

UNIVERSIDADE FEDERAL DE MINAS GERAIS

Faculdade de Letras

Programa de Pós-Graduação em Letras: Estudos Literários

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**The Body in Grace Nichols's *The Fat Black Woman's Poems*:**

**Postcolonialism and Carnivalization**

Belo Horizonte

2021

Letícia Nogueira Romariz Medeiros

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Dissertação apresentada ao Programa de Pós-Graduação em Letras: Estudos Literários da Faculdade de Letras da Universidade Federal de Minas Gerais como requisito parcial para a obtenção do título de Mestre em Letras: Estudos Literários.

Área de concentração: Literaturas de Língua Inglesa

Linha de Pesquisa: Literatura e Políticas do Contemporâneo

Orientadora: Profa. Dra. Sandra Regina Goulart Almeida

Belo Horizonte

2021

Ficha catalográfica elaborada pelo Bibliotecário Israel Jose da Silva – CRB/6-2128

N618f.Ym-b Medeiros, Leticia Nogueira Romariz.  
The Body in Grace Nichols's The Fat Black Woman's Poems [manuscrito] :  
Postcolonialism and Carnivalization / Leticia Nogueira Romariz Medeiros. –  
2021.  
178 f., enc.

Orientadora: Sandra Regina Goulart Almeida.

Área de concentração: Literaturas de Língua Inglesa.

Linha de Pesquisa: Literaturas e Políticas do Contemporâneo.

Dissertação (mestrado) – Universidade Federal de Minas Gerais,  
Faculdade de Letras

Bibliografia: p. 166-178.

1.Nichols, Grace, 1950- – Fat Black Woman's Poems – Crítica e interpretação – Teses. 2. Literatura guianense – História e crítica – Teses. 3. Negros na literatura – Teses. 4. Mulheres na literatura – Teses. 5. Pós-colonialismo na literatura – Teses. 6. Diáspora – Teses. 7. Alteridade – Teses. 8. Feminismo e Literatura – Teses. I. Almeida, Sandra Regina Goulart. II. Universidade Federal de Minas Gerais. Faculdade de Letras. III. Título.

CDD : G821

08/03/2021

SEI/UFMG - 0559280 - Folha de Aprovação



UNIVERSIDADE FEDERAL DE MINAS GERAIS  
FACULDADE DE LETRAS  
PÓS-GRADUAÇÃO EM LETRAS: ESTUDOS LITERÁRIOS

### FOLHA DE APROVAÇÃO

Dissertação intitulada *The Body in Grace Nichols's The Fat Black Woman's Poems: Postcolonialism and Carnivalization*, de autoria da Mestranda LETÍCIA NOGUEIRA ROMARIZ MEDEIROS, apresentada ao Programa de Pós-Graduação em Letras: Estudos Literários da Faculdade de Letras da UFMG, como requisito parcial à obtenção do título de Mestre em Letras: Estudos Literários.

**Área de Concentração:** Literaturas de Língua Inglesa/Mestrado

**Linha de Pesquisa:** Literatura e Políticas do Contemporâneo

Aprovada pela Banca Examinadora constituída pelos seguintes professores:

Profa. Dra. Sandra Regina Goulart Almeida - FALE/UFMG - Orientadora

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Profa. Dra. Izabel de Fátima de Oliveira Brandão - UFAL

Belo Horizonte, 22 de fevereiro de 2021.



Documento assinado eletronicamente por **Izabel de Fátima de Oliveira Brandão, Usuário Externo**, em 22/02/2021, às 16:15, conforme horário oficial de Brasília, com fundamento no art. 5º do [Decreto nº 10.543, de 13 de novembro de 2020](#).



Documento assinado eletronicamente por **Sandra Regina Goulart Almeida, Reitora**, em 22/02/2021, às 19:10, conforme horário oficial de Brasília, com fundamento no art. 5º do [Decreto nº 10.543, de 13 de novembro de 2020](#).



Documento assinado eletronicamente por **Jose de Paiva dos Santos, Professor do Magistério Superior**, em 24/02/2021, às 22:14, conforme horário oficial de Brasília, com fundamento no art. 5º do [Decreto nº 10.543, de 13 de novembro de 2020](#).



Documento assinado eletronicamente por **Georg Otte, Coordenador(a) de curso de pós-graduação**, em 05/03/2021, às 14:44, conforme horário oficial de Brasília, com fundamento no art. 5º do [Decreto nº 10.543, de 13 de novembro de 2020](#).



A autenticidade deste documento pode ser conferida no site [https://sei.ufmg.br/sei/controlador\\_externo.php?acao=documento\\_conferir&id\\_orgao\\_acesso\\_externo=0](https://sei.ufmg.br/sei/controlador_externo.php?acao=documento_conferir&id_orgao_acesso_externo=0), informando o código verificador **0559280** e o código CRC **697962BB**.

Referência: Processo nº 23072.203404/2021-48

SEI nº 0559280

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

To my parents, Mônica and Marcos André, for their encouragement and love, for guiding me and giving me unconditional support. You are my role model.

To my sister, Lara, for walking with me throughout this journey, pushing me when I needed motivation and lending a shoulder when I needed to rest.

To all the women who raised me and made me the person I am today, Bruna, Geny, Laís, Leila, Lineuza, Maita, Martha, Mônica, Natália, Nathália, Raquel, you made my life easier and sweeter so I could become whomever I want.

To Paulo, Lucas, Paulo Henrique, for being my constant support and source of joy.

To Arthur, Bárbara, Eduardo, Isabela, Jorge Artur, and Maria Isabel, for their open arms and minds, for being the new loves of my life, and for making the ones I love so happy.

To my grandparents, Lineuza, José, Geny, and Natálio, for the look of pride in their eyes when facing me.

To my beautiful Artur, Celina, Benício, Maria Eduarda, and Miguel, for bringing me happiness and new colors to my life, especially blue.

To all my relatives and friends, for their love and cheering.

To Guilherme, for his friendship, love, and comprehension, and for always reminding me of what is important.

To GEAP and its members, for helping me to discover the person I want to be and the necessary steps to achieve it.

To my colleagues at UFMG and my friends, for their companionship, sharings, and encouragements.

To Hanna, Marcelle, Michelle, Thathiana and all the members of *entre outros* for bringing some light into the academic world during a world pandemic.

To the group of interdisciplinary studies Mare&Sal, for the academic and emotional support at all times.

To Fapemig, for the financial support that allowed me to develop this research with full dedication to it.

To my professors, who guided me and helped me accomplish my goals.

To my advisor, professor Sandra Almeida, for her welcoming me into a new state and university, for her support, patience, for constantly demanding the best I could be, and whose guidance and knowledge were of utmost importance for the development of this thesis.

To God, for giving me strength and wisdom, and for surrounding me with all these people that gave me love and support so I could become a Master in Literature.

## ABSTRACT

This work analyzes Grace Nichols's *The Fat Black Woman's Poems* (1984) from the perspective of postcolonial and feminist studies, in light of Mikhail Bakhtin's and Mary Russo's theories of carnival. The fat black woman portrayed in the poems is a diasporic Caribbean subject, living in London, who challenges the usual constructions of race, gender, and other aspects related to identity through her daily activities. These cultural and social constructions that are questioned in the poems create an excluding binary logic that divides the world. In this thesis, I argue that the fat black woman creates for herself a carnivalesque world. Inside this world, the binary divisions and excluding stereotypes do not exist, thus, the fat black woman is free to be herself and to live as she pleases. I investigate in this work how the colonial and patriarchal stereotypes were established and are reflected in the book, and how the carnivalesque strategies used by the fat black woman in the poems challenge and recreate these conceptions. Both processes – stereotype construction and carnivalesque subversion – occur through the body and the body's expressions. Thus, the body becomes a locus of oppression, but also becomes a possibility of insurgency. In order to challenge the stereotypes and patriarchal cultural and social constructions, the fat black woman uses this body subversively, creating new images of herself through self-love. The book of poems consists of a journey from the hate and violence of colonization and patriarchy to the self-love of the fat black woman and her carnival world. *The Fat Black Woman's Poems* depicts new and better possibilities of a less excluding and more loving existence.

Keywords: Body; Carnival; Postcolonialism; Feminism; Grace Nichols; Fat Black Woman.

## RESUMO

Este trabalho analisa o livro *The Fat Black Woman's Poems* (1984), de Grace Nichols, a partir da perspectiva do estudos feministas e pós-coloniais e à luz das teorias do carnaval de Mikhail Bakhtin e Mary Russo. A mulher negra e gorda descrita nos poemas é uma pessoa diaspórica e caribenha que vive em Londres e questiona as tradicionais construções de raça, gênero e outros aspectos relacionados à identidade por meio de suas atividades cotidianas. Essas construções sociais e culturais retratadas nos poemas foram estabelecidas pelo processo patriarcal de colonização que criou uma lógica binária que divide o mundo. Nesta dissertação, eu argumento que a mulher negra e gorda cria para si mesma um mundo carnavalesco no qual ela vive. Dentro desse mundo, as divisões binárias e os estereótipos excludentes não existem. Assim, a mulher negra e gorda é livre para ser e viver como preferir. Eu investigo nesse trabalho como as construções dos estereótipos coloniais e patriarcais foram estabelecidas e são refletidas no livro, assim como de que maneira as estratégias carnavalescas usadas pela mulher negra e gorda nos poemas podem questionar e recriar essas concepções. Ambos os processos – construção de estereótipos e subversão carnavalesca – ocorrem por meio do corpo e de suas expressões. Dessa maneira, o corpo se torna um locus de submissão, mas também uma possibilidade de insurgência. Para questionar os estereótipos e as construções culturais coloniais e patriarcais, a mulher negra e gorda usa esse corpo de maneira subversiva, criando novas imagens de si por meio do auto-amor. O livro consiste em uma jornada partindo do ódio e da violência da colonização e do patriarcado para alcançar o auto-amor da mulher negra e gorda e de seu mundo carnavalesco. *The Fat Black Woman's Poems* apresenta novas e melhores possibilidades de uma existência menos excludente e mais afetuosa.

Palavras-chave: Corpo; Carnaval; Pós-colonialismo; Feminismo; Grace Nichols; Mulher Negra e Gorda.



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## INTRODUCTION

### **The Fat Black Woman's Journey From Hate to Self-love: The Creation of New Narratives**

Grace Nichols is a Caribbean writer, born in Georgetown, Guyana, in 1950. The fifth of seven children, she grew up in a small country village on the Guyanese coast, called Stanleyville or, as it is mostly known, Highdam (Lawson Welsh, "Grace Nichols" x). When she was eight years old, her family moved back to Georgetown and there she graduated from the University of Guyana with a Diploma in Communications. In 1977, after working in the area for some time, she decided to move to Great Britain because of the "economic devastation of her country after independence in 1966 and the fact that there was not . . . a Guyanese publishing house to support native writers (Nichols, "Free Verse" np).

The political and social instabilities that made Nichols depart from Guyana resulted from the turbulent colonial and political history of the country. The first European explorer arrived in Guyana in 1590, the British Walter Raleigh. However, it was only in 1831 that this territory was unified, still as a colony. The country was dominated for 376 years until its independence in 1966 (Cavlak 76).

The colonization of Guyana was rather unusual. The territory was primarily colonized by the Dutch, who had the only intention of waging war against Spain. Therefore, they did not catechize the Amerindians, nor did they create a new society with the expansion of their colonization as usual. Instead, they looted, plundered and destroyed Spanish ships and possessions (Cavlak 20). According to Iuri Cavlak, the entire Dutch colonization was only a period of exploitation. There was neither development of infrastructure nor political or social organization during this time (20).

It was only when the British Empire took over the region that the efforts towards creating what they called a “civilization” took place. This colonization also made it difficult to access the history of the country, as its official language became English. The earlier documented sources are in Dutch and are usually only found in the Netherlands (Cavlak 18).

The colonial period was not the only critical time for Guyana. The country’s independence and transition from a colony to a free nation were marked by several instabilities: the involvement of the Britain and the United States in elections; an overthrown government because of the “communist threat,” which was later reestablished with the support of the United States; the division of national parties; corrupt practices; and great popular dissatisfaction with the remaining colonial white elite (Cavlak 62-65). In point of fact, the popular dissatisfaction had enormous significance during the Guyanese formation.

Guyanese people’s non-acceptance of the subaltern positions imposed on them is reflected on Guyana’s complex trajectory of extreme dynamism (Cavlak 76). In fact, Guyana’s history is one of survival through change. It is marked by popular risings, such as the Berbice Slave Uprising of 1763 and the Demerara Rebellion of 1823. Likewise, the entire Caribbean was formed through struggles and, although Guyana is located on the north of the South American subcontinent, it is undoubtedly much more closely related to the Caribbean than to its Luso-Hispanic neighbors.

Many peoples were assembled in the Guyanese soil – Amerindian original inhabitants, African slaves, Indian and Chinese indentured workers, British colonizers, Portuguese and other European peoples who came to replace manual labor after the end of slavery. This combination of cultures and languages led to several fights among the peoples and strong rebellions against the governments. However, it also led to the creation of a complex and diverse Caribbean culture.

This culture appears strongly in Nichols's works, and is always linked to the Caribbean roots and imaginary. Even though some of her lyrical subjects do not live in the Caribbean – some of them live in a diasporic context –, they present a strong connection with it through food, mythology, language, and culture in general. As a matter of fact, the diasporic aspect can be said to be a Caribbean mark in her *oeuvre*. Susan Mackenzie, in an interview with Nichols for *The Guardian*, claims that there is “a rootlessness, a shiftlessness which is quintessentially Caribbean” (Nichols, “Free Verse” np). The diasporic aspect can be said to be quintessentially present in Nichols's works as well. Nichols herself draws this link between her work and the Caribbean. She claims that she likes to think of herself as a Caribbean poet and person, instead of a Guyanese poet living in Britain, or even Black-British poet and person, because “the Caribbean embraces so much . . . You have Africa, you have Asia and Asian culture, you have European culture. It's all there” (Nichols, “In Conversation” 18).

Nichols became one of the main voices in the Caribbean literary scenario. However, it was not without struggle. Her first book of poems, *i is a long memoried woman* (1983), was awarded the Commonwealth Poetry Prize of 1983. Before it was published, though, it was often rejected. The author comments on a rejection in particular from the Oxford University Press. She was told that “even though they ‘admired’ it, they felt that Kamau Brathwaite, the Barbadian poet, had already covered the diasporic journey from Africa to the Caribbean” (Nichols, “Stiching Together” np). They failed to look into gender-related aspects, which are relevant for the criticism of Nichols's work.

The Caribbean publishing industry has been, as the example above shows, predominantly male. With the growing prominence of women's movements and the increasing interest in black and postcolonial literatures in the past four decades, British and North-American publishing houses have started to pay more attention to Caribbean women's

writing (deCaires Narain and O’Callaghan 625). Albeit such positive aspects of this marketability, there were negative ones, such as the problematic and universalizing term “Caribbean women’s writing” used in anthologies, which resulted in the circulation of limiting representations of Caribbean women. Considering that these representations were predominantly produced by male authors, the female images that circulated were often stereotypical and downgrading (deCaires Narain and O’Callaghan 625-26).

Nichols belongs to a countermovement against these expressions. According to Ana Bringas López, Nichols’s poetic work is “part of a general trend in contemporary black women writers that attempts this redefinition and the construction of new female subjectivities that are able to resist (neo)colonial and patriarchal ideological structures marginalizing black women” (8). Nichols herself draws attention to the need of having to “come up with new myths and other images that please us” (Nichols, “The Battle” 287). This drive to create other narratives and points of views repeatedly can be seen in Nichols’s works.

Along these lines, Nichols has written more than 20 books of poems and one novel. Some of the most known books are *Insomnia Poems* (2017), *Picasso, I Want My Face Back* (2009), *Startling the Flying Fish* (2005), *Lazy Thoughts of a Lazy Woman* (1989), the object of study of this thesis *The Fat Black Woman’s Poems* (1984), and her most recent book, *Passport to Here and There* (2020). It can be said that the main proposition that underlies all her books is to question and unsettle limiting impositions on the identity of black women and their historical construction in relation to colonialism and slavery. Despite this vast production and the acknowledgment she has received in life, there is still little critical writing on her work (Lawson Welsh, “Grace Nichols” 22). Because of this, I would like to mention here a few of the critical texts regarding the works of Nichols whose authors have been studying, writing about, and arguing for the recognition of Grace Nichols for a good time and deserve to be acknowledged as well for their contributions in general and to my thesis’s

research in particular. Some of them are Izabel Brandão (1996, 2005, 2006, 2018, and many others), Gudrun Webhofer (1996), Mara Scanlon (1998), Jana Golrish (1998), Jan Montefiore (1987), and Gabriele Griffin (1993).

*The Fat Black Woman's Poems* (1984) is one of Nichols's most famous works and perhaps the one to have received more theoretical attention. From the title we can read defiance against beauty constructions, racial stereotypes, and other restrictions imposed on black women by patriarchal Western culture. This book deals with the life of a fat black woman from the Caribbean living in London, who, according to Scanlon is "a new heroine, a woman who revises the esthetic of female beauty, challenges oppressive societal forces, and emerges as a powerful queen, founder, or goddess" (59). In the first person, the lyrical subject addresses her daily affairs such as buying clothes, putting the trash outside, and even meeting people on the train. These daily activities are filled with political content: racial and gender inequalities, prejudice against diasporic people and against fat people, among many others. With a humorous tone, the fat black woman challenges and questions society through her trivial and everyday acts.

Through the carnivalization of the female body and the language used, the fat black woman referred to in the title of the book challenges the impositions her body is subjected to and the historical constructions that surround it. By understanding the world of the fat black woman as a world of carnival – in which all hierarchies are suspended – the purpose of this thesis is to analyze Nichols's book of poems through postcolonial and feminist studies in view of the processes of colonization. The portrayal of women's bodies as grotesque is investigated in light of Mikhail Bakhtin's and Mary Russo's theory of carnival.

Bakhtin developed the theory of carnival, through the analysis of François Rabelais's works of *Gargantua and Pantagruel*. For the Russian scholar, carnival is a "festive life," "the

people's second life, organized on the basis of laughter" ("Rabelais" 8). It opposes the official order of the world; it is a second world of folk culture, and "to a certain extent a parody of the extracarnival life, a 'world inside out'" (Bakhtin, "Rabelais" 11). Despite the importance of Bakhtin's theorization, his theory was accused of being rather "limited" in certain aspects. This is why I also draw on the work of Mary Russo, who proposes a realignment of Bakhtin's carnival grotesque, by approaching gender.

In *The Female Grotesques: Risk, excess and modernity* (1994), Russo introduces a theorization about women in the context of Bakhtinian theory, reflecting on how they have traditionally embodied the grotesque, which refers to what is unwanted and excluded. The female body, for example, is only accepted by society when it complies with the established norms. Therefore, a body that is black, fat, pregnant, old, or that has any other characteristics that do not fit the idealized, socially constructed version, is an ugly body; it is grotesque. This body has not been an empowering element for women, but the fat black woman's carnivalization of her body grants the grotesque a new provocative aspect. Hence the grotesque becomes a strength.

Maite Escudero states that "the overall impression when reading Nichols's *The Fat Black Woman's Poems*, is that these poems constitute the epitome of her endurance, vitality and spiritual strength" (15). That is why I chose to study this book, even though it is dealt with most of the theoretical approach to Nichols. *The Fat Black Woman's Poems* has a strength to invite, with wit and sharpness, its readers into the fat black woman's new world. This world portrays new possibilities of a more equalitarian existence. The invitation is not only to read and see this world, but to be part of it.

In the book of poems analyzed in this thesis, Nichols builds the fat black woman's world as a carnivalesque world. It is through this carnival and its strategies that the fat black

woman challenges the cultural and social constructions and stereotypes endorsed by patriarchy and the processes of colonization. This challenging takes place through the revision of the body (the female, the fat, and the black body) and points to the transformation of hate and violence of colonization into the fat black woman's self-love throughout the book.

Although the book – and specially the section “The Fat Black Woman's Poems” – may appear to present an arbitrary order of poems, a close attention to its arrangement can reveal more details to the reader. The fat black woman recreates the world history of colonization and shapes a new possible future. The arranged order of the poems can be seen as a linearity of this new history. In the second poem, “The Assertion” (4), the fat black woman begins to rewrite how the process of colonization occurred. This time, in her world, the “white robbed chiefs / are resigned” (7-8) because they did not succeed in the attempt to dominate. The following poems, “The Fat Black Woman Remembers” (5) and “Alone” (6), are a reflection upon what happened in the world in which colonization took place. Then a series of daily activities in carnivalesque London is questioned through the fat black woman's body. At the end of the section, with the last two poems “Small Questions Asked by the Fat Black Woman” (24) and “Afterword” (25), the fat black woman leads us to the destiny she predicts for her new world.

The lyrical subject is inside a journey which goes from the violent process of colonization to a new possible world where hate and exclusion do not exist. Such new world is created through the new narratives and images of the fat black woman, of her body and its carnivalization. In Sarah Lawson Welsh's book, *Grace Nichols*, there are two chapters dedicated to Nichols's journeying. The author describes Nichols's first book, *i is a long memoried woman*, and her 1996 book, *Sunris*, as “epic journeys.” The first book is a journey of the protagonist who goes from Africa to the Caribbean, in an attempt to cleanse the ocean



from all the pain of her ancestors. The nature of this journey is “at once mythic and real, singular and multiple but, significantly, its historical basis and its geography are quite precise” (Lawson Welsh, “Grace Nichols” 46). Differently, in *Sunris*, the journey is about the protagonist’s self-discovery (Lawson Welsh, “Grace Nichols” 81) through carnival.

Even though Lawson Welsh does not analyze *The Fat Black Woman’s Poems* as an “epic journeying,” the main characteristics attributed to the journeys in *Sunris* and *i is a long memoried woman* are present in *The Fat Black Woman’s Poems* as well. Some examples are the revisal of the past in order to reframe the present and the future, the self-discovery and continual change of the protagonist, and the travelling between two worlds and their borders. The fact that Lawson Welsh does not address the fat black woman’s journey may result from the common vision of *The Fat Black Woman’s Poems* as a “frivolous book” because of its humorous aspect.

Nichols mentions that “people have said to me *i is a long memoried woman* is such a moving and deep book, and *The Fat Black Woman* . . . doesn’t carry forward the struggle . . . they see it as a frivolous book” (Nichols, “In Conversation” 19). Nonetheless, “it isn’t – it is just that things are put in a funny way because the laughter and the humour is healing and is very much part of Caribbean people” (ibid). Nichols goes on, “I hate the one-dimensional stereotype of the black woman as just being a sufferer or a person who’s a victim . . . On one realistic level we have had, as black woman, an oppressive history . . . but I know so many black women who are rich humorous beings inside” (ibid). That is why in her writings she tries “to give other pictures and other images of black women as distinct from being this victim figure” (ibid). Nonetheless, *The Fat Black Woman’s Poems* is often not taken as seriously as other books. Perhaps, this is the reason this book is not considered an “epic journey,” since epics are not usually comic. I advocate that the fat black woman is in a journey, one towards more acceptance and inclusion. Through such journey, the fat black

woman is able to revisit the imagery related to the body. The importance of the body comes from the process that has molded our world and our relations through colonization. To achieve the violent expansionist objectives of the colonization process, the Europeans also colonized knowledge. Ania Loomba states that the process of “forming a community” in the new lands “necessarily meant *unforming* or re-forming the communities that existed there already” (2). Thus, the current knowledge systems were, as the lands and goods of these peoples, sacked and broken.

The colonization process only occurred through discursive constructions that characterized the non-Europeans as the Others and as inferiors. The world we live in “is only comprehensible to us via its discursive representations” (Loomba 40), and the creation of a new model of world could not be different. Despite the fact that these constructions were discursive, they were materialized in our bodies. According to María Lugones, the colonial “civilizing mission” was a euphemistic mask of the brutal access to people’s bodies through unimaginable oppression, sexual violation, reproductive control, and systematic terror (938). The objectifying process to which colonized peoples were submitted was materialized in their skin colour, in the shape of their bodies, in their alleged biological differences, and in many other misleading foundations.

With the European colonization of the Americas and its expansionist objectives, many binaries were historically established as universals. Following the logic that binds them all together, the dualisms of black and white, female and male, nature and culture, body and mind were constructed, and thus they considered black, women, nature, and body as inferior.

Thus Whites rule Blacks, men dominate women, reason is superior to emotion in ascertaining truth, facts supersede opinion in evaluating knowledge, and subjects rule objects. The foundations of intersecting oppressions become grounded in

interdependent concepts of binary thinking, oppositional difference, objectification, and social hierarchy. With domination based on difference forming an essential underpinning for this entire system of thought, these concepts invariably imply relationships of superiority and inferiority, hierarchical bonds that mesh with political economies of race, gender, and class oppression. (Hill Collins, “Black Feminist” 72)

This process, then, established the body in its center as the main tool for domination. The body is built and formed by the discursive constructions that mold our society. Therefore, an inferior status has been assigned to black, fat, and female subjects. It is a medium of culture (Bordo 165). According to Judith Butler, “there is no reference to a pure body which is not at the same time a further formation of that body” (“Bodies that Matter” 10). However, for the fat black woman, the body is the means to question and dismantle such excluding logic. In order to confront this traditional discourse, in Nichols’s work the fat black female body can be seen as defiance against the male white norm and the beauty patterns inflicted on women, to restrict and to control their bodies. Izabel Brandão affirms that Nichols’s fat black woman is an anti-woman turning fat into her battle flag and that the entire book is an apology to this anti-woman living happily being fat, black and woman (“Grace Nichols: Do Fragmento” 165). Through her poems, the fat black woman shows us how the body is no longer a tool or a locus of oppression. The body becomes the main player of the journey from hate to love. The order of the chapters of this thesis is established as a reflection of the fat black woman’s journey.

The first chapter consists of an analysis of *The Fat Black Woman’s Poems* through the postcolonial optic. By investigating how the colonial process formed our world and still influences it, I show how such process creates a logic that divides our culture in binaries, which were internalized in most official branches of knowledge – science, religion, and philosophy –, and therefore created an exclusionary logic based on stereotyping. The

postcolonial approach allows me not only to study this process and its formation, but also to analyze how the fat black woman revisits history and contemporaneity with a critical eye, questioning the foundation of several exclusions. In this chapter, I show how she uses the more-than-human<sup>1</sup> and the cosmopolitan city as spaces of negotiation. I argue that in the poems she is able to expose how stereotypes and our forms of knowledge are cultural impositions, not natural categories.

In the second chapter, I examine the formation of the fat black woman's world. It is about the lyrical subject's denial of such an excluding logic and the creation of her own world. I claim that the way the fat black woman lives and acts, as analyzed in the poems, is only possible because she lives inside a world of carnival, a world in which binary divisions and excluding structures do not exist. By using Mikhail Bakhtin's work on carnival and Mary Russo's revision of his work, I investigate the carnival categories of laughter, language, and the grotesque body in order to demonstrate how the fat black woman in the poems lives in a carnivalesque world. In addition, I discuss how these categories function as strategies to question the binary logic through the dismantling of these divisions.

In the third chapter, after discussing both worlds, I arrive at the crux of the matter of *The Fat Black Woman's Poems*: the body. The constructions created by the colonial process and the binary logic are all inscribed in the body. The stereotypes and exclusions are based on the body as well and are also related to other constituents of identity, such as gender, race, identity, and others. The carnivalization of this world through laughter, language, and the

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<sup>1</sup> The more common term to refer to the "more-than-human" is "non-human". However, the latter suggests a centrality of the human element: everything is divided into what is human and what is not. Although "more-than-human" is not able to avoid anthropocentric reference – our language and codes have not overcome this barrier –, it gives the natural element an appreciation that evades the common inferiorization of such element. Therefore, the term to refer to the natural element in this thesis will be "more-than-human", except when a different term is necessary, or for discursive effects. For a deeper problematization of the term more-than-human in contrast with non-human and other terms, see O. Pyyhtinen's *More-than-Human Sociology: A New Sociological Imagination* and Sarah E. Truman and Stephanie Springgay's *Walking Methodologies in a More-than-Human Worlds: WalkingLab*.

grotesque are felt and carried out through the body as well. The body is the fat black woman's weapon and battlefield, as analyzed in the poems. This chapter discusses the female body, the fat body, and the black body. Through this analysis I show how the poems dismantle binary constructions and their stereotypes.

The focus of this thesis is the analysis of Nichols's *The Fat Black Woman's Poems* through a feminist and postcolonial optic with regard to the theory of carnival. From my perspective, the fat black woman presents possibilities that lead to a new way of living, in an all-embracing world. In my analysis the way she recreates this world through the poems, and through its narratives and stereotypes, is built on the opposite operation of the colonial process, which has been founded on hate, on violence, and on exclusion. The journey of the fat black woman, which has this hate as point of departure, is based on and arrives at self-love as a force, a rebellion, and as a form of healing. The poems analyzed show that self-love, then, is the route to undo the wrongs of colonialism and patriarchy.

## CHAPTER ONE

### The Formation of the Fat Black Woman's World: A Postcolonial Perspective

Theory is always a detour on the way to  
something more important

Stuart Hall, "Old and New Identities, Old and new  
Ethnicities"

you split the world  
into pieces and  
called them countries  
declared ownership on  
what never belonged to you  
and left the rest with nothing  
rupi kaur, "colonize"

This Kingdom Will Not Reign

Forever

Grace Nichols, "This Kingdom"

The term "postcolonialism" has raised many questions about its meaning, especially because of its heterogeneous uses and the different areas it comprises. In order to begin the discussion on the formation of the fat black woman's world in this chapter, we must determine what we understand by postcolonial, and therefore we need to elaborate on the term colonialism first.

Ania Loomba, in *Colonialism/Postcolonialism*, borrows the definition of colonialism from the Oxford English Dictionary<sup>2</sup> and states that the given explanation "quite remarkably, avoids any reference to people other than the colonisers, people who might already have been

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<sup>2</sup> "A settlement in a new country . . . a body of people who settle in a new locality, forming a community subject to or connected with their parent state; the community so formed, consisting of the original settlers and their descendants and successors, as long as the connection with the parent state is kept up."

living in those places where colonies were established.” Therefore, “it evacuates the word ‘colonialism’ of any implication of an encounter between peoples, or of conquest and domination” (1-2). Despite Loomba’s surprise at this definition, the way the Oxford English Dictionary describes the process of colonization is aligned with the strategies used to justify this process in the first place, which diminish the value of the colonized cultures and invalidate their knowledge and history.

It is usually thought that the history of humanity is a linear sequence of events, neglecting the deep alterations colonization provoked in both the colonies and the metropolises. The world’s economic, social, and cultural formation is based on this process of conquest of and control over lands and bodies of other peoples. Knowledge is “not innocent but profoundly connected with the operations of power” (Loomba 24) and colonialism reshaped the “existing structures of human knowledge. No branch of learning was left untouched by the colonial experience” (Loomba 54). The formation called “the West and the Rest” by Stuart Hall represents how colonialism carried out a material, but more importantly, intellectual colonization. The theorist claims that “our ideas of ‘East’ and ‘West’ have never been free of myth and fantasy, and even to this day they are not primarily ideas about place and geography” (“The West and the Rest” 141). They are historical constructs. West traditionally means a “developed, industrialized, urbanized, capitalist, secular, and modern” (“The West and the Rest” 143) society. The “Rest” – places that were home to millions of people with complex social, cultural and economic formations before the Europeans arrived – is often considered a savage, primitive society. They were “functioning societies. What they were not was ‘European’,” and that was what disturbed the colonizers, the difference that could not be managed (“The West and the Rest” 167) and was, consequently, considered inferior.

These constructions established a series of supposedly universal truths, which divided the world into binaries. The binaries, in turn, were attached to institutional and official discourses. They were material in their formation and in their effects. The colonization of Asia, Africa and the Americas, from the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries on, was not the first form of colonial contact in the world. However, it was “distinctive and by far the most extensive of different kinds of colonial contact that have been a recurrent feature of human history” (Loomba xiii). Even though modern colonialism cannot be shielded from these former contacts, the modern experience of conquest and domination established the basis for the current economic, social, racial, gender, and cultural classifications.

Not only has the process of colonization rewritten history, but it has also erased other histories as part of a project of expansion and domination. Although colonialism has ended, coloniality has not. Colonialism is usually associated with the colonial period, but coloniality “constitutes modernity” as we are still “living under the same regime” (Mignolo 249). According to Mary Louise Pratt, “white skins continue to seduce, brown-skinned daughters continue to be sold, and imperial myths continue to generate meanings, desires and actions” (“In the Neocolony” 460). Therefore, the effects of colonization are still very present.

Accordingly, postcolonialism cannot mean an overcoming of colonization and its effects. Nor can it be considered just a temporal mark. Postcolonialism deals with “the effects of colonization on cultures and societies”; it was “originally used by historians after the Second World War in terms such as the post-colonial state, ‘post-colonial’ had a clearly chronological meaning . . . However, from the late 1970s the term has been used by literary critics to discuss the various cultural effects of colonization” (Ashcroft *et al.* 108). One of such critics is Pratt, who claims that “the prefix *post* refers to the fact that the workings of colonialism and Euro-imperialism are now available for reflection in ways they were not before” (“In the Neocolony” 460). Her view is similar to what Hall defends in the sense that



“problems of dependency, underdevelopment, and marginalization, typical of the ‘high’ colonial period, persist into the postcolonial. However, these relations are resumed in a new configuration” (“The Multicultural Question” 99).

Postcoloniality has, indeed, encompassed a time of great production of critical thinking about colonialism and its effects, of “contestation of colonial domination and the legacies of colonialism” (Loomba 12). For Peter Hulme, with whom I agree, the term postcolonial is

a way of describing a body of work which attempts to break with the colonialist assumptions that have marked many of the projects of political and cultural criticism launched from Europe and the United States, while learning from and frequently refiguring those theoretical projects in the interests of an analysis of and resistance to the networks of imperial power which continue to control much of the world (388).

Nonetheless, postcolonial studies are still largely marked by blindness in some aspects. Many books and essays considered reference postcolonial texts, such as *Orientalism*, by Edward Said, or *Black Skin, White Masks*, by Frantz Fanon, omitted gender questions, for example. One problem acknowledged by many scholars is that postcolonial studies remain Eurocentric (Loomba 256). We still live under coloniality in various ways, for instance, the centers produce knowledge and the “peripheral” countries consume and reproduce it. According to Walter Mignolo, “the Eurocentric critique of Eurocentrism was accepted in former colonies as ‘our own’ critique of Eurocentrism” (232). The postcolonial optic “continues to colonize to the degree that it identifies everything with respect to European-dominated power relations” (Pratt, “In the Neocolony” 460). Therefore, postcolonial studies require a critical eye to revise and re-read the canon and the established disciplines. However influenced by eurocentrism,

postcolonial studies “have tried to locate and theorise oppositions, resistances and revolts . . . on the part of the colonised” (Loomba 51).

Gayatri Spivak’s most famous essay *Can the Subaltern Speak?* is an important text in this discussion, as it brings questions on the silencing of the subaltern, and of marginal or peripheral voices. The author claims that they do speak, but there is always a voice of the “West,” of the “first world” intervening in their speech. Thus, instead of creating spaces in which these voices can be heard, Western intellectuals often insist on representing them and speaking on their behalf. In order to listen to these subaltern voices, “we need to uncover the multiplicity of narratives that were hidden by the grand narratives, but we still need to think about how the former are woven together” (Loomba 241). Ergo the postcolonial studies demand “both a revision of the past, and an analysis of our fast-changing present” (Loomba 254).

In the interest of accomplishing that, we need “theoretical flexibility and innovation” (Loomba 254), which explains the focus on peripheral works and their new necessary perspectives to think the multicultural postcolonial world. Although theoretical texts are more direct in dealing with these questionings, literary works are “important means of appropriating, inverting or challenging dominant means of representation and colonial ideologies” (Loomba 70-1). Homi Bhabha affirms that it is “from those who have suffered the sentence of history – subjugation, domination, diaspora, displacement – that we learn our most enduring lessons for living and thinking” (Bhabha, “The Postcolonial” 246).

Grace Nichols’s *The Fat Black Woman’s Poems* – and her entire *oeuvre* – is among the important texts produced by what Hall terms “Rest,” which have recently stood out in postcolonial studies. It presents humorous situations that defy the colonial constructions of identity, mainly women’s. The poetic voice in Nichols’s work shows a new view on history,

leading to different constructions of beauty, race, and geopolitics, among other factors. Accordingly, her poetry retrieves the silenced histories of the colonized peoples and proposes new issues to postcolonial studies. In order to consider and to challenge one's identity, it is necessary to examine and to question the processes that have molded it. Denying or even neglecting the colonized peoples their past as civilizations and as nations with distinctive histories and cultures means depriving them of their agency. This argument is a main point in Nichols's poetry, which always emphasizes the fact that colonialism did not insert itself in empty lands. Thus it proposes a postcolonial view on key questions of how these stories were told, rewritten and retold.

In the poem "The Assertion" (4), the poetic voice recounts a distinct reality. In this different context, the "white robed chiefs" (7) did not submit the fat black woman to a position of inferiority and are "resigned/ in their postures of resignation" (8-9). According to Bhabha, this revisionist perspective of postcoloniality, as we see in Nichols's poem, "enables the authentication of histories of exploitation and the evolution of strategies of resistance" ("Introduction: Locations" 9). The assertion, then, is a statement of the fat black woman's blackness and her pride to portray her culture and history from an empowered position.

Heavy as a whale  
 eyes beady with contempt  
 and a kind of fire of love  
 the fat black woman sits  
 on the golden stool  
 and refuses to move  
 .....

*This is my birthright*

says the fat black woman

giving a fat black chuckle

showing her fat black toes (1-6, 14-17)

The repetition in this poem shows the ratification of how black this woman is, i.e., her chuckle is black as are her toes. Likewise, the white robed chiefs are resigned to the impossibility to treat the fat black woman brutally, as they have in the history of colonization. This alternative reality can be interpreted as what might have happened in a different set of events when the Europeans arrived in the “new” lands. Although this position of empowerment is carried out in a fictitious world, it rewrites the way history is told: the white men who arrived in the fat black woman’s land were not superior. Because they were victorious in the process of domination, they wrote history as they wanted, as if they were a superior civilization. If the whites are deemed superior, the black colonized people, in turn, are considered inferior and uncivilized from the perspective of the colonizers. By showing how things might have occurred differently, the fat black woman demonstrates how these constructions are historical inventions, rather than a natural and biological division among races, as the colonial narrative implies.

The reference to the golden stool reinforces this interpretation. The golden stool has been a symbol of power for the Ashanti Kingdom since the seventeenth century. Legend has it that it descended from the sky and it was believed to house the soul of the Ashanti nation. It was sacred and, therefore, could never touch the ground or be touched. Kings consulted the golden stool before going to wars and no ruler could be legitimate without it. In the nineteenth century, the British Empire established control over the coast of what is Ghana today and waged war on the Ashanti people for power over their lands. After several

confrontations, the Queen Mother and Gate Keeper of the golden stool, Yaa Asantewaa, outraged by the British governor's demand to sit on it, led a rebellion that caused the death of over two thousand Ashanti and more than one thousand British people. Although the war was won some months later by the British Empire, the golden stool was hidden by the Ashanti people. Later on, it was retrieved and had its sacredness acknowledged by the British, who guaranteed they would not interfere again with such matter.<sup>3</sup>

The insertion of historical elements is a common characteristic in Nichols's poetry. It motivates readers to reflect on their reality. In the poem discussed above, a hidden history is inserted, one that is not present in school books and does not appear in the narratives of the British Empire. Nonetheless, this event represents an important part of such narratives, especially as demonstration of women's leadership. According to Hall, there are "outside histories" inside the history of the English, which are, for example, in the "sugar at the bottom of the English cup of tea" ("Old and New Identities" 70) that came from the plantations in the colonized countries to supply and maintain the British way of life. However, this part of the narrative is often silenced. When it is evoked, it is seen as lesser or inferior. We should notice that, as Bhabha is keen on reminding his reader, although the assertion of indigenous cultural traditions is of crucial importance, there is a certain danger in the "fixity and fetishism of identities within the calcification of colonial cultures" as in a romanticization of the past ("Introduction: Location" 13). This argument endorses my reading that this is why the fat black woman sits on the "unsittable" golden stool. By sitting on it, not only does she retrieve her cultural roots but she also makes a critique of patriarchy in society. This is a discriminated culture. However, its expressions are not free of criticism. Postcoloniality indeed brings us the opportunity to rethink the present by rewriting the past. Nonetheless, criticizing the past is recurrently necessary.

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<sup>3</sup> For further information, see: <<https://www.blackpast.org/global-african-history/golden-stool-17th-c/>>.

### **1.1 Blurring Binary Constructions: The More-than-Human as a Pathway**

The binaries, considered universal truths, divide and classify the world. Sandra Almeida argues that contemporary space is inherently dichotomic (“Traçando” 33). The divisions of nature/culture, female/male, black/white, colonized/colonizer, private/public, body/soul, and others are intrinsically dependent on one another and maintain their influence on and control of social and intimate relations. It is not by chance that subaltern peoples are usually feminized (Almeida, “Constelações” 59) – an assertion of their inferiority – or that the private realm is emptied of political and social value. Since their origins, these binaries have been intrinsically connected with one another, i.e., the formation of their divisions was not individual. They were jointly formed as part of one system of thought, which has guaranteed their perpetuation. In order to unsettle their structures, it is necessary to unsettle only one of them. Here I intend to focus on how the colonial construction of an excluding system was based on the conceptualization of nature and of the more-than-human. Such notion is the very origin of all the other binary conceptualizations (Huggan and Tiffin 151).

The first aspiration that led Europeans to their colonizing race can be said to be the ambition to conquer lands and to extract natural resources from them, i.e., the exploitation of nature. As they arrived in these lands, they encountered the local people, who had control over their own territories. The decision was to exploit not only the land but also those peoples, and thus the process of colonization started. For the project of domination to be taken forward, a justification was needed, so these peoples, who were then associated with nature as opposed to civilization, could be treated violently. Such peoples were put at the bottom of the European social scale, centered around the white heterosexual man.

According to Helen Tiffin and Graham Huggan, “the western definition of humanity depended – and still depends – on the presence of the ‘not-human’, the uncivilized, the

animal and animalistic” (5), as a pretext to legitimate invasion and colonization. The white colonizers represented the overcoming of nature, or at least the overcoming of the deep connection between human and nature, whereas the colonized often represented a phase in evolution that the supposedly superior European civilization had already exhausted (Fanon, “Black Skin” 108). The human was prioritized over all more-than-human existence.

However, the definition of those who were to be considered a “full” human being was very limited.

Women, for example, were considered inferior, which was explained through biological features that allegedly associated them with nature. Sherry Ortner, in “Is female to male as nature is to culture?”, claims that the belief in women’s capacity to provide the “gift of life” connected them with nature, whereas men, freer from such connection, were considered closer to culture. Because of such “procreative” characteristics, different social roles were attributed to male and to female. One of such roles was the connection of the private realm with women, which was based on women’s need to stay home, to tend, to care for, and to breastfeed their offspring, leaving men free to perform activities in the public realm. These so-called male activities were related to culture, and considered more important. Therefore, as nature was comprehended as inferior to culture, women were classified as inferior to men and “less human.” Accordingly, the private realm was disconnected from the public and considered inferior.

Black people were also often associated with nature in a depreciative manner, but for different reasons. As the colonized peoples had to be inferior in order to justify the violent colonization, as mentioned above, they were also associated with nature through the image of the “savage,” with uncivilized characteristics. María Lugones establishes the basis for the difference between colonizer and colonized as human *versus* non-human. The non-human species were frequently seen as wild and uncontrollable sexual animals (936). Later on, with

the advance of science, nature was used to explain and to connect “black skin, a small brain, and savagery” (Loomba 63). Even the Catholic Church took part in this construction of black people as souls that needed to be saved. Hall argues that race is a “political and social construct.” It is the “organizing discursive category around which a system of socioeconomic power, exploitation, and exclusion – i.e., racism – has been constructed” (“The Multicultural Question” 109). The theorist claims that racism establishes exclusion through biological differences, i.e., through nature, which turns racial difference into a scientific fact (110), and points to the official character of this discourse.

In Nichols’s “Thoughts drifting through the fat black woman’s head while having a full bubble bath” (13), the poetic voice deals with this scientific reasoning that constructed her body and, therefore, her identity, as inferior. In this poem, the fat black woman is taking a bubble bath while contemplating her body and the historical constructions surrounding it. After centuries of being told their skin is ugly and of being judged by their skin color instead of by their character, black people went through a process of incorporating colonial stereotypes. This led to a desire of “whitening” their skin, hair, and even language, of “cleaning” the race. In *Black Skins, White Masks*, Fanon demonstrates how the colonized wants to “escape the bush” by rejecting his or her blackness (2-3). The presence of the bath in the poem – the act of cleaning – can be related to the mark of shame of the black skin (hooks, “Black Looks” 106) as if the bath would clean away the black body’s “savagery” or “ugliness” that constitutes such shame. Nevertheless, the fat black women’s bath symbolizes a subversive cleaning of the black body, not off its color, but off the stereotypes imposed on it. While asserting the body’s blackness, this bath mocks the idea of cleaning off the race, by cleaning off the violence underlying this notion of shame.

The cleaning in the poem is the same established as necessary by Salman Rushdie, in reference to the act of purifying thought in post-Hitler Germany. The author claims that such



an act was never carried out in post-Imperialism British society. It remained in the nation's thoughts, "breeding lice and vermin, waiting for unscrupulous people to exploit it for their own ends" ("The New Empire" 131). The fat black woman then proposes cleaning Western thought and its dominant religion, science, and anthropology, i.e., she wants to clean the forms of knowledge that established black people as inferior, by cleaning hate, lies, and biased vision.

Scientific knowledge was used to create such universal truths about black people, as Rushdie explains: "even ghosts can be made to exist if you set up enough faculties, if you write enough books and appoint enough research students" ("Commonwealth Literature" 70). Accordingly, through a process of intellectual colonization, Western science wrote *a* story as *the* history of all civilizations. Western anthropology created a limited profile of what human beings were supposed to be like, and it did not include the fat black woman. Western theology rejected African gods, as well as the divinities of all religions which were different from the Western religions with their white god and white representations. The fat black woman was submitted to an inferior category. In the poem below she personifies these ideologies and fights against them with her own body and with the biology used to discriminate against her in the first place. Thus, the cleaning of the body is meant to clean away the inscription of this distorted discourse on it – it is not meant to clean the body itself.

O how I long to place my foot

on the head of anthropology

to swig my breasts

in the face of history

to scrub my back

with the dogma of theology (5-10)

This body challenges the colonial constructions described above. It is not to be enslaved or to serve as a source of pleasure. The materialization of the sciences through their embodiment shows how ideologies are material in their effects and how they are maintained by real people and by official institutions. By cleaning the body, the fat black woman is somehow trying to undo the damages these constructions entailed, as if such stereotypes could be cleaned away. The use of the body to question these colonial notions suggests an empowerment of the black people. Such empowerment includes their color and everything assigned to them by versions of history told by others. Black people's history, hidden inside the official history of the globe, emerge. As Fanon claims, it was not the colonizing nations that created the "Third World;" it was the blood and sweat of the colonized peoples that made and constructed Europe ("The Wretched" 96), which inverts, then, the perspective of such narrative.

It is also important to note another key feature in this poem. The first stanza, as well as the last one, presents a repetition:

Steatopygous sky

Steatopygous sea

Steatopygous waves

Steatopygous me (1-4)

The word *steatopygia*<sup>4</sup> is most famous in relation to Saartjie Baartman, also known as the "Hottentot Venus." Baartman was a Hottentot or Koi Koi<sup>5</sup> woman, born in the late

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<sup>4</sup> *Steatopygia* is the hypertrophy of the buttocks, most commonly seen in women of African descent. Although many discussions on this topic are related to health issues such as locomotion difficulty, in some cultures – mainly African tribes – it is seen as an element of sexual attraction.

<sup>5</sup> The original name of this tribe is Koi-Koi. The name Hottentot was given by the Dutch because of the way this people spoke. Although it is a depreciative term, it is how this people is known currently worldwide.

seventeenth century in a place currently attributed to a South African region, whose tribe and land were colonized by the Dutch. Her entire family was killed and she became a domestic servant for a Dutch family. Hendrick Ceaser, who was her “owner’s” brother, in association with a merchant of “eccentric pieces,” Alexander Dunlop, was so fascinated by the different type of Baartman’s body that he convinced her to be exposed in London as a “great artist.” The Hottentot women (or Koi-Koi) had, along with the steatopygia and a broad body (differently from the European beauty patterns), one characteristic called the Hottentot apron. When Hottentot girls reached puberty, they went through a process of lengthening their genitalia with weights or other instruments, which led to the formation of the apron. In the Hottentot culture, the bigger the apron, the better the woman was regarded to be. For Europeans, however, it was a symbol of bestiality and savagery. Baartman, then, was taken to Europe to perform, differently from what she had been told, in a freak show. She stayed the entire day trapped inside a cage in which she could not stand, and wore thin, almost transparent clothes, while people touched, yelled at and performed all kinds of absurdities to her (Chase-Riboud). The “Hottentot Venus” is now known as a symbol of resistance for the black women’s movement and an example of the great violence against black people, perpetrated in the colonial process. After she died, because of the conditions to which she was submitted, her body was dissected as a sort of aberration and exposed in the Museum of Natural History, in London, and in the Museum of Man, in Paris, where it was kept until the year of 2002 when the government of South Africa claimed her mortal remains.

The use of the term “steatopygia” in the poem indicates the use of science as a justification for exploitation, specifically of black women. In the fat black woman’s new reality, her body is no longer used for pleasure or violated – it refuses to be convinced that it is “wrong” or inferior. Gundrun Webhofer claims that the fat black woman’s “nonchalant playing with the tokens of white hegemonic artificiality”, when playing with the repetition of

the word “steatopygous” and stress patterns, she “points to their [the tokens] arbitrariness and artificiality” (25). By “reducing words to mere toys she deprives an inherently racist language of its power” (25). Here, then, not only the word “steatopygous” loses its racist connotation, as Webhofer asserts, but it changes its meaning as well. In fact, the new meaning assigned to steatopygia makes this body resist and subvert the established notions attributed to black people. This body is no longer related to savagery. Now it is a representation of this fat black woman’s greatness as it is connected to great representations of nature. By relating steatopygia with the greatness of nature (the sky, the sea, the waves, and the fat black woman are in the same position) – therefore, by normalizing it – the poetic voice ascribes new positive values to this characteristic that was once explained as proof of bestiality of an entire people and of its culture and knowledge. Like the sky and the sea, this woman is big, and like the waves, she possesses the power and the energy to destroy the colonial concepts of inferiorization, which subverts not only the hegemonic version of history and the way it was constructed, but also the connection with nature, which was the very means of such construction.

A similar assertion of blackness is portrayed in “The Fat Black Woman Composes a Black Poem...” (14-15). The notion of a black poem, as the title claims, suggests an intrinsic essence of all black people. For a black poem to exist, there must be a universal definition of what “black” is. This universal notion, as we have seen, was the one used to connect black people with nature in a belittling way. However, the “essence” or the characteristic presented in the poem to define “black” – as if there could be a characteristic common to all black people – is a consequence of their history of subjugation. This alleged “essence” is actually a developed need to resist such process. In other words, the only thing connecting all black people is the colonial construction of race (and racism).

Black as the intrusion

of a rude wet tongue

Black as the boldness  
of a quick home run

Black as the blackness  
of a rolling ship

Black as the sweetness  
of black orchid milk (1-8)

In the poem, the intrusion of the English/colonizer language (hence, culture) or the boldness required to fight and defy the white masters are the characteristics all black people have in common. The poem may be seen as a confrontation of the narrative of essential inferiority of black people through an appropriation of this very discourse. It is the use of the master's tool against the master's narrative. Another strategy shown in the poem is the reference of blackness as "a rolling ship." Ships roll as a way to avoid sinking. With a technology that permits their structures and even the electric equipment to work in the many positions ships may be put in by the impacts of the waves, they are able to function appropriately despite the collisions with the sea. Associating blackness with rolling ships suggests the black people's development of an ability, which was necessary to survive the extreme barbarism of coloniality.

This blackness is defined in the poem in opposite terms, i.e., sweet and bold. This ambiguity reflects the double-sided characteristic of stereotypes, which are a powerful strategy of ideological domination. The creation of black people's stereotypes ranges from the good docile native, who does not oppose colonization, to the savage cannibal, who fights the European for the control over his or her land. When it comes to women, this is more severe because of the gender-related issues and because of men's desire to control women's

sexuality and procreation. In colonial times, black women's procreation was a main factor for capital growth; the more black slaves, the more money could be made. Grada Kilomba claims that this strategy of "splitting" images, creating opposing stereotypes, is a process of denial, which makes one project onto the other his or her own characteristics that cause anxiety, guilt or shame (18). By attributing such characteristics to the colonized, white people could escape these feelings (ibid). In "Double Trouble" (224), Scottish poet Jackie Kay writes: "We were the spitting image. / We were the doppelganger." (19-20).

What is interesting to notice is that both poems analyzed above subvert – or try to subvert – the negative impacts of black people's essentialist relation with nature through a new and remodeled relation with it. It is an attempt to remodel the very basis on which this alleged inferior position was created. Accordingly, the re-telling and re-narration of the colonization process, of its history, and of its consequences gain a new route: the re-conceptualization of nature and of our relation with it. Post-colonialism and ecocriticism, then, may begin a new journey hand in hand. Huggan and Tiffin claim that "if the wrongs of colonialism . . . are to be addressed, still less redressed, then the very category of *human*, in relation to animals and environment must also be brought under scrutiny" (18). They go even further to state that human liberation "will never be fully achieved without challenging the historical conditions under which human societies have constructed themselves in hierarchical relation to other societies, *both human and non-human*, and without imagining new ways in which these societies, understood as being ecologically connected, can be creatively transformed" (22). Nature was in the beginning of these colonial constructions and it must be present in their reformulation too.

In the poems above, the use of positive associations with nature is the path to reframe the connection of women with it – in this case, of the fat black woman –, not the destruction of such relation. For long nature was seen as a locus of oppression, since it was the

connection with the basis for the binary constructions (Alaimo). However, such basis was formed by a fixed and stable notion of nature as a passive resource for human action. Understanding nature's actions in a new way could transform its connection with the marginalized social classes. The notion of passivity emerges from the idea that human beings are able to control everything: the human and the more-than-human; and from the misperception that the more-than-human has no influence on our lives. The conquest and domination of the new lands in America, Africa and Asia led colonizers to think nature was only a backdrop to their actions.

Because nature is understood as passive, the body – in opposition to mind or soul – is attached to passivity as well. However, our bodies function without our knowledge. Our cells are working, our organs and tissues produce substances and rebuild themselves. We do not know, not even through the most advanced medicine and technology, how many self-immune diseases are formed. In other words, we do not fully control our own body; it has a proper nature beyond our comprehension (Alaimo 921). If we cannot control our own body, maybe nature is not under our control, as we once thought. The point here is not only to reconceptualize nature as agent, but to redefine our very notions of agency, which are still seen through anthropocentric lenses. Huggan and Tiffin argue that “if we define agency less by the essentialist capacities apparently required to effect change than by the effecting of change itself, we have not only a less anthropocentric but also a less circular definition of agency” (208).

A brief look in the superior axis of the binaries that molded Western thought gives us the comprehension that the material aspect of the world was overlooked, compared to the intellectual and the mind. The division between mind and body is reflected in the connection of women and black people with this body and nature, and of men and white people with culture and mind. Therefore, we can say that the materialization of the world was suppressed

as the basis for the colonial process. The postcolonial/ecocritical alliance, named as such by Huggan and Tiffin, “brings out, above all, . . . the need for a broadly materialist understanding of the changing relationship between people, animals and environment” (12). Stacy Alaimo, when discussing feminist ecocriticism, brings important considerations for the materialist understanding of postcolonial ecocriticism. Alaimo proposes the concept of “transcorporeality” to map a new post-human space, focusing on the traffic between human and more-than-human. Hence, the author proposes a solution, through the material body, to the most important “intellectual” questions. She claims that we are directly connected with nature not only in the conventional way of eating what comes from earth, but by sharing the same matter and the same type of functioning. In transcorporeal space, human corporeality is not separated from nature – they are tied to one another. Nature is also a central element since it is as close to us, humans, as our own skin (910). This focus on materiality is not a denial of discursive and historical constructions; it is rather an acknowledgment of how such discursive and historical constructions influence our perception of life the same way that nature exerts such influence.

Although this discussion about materiality and the transcorporeal may seem very distant from the postcolonial objects of study, Nichols shows us how this new connection with nature can be used to question the same issues postcolonialism does. Some examples are the topics related to race constructions, to official and non-official history of the world, and to the intellectual domination established by colonialism. The poem that opens Nichols’s book, “Beauty” (3), portrays the dynamics of the transcorporeal by recreating the concept of beauty. Normally such concept does not encompass fat black women, as addressed in the third chapter.

Nature, in the poem, is not a backdrop for human actions. Instead, it is the very way through which a fixed pattern of beauty is reconceptualized. The construction of the



European beauty standards was aligned with those of race. According to this logic, the fat black body is supposedly “inferior” and “ugly”, seen as a passive subject. “Beauty” manages to unsettle the logic that built these stereotypes by unsettling our notions of nature as an agent, not as a passive subject. In the poem, the woman’s and the nature’s actions influence one another simultaneously in a balanced intermingling of matters.

Beauty

is a fat black woman

walking the fields

pressing a breezed

hibiscus

to her cheek

while the sun lights up

her feet

Beauty

is a fat black woman

riding the waves

drifting in happy oblivion

while the sea turns back

to hug her shape (1-14)

Both stanzas present the fat black woman acting upon nature and receiving back another action. The use and repetition of the conjunction “while” points to the transcorporeal as the space-time in which human corporeality is inseparable from nature (Alaimo 910). The actions take place simultaneously. The fact that the two moments start with the human action builds the common expectations of how these interactions usually happen – with anthropocentric focus –, which is then subverted by the use of “while.” The unexpected agency of nature adds more emphasis to this harmonic and unusual traffic. The same happens at the end: the fat black woman is numb, drifting in the power of nature, e.g., the waves. From this point on, all the sentences are divided by the use of enjambment and the dismantlement of its syntax, indicating the dismantlement of the fixed and closed body of the human, which is here mixed with nature’s matter.

In “Invitation” (10-11), this intermingling of matters is even more evident.

Come up and see me sometime

Come up and see me sometime

My breasts are huge exciting

amnions of watermelon

your hands can’t cup

my thighs are twin seals

fat slick pups (19-25)

The poem is divided into two parts by the repeated phrase “come up and see me sometime” (18). In the second part, the fat black woman’s body is described with images of nature’s

elements. The comparison between her body parts – breasts and thighs – and nature, for example, not only constructs this body as part of nature, but it also points to the impossibility of limiting it, to “cup” it, since it is so “slick.” The title of the poem is ambiguous in the sense that invitations to women’s bodies are, in general, sexist perspectives for using their bodies. However, here there is an invitation to see this new woman in formation along with nature – the fat black woman that embodies her agency and may be too much for fixed and simplistic forms of understanding.

Many of the book’s poems insinuate this new relation with nature as a way to dismantle the dual construction of the world that belittles an enormous part of it. However, in “Small Questions Asked by the Fat Black Woman” (24) the poetic voice questions if such dismantlement will be enough.

Will the rains

cleanse the earth of shrapnel

and wasted shells

will the seas

toss up bright fish

in wave on wave of toxic shoal

will the waters

seep the shore (1-8)

Basically, will nature survive the abuse and the neglect of human actions that have been going on for so long? And if it does, will it continue to provide humans with a house and a living? Although we, as human beings, consider ourselves more evolved and more rational than other species of this world, we tend to forget that our so-called evolved existence depends on the survival of these other beings. These ironically “small” questions defy the capacity of nature’s regeneration, but more importantly, it elicits its capacity of answering back to humanity for all the violence it has been treated with. In the last stanza, the poetic voice connects the survival of nature with her own survival: “will I like Eve / be tempted once again / if I survive” (12-4). In other words, will the fat black woman and all that she represents be someday free of the impositions of binary constructions if this system fails? Will she be able to create images of herself? As pessimist as this sounds, the poem points to the outrageous violence that the domination of the more-than-human (connected with the domination of colonized peoples) has exerted. She asks the ultimate question: are we walking towards a more clement future or are the people that created this system still working to maintain their superior position through the creation of new stereotypical images? Is it possible that this system will transform itself into new ways of domination, like a virus that changes its core upon each new attempt to kill it?

In the next and final poem of “The Fat Black Woman’s Poem’s” section – “Afterword” (25) –, the fat black woman answers this question: no, it is not possible that a system based on exclusion and destruction can last forever. The poem shows the fat black woman as a symbol of resistance. She has survived several centuries of colonization and coloniality and she will still be here when this system collapses. She “will come out of the forest” (2) when “the wind pushes back the last curtain / of male white blindness” (17-8) to “stake her claim again” (21). The closing of the section shows how our only choice is to follow the path of this more equal and all-embracing world, not only with human beings but

also with all forms of life surrounding us. Either this excluding system will end or it will end us. Nevertheless, it seems to indicate that the fat black woman will be here for the afterword.

The world is dialogic and ever changing. Thus it cannot be framed through essential and fixed, dividing categories. Differences among people, cultures and forms of life do exist and do not need to be “solved” or seen as bad for the world. Our binary divisions between high and low (black versus white; female versus male; nature versus culture; etc.) are unnatural and, therefore, unbalance our world. They are not a natural creation of the world; it was humanity that established these constructions. A fixed system that claims that the monolithic European model of life, knowledge, body, beauty, etc. is universal and superior – as if the world should conform to its patterns – is not fit for dealing with the complex multitude of beings that exist and with *The Fat Black Woman’s Poems*.

## **1.2 Dislocation in the Metropolitan Space: The Gap of Negotiation**

If the formation of the imaginary of binary thought was reinforced by the dispersion of peoples around the world, it is through their reunion in the globalized cities that such dualisms are questioned and their structure is complexified. The multicultural aspect of the main cities in the world has turned these spaces into battlefields in which cultural difference can be negotiated. The fat black woman is a Caribbean-born woman who lives in London in a diasporic context, which marks her daily experiences. There has been a “black presence” in Britain since the sixteenth century, as Hall emphasizes (“The Multicultural Question” 105). However, the strong migration from the Caribbean to London began in the post-Second world war, with the arrival of the ship *Empire Windrush* in 1948, “bringing returning Caribbean volunteer servicemen and the first civilian Caribbean migrant leaving the depressed economies of the regions in search for a better life” (“The Multicultural Question” 105). This

flow was not only from the Caribbean, but also included Asian, African and other peoples from the “Third World.” The colonized peoples found their way “back” through the pathways that England opened during colonization. The political statement that attempted to define this movement, “we are here because you were there,”<sup>6</sup> grew increasingly until the 1970s, when immigration laws became more rigid in Britain.

The closing of international doors was a response to the great number of immigrants arriving in Britain. Nonetheless, it also reflected the harsh attitude of British people towards the newly arrived, so well described by Hall: “most British people looked at these ‘children of empire’ as if they could not imagine where ‘they’ had come from, why or what possible connection they could have with Britain.” These people found “poor housing and unskilled, poorly paid jobs.” Although they constitute a significant part of Britain, and even more of London’s population, they “have been subjected to all the effects of social exclusion, racialized disadvantage, and informal and institutionalized racism” (Hall, “The Multicultural Question” 104). The way Britain’s national history was told underlies this situation and upholds its maintenance. Bhabha claims that nation is a narration (“DissemiNation” 204). In the case of Great Britain and many other European cases, the narration left out important parts of its constitution. Britain was considered a “unified and homogeneous culture until the postwar immigrants” (Hall, “The Multicultural Question” 104) arrived, which is a very simplistic and colonialist view of history. In fact, Britain was constituted through “a series of conquests, invasions, and settlements” (ibid). It was dominated by the French and has only existed as a nation-state since the eighteenth-century. It came into being, as we know it, when other cultures (Scottish and Welsh) were associated with the English culture, leading to the “slippage between London, England and Britain as corresponding terms,” which erased any other influences or differences inside it (McLeod 16).

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<sup>6</sup> It is a famous motto of political activists that emigrated to Europe (Almeida, “Traçando” 12).

In “The Fat Black Woman Goes Shopping” (8-9), this discussion on the nation is very much present. Women and black people, as mentioned above, are not “full” human beings, and the fat black Caribbean woman is not, therefore, a full citizen of Britain. However, the constant presence and the resistance of these “children of empire,” to use Hall’s expression, have instituted a negotiation of the frontiers of the divisions. Likewise, the classification of people through essential and fixed categories has also been negotiated. As Bhabha claims, “it is to the city that the migrants, the minorities, the diasporic come to change the history of the nation” (Bhabha, “DissemiNation” 243).

Searching for comfortable clothes that would fit her figure in the cold London winter, the fat black woman has to deal with the prejudice from the salesgirls and the lack of variety of clothes that can fit her “Caribbean body.”<sup>7</sup>

Shopping in London winter

is a real drag for the fat black woman

going from store to store

in search of accommodating clothes

and de weather so cold

Look at the frozen thin mannequins

fixing her with grin

and de pretty face salesgals

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<sup>7</sup> Although body-related issues will be better explored in the third chapter, it is relevant to explain here that this expression refers to the Fat Black Woman’s type of body – larger, “curvy” – and the different preferences and cultural identities such body relates to.

exchanging slimming glances

thinking she don't notice (1-10)

The search for clothes may appear to be a distant theme from the negotiations inside the cosmopolitan city. Sandra Almeida argues, however, that the city is a reflection or projection of the bodies that inhabit this space (“Poéticas” 142). Therefore, the way the bodies behave and express themselves is part of the city’s construction. The “slimming glances” the salesgirls exchange represent the paradox of hospitality Almeida talks about. Hospitality and hostility, similar even in their etymology, constitute a paradox of the reception immigrant people have in a country. The law of hospitality determines that the immigrants must comply with the laws of the new country. On the other hand, the inhabitants of this new country must also respect and accept the difference through an ethics of hospitality (Almeida, “Poéticas” 150). The hidden judging gaze of the salesgirls reflects this need to accept the other and the failure to deal with the uncommon. However, this paradox of the double-sided law of hospitality should not paralyze political action, but foster it (Almeida, “Poéticas” 152). As much as this poem seems to portray an immobilization of political action, the way the fat black woman deals with this paradox leads to a visualization of another narrative within this city. These different bodies that occupy the city - the British, the “native” ones of the salesgirls and the new, fluid one of the fat black woman - constitute a negotiation of identity and the unsettling of essentialized notions of citizenship.

Nonetheless, it is possible to notice the fat black woman’s discomfort in the cold city of London, which provokes the feeling of “a real drag” (2). These terms demonstrate a distancing of the fat black woman from this city, which does not incorporate her. Moreover, she does not have accommodating clothes, houses, and jobs. According to John McLeod, the shop in the poem “stores up unaccommodating prejudices and ways of seeing, not just ill-



fitting clothes” (123). Almeida still points to the existence of different cities within only one city. In the case of this poem, the two sides of one metropolitan space – in one side are the salesgirls; in the other is the fat black woman – represent this division, typical of globalized cities. In an ironic tone, these binary lines are blurred in the ending of the poem.

The fat black woman could only conclude

that when it come to fashion

the choice is lean

Nothing much beyond size 14 (18-21)

By rhyming “lean” with the word “fourteen/14,” not only does the fat black woman mock this situation – of which she is very aware – but she also plays with this status. The play with “lean” as few, poor and as skinny creates a new pattern for fashion that does not associate being skinny with a good thing, but with something poor and lacking variety. Giving a new value to this established pattern makes the reader rethink the other essentializations presented in the poem.

The analysis of this poem is only possible – or perhaps, more conceivable – because of the circumstances of the fat black woman’s presence in London. Moving from the Caribbean to England and living in this in-between space means living in diaspora. Diaspora constitutes a significant space for questioning and dismantling established and fixed notions. It is a “contested cultural and political” terrain where “individual and collective memories collide, reassemble and reconfigure,” then becoming “the sites of hope and new beginnings” (Brah 193). In the book *Searching for Safe Spaces: Afro-Caribbean Women Writers in Exile*, Haitian scholar Myriam Chancy claims that exile is, paradoxically, “the source from which various Afro-Caribbean women find the strength to counter their multiple points of oppression” (14). By writing in Britain, Nichols’s fat black woman and other subjects in

diaspora can “claim the space of their conquerors at the same time that they look critically homeward to the Caribbean” (Chancy 33).

The beginning of the twenty-first century “witness[es] a new phase of mass population movements” (Brah 178) that accompany “major re-alignments in the world political order” with new transformations “in the political economy of late twentieth-century capitalism” (ibid 179). Migrations have increased rapidly since the 1980s and “economic inequalities within and between regions, expanding mobility of capital, people’s desire to pursue opportunities that might improve their life chances, political strife, wars, and famine are some of the factors that remain at the heart of the impetus behind these migrations” (ibid 178). This new world context demands re-interpretation of global and intimate interactions in view of the new configurations of our borders and dividing lines – of countries and of our settled notions of the world order.

The term diaspora, first used in history to describe the Jewish movements after the Babylonian exile, refers to a journey or, as Avtar Brah calls it, many journeys, each with its own particularities. According to the author, “each diaspora is an interweaving of multiple travelling; a text of many distinctive and, perhaps, even disparate narratives” (183). It has an original meaning of “dispersion from” (181) and, therefore, it evokes a centre, a home. However, its meaning has changed over time given the new kinds of world diasporas. Almeida uses the term diaspora in association with the contemporary movements in a critic and questioning manner (“Constelações” 50). Brah claims that “in the context of a proliferation of new border crossings the language of ‘borders’ and of ‘diaspora’ acquires a new currency” (179). Chancy calls this space of exile a paradox as it brings “the opportunity for a renewed sense of self” (217). The poems “Fear” (30-31) and “Two Old Black Men on a Leicester Square Park Bench” (42-43), which compose the section “In Spite of Ourselves” in Nichols’s book, may shed some light on these new configurations. Through their new ways

of portraying relations with home in a diaspora, they complexify the notions of home and of the places with which home is connected.

In the Jewish diaspora and other diasporas considered “traditional,” the relation with home or with a place of departure was very strong. However, in these new movements, home is a very intricate term. In “Two Old Black Men”, the fat black woman contemplates this new place of London and the former home of these men.

What do you dream of you

old black men sitting

on park benches staunchly

wrapped up in scarves

and coats of silence

eyes far away from the cold

grey and strutting

pigeon

ashy fingers trembling

(though it's said that the old

hardly ever feel the cold)

.....

O it's easy

to rainbow the past

after all the letters from

home spoke of hardships

and the sun was traded long ago (1-11, 19-23)

Going back home is not a necessary factor in these new diasporas. There may not even be a desire to go home, but to feel at home wherever one is. In “Diaspora, borders and transnational identities”, Brah asks “where is home?”, but cannot give the reader a straight answer because home is more complex than a simple place of return. “On the one hand,” she argues, “home is a mythic place of desire in the diasporic imagination. In this sense, it is a place of no return, even if it is possible to visit the geographical territory that is seen as the place of origin” (192), which is not exactly what these two men sitting on a bench dream about. They dream of an illusory Caribbean of the past that has never been as it is in their imagination. “On the other hand,” Brah continues, “home is also the lived experience of a locality. Its sounds and smells, its heat and dust, balmy summer evenings, some grey skies in the middle of the day . . . all this, as mediated by the historically specific everyday of social relations” (192). Therefore, it can be understood that a diasporic subject does not necessarily want to go back home, but to feel at home wherever he or she is. It is a need of belonging, which these two men apparently can only find in the past.

By mentioning the location of Leicester Square in the title, the image of a tourist city, full of cinemas, theaters and a rich location is brought to the picture. These two old black men, who cannot even deal with London’s cold weather, having to wear many layers of clothing, trying to look away from the metaphoric cold of the city – images that are also present in other poems in the same book – are confronted with this other city of which they are not part. The poem evokes a nostalgia of home not as a physical space, but of a place where one can belong.

For Rosemary Marangoly George, home has been read as a “terrain of conservative discourses,” “abandoned to its clichés” (3), but there have been some theorizations that reconfigure this fixed notion of home (3). The definition of home, as we usually understand it, depends on binary divisions of home/not-home, me or us/ them or “Others”. It is “the ‘private’ space from which the individual travels into the larger arenas of life and to which he or she returns at the end of the day.” It is also “the larger geographic place where one belongs: country, city, village, community” (George 11). In other words, it depends on exclusions and inclusions. These inclusions “are grounded in a learned (or taught) sense of kinship that is extended to those who are perceived as sharing the same blood, race, class, gender, or religion. Membership is maintained by bonds of love, fear, power, desire and control . . . They are places that are recognized as such by those within and those without” (George 9). Thus, the notion of home intersects with the notion of self and of identity. Accordingly, identity for the fat black woman is not fixed and pre-established. Neither is the notion home.

In “Fear” (30-31), the “civilized” British asks the fat black woman: “‘Are you going back sometime?’” (8). She answers: “but of course / home is where the heart lies” (9-10), pointing to a new home that she may have found in this new country. Nonetheless, it is not simple to feel at home in a place full of prejudice against immigrants. After answering the question about going home, the fat black woman goes on drifting:

I come from a backyard  
 where the sun reaches down  
 mangoes fall to the ground  
 politicians turn cruel clowns (11-4)

The reader then may expect a romanticized vision of her birthplace, aligned with Brah's mythic place. However, this expectation is frustrated in the last verse. The fat black woman continues:

And here? Here

sometimes I grow afraid

too many young blacks

reaping seconds

indignant cities full of jail (15-9)

By contrasting both places, it appears to be strange that home may be found in such a place as the one described. It is a place of fear, in which the expectations of a better life were not met and the very institutions supposed to protect all citizens are the ones of which the fat black woman is afraid. Again, we see a polarization between the British and the immigrant (Caribbean) in the poems. This division appears even in the formal structure of the poem with the use of possessives separating "our skin" from "your own," and with the distinction between the place where the fat black woman comes from and "here." However, such separation is again complexified by the new configurations of her life, which does not conform to simplistic divisions that aim to classify the world. In this case, this complexity and the blurring of the binary dividing lines are not at the end, but at the beginning:

Our culture rub skin

Against your own

Bruising awkward as plums

black music enrich

food spice up

You say you're civilized

a kind of pride

ask, 'Are you going back sometime'? (1-8)

The rubbing skin, the music and the food present in this scenario point to a diasporic community that may be what provides the feeling of home or of belonging in this cruel place, which “bruises awkward as plums.” In other words, it violates and discriminates quietly. An example of this quiet discrimination is when the salesgirls think the fat black woman does not notice their looks. Another example is the so-called civilized people in the poem “Fear.” They were the ones who invaded and violently conquered the Caribbean. Nevertheless, they called the Caribbean savages and referred to themselves as civilized.

This intricate process of belonging “is intrinsically linked with the way in which processes of inclusion and exclusion operate and are subjectively experienced under given circumstances. It is centrally about political and personal struggles over the social regulation of ‘belonging’” (Brah 192). Therefore, the fat black woman’s account in “Fear” shows how this process is intimate and political at the same time. It also blurs the limits between these two spheres. Chancy claims that the exiled peoples’ actual return home is the revolution of consciousness of self-love and self-awareness. Therefore, going back home, as asked in “Fear,” is already achieved, because the fat black woman claims “the beauty and wisdom of

Black women and end[s] our[her] alienation” (219). Perhaps this is the only possible “going back home” since, as stated by Hall, “you can’t ‘go home’ again” (“The Formation”, 192).

The fixed notions of home and belonging that create separate spaces and cities, for those who are considered “British” and those who simply are not, are related to the idea that if you originally belonged somewhere else you would always belong there. Identities, then, are considered immutable. Identity is not instantly constructed or given to a person at birth; it is a continuous construction and re-modeling of oneself. In a diasporic context, one’s identity becomes multiple (Hall, “Thinking” 207) and her or his cultural identity follows the same rule. According to Hall, the term “cultural identity carries so many overtones of essential unity, primordial oneness, indivisibility, and sameness,” which leads the author to ask “how are we to ‘think’ identities inscribed within relations of power and constructed across difference and disjuncture?” (ibid 208). Accordingly, the fat black woman tries to claim her identity in this new diasporic context, not by leaving behind the Caribbean but by accepting where she is now and by changing what it means to be a citizen of this place.

The fat black woman’s notion of home dismantles the basic notions of separation that create home as we know it. The answer the fat black woman gives to the “civilized” person that asks when is she going home shows how home is no longer, for her, a fixed place or idea. Home is not a given; it is where “the heart lies.” By denying the fixity of home and what comes with the notion of a Caribbean immigrant, the fat black woman reconstructs her own identity as a diasporic subject empowering herself. She gains this power by being able to say where and what her home is, with what categories she identifies, and which values she attributes to these categories. By defying the notion of London as not-home and the Caribbean as home, the fat black woman also defies the categories that negatively “frame” her as immigrant. For her, home becomes “places carved out of closed doors, closed borders



and screening apparatuses . . . ‘home’ becomes contested ground in times of political tumult” (George 18).

In “Like a Beacon” (29), another poem of the section “In Spite of Ourselves,” the fat black woman mediates the dialogue between cultures. Although she has managed to enter the cultural performances and expressions of British culture in London, as the occupation of the space of the art galleries, she still misses her mother’s food. By using the representation of Caribbean food, she also points to the construction of the fat black woman’s identity. As mentioned above, identities are not fixed, let alone diasporic identities. According to Sarah Lawson Welsh, food, the acts of cooking and eating “play an equally key role in the negotiation of Caribbean identity . . . and culture in a global context.” The author also claims that specifically “diasporic Caribbean subjects (writers and cooks) can be seen to attempt to reestablish a new cultural home by adapting their cultures to novel conditions, fusing imported culinary traditions with resources in the new territory, and creating local versions of Caribbean cooking and eating” (“Caribbean Cravings” np). The strong presence of food in Nichols’s poems indicates that it is part of the process of identity formation. Such cultural feature does not alienate the Caribbean culture, nor does it let the Caribbean culture remain in a fixed position as a possible cultural defense.

Lawson Welsh, in the same text, refers to “Like a Beacon” as a poem that “articulates nostalgia for ‘back home’ through the lack of Caribbean food in a diasporic setting” (“Caribbean Cravings” np). However, considering the poem is inserted in Nichols’s book as part of a tightly weaved work, my close examination suggests something else. The reference to food points to the fat black woman’s construction of a new identity amid the blurring of discriminating binaries and the revision of old boundaries. It has to do with a more complex (re)construction of identities and traditions in the multicultural, cosmopolitan, and postcolonial scenario of London rather than a mere relation of nostalgia with Caribbean

aspects. Caribbean culinary itself is a proof of how cultures are redefined and can negotiate their influences when they are put together in the same territory. The relationship between food and literature as expression of cultural identity arises from the established association between eating habits and storytelling, going back to the earlier periods of settlement. This connection is useful to understand the Caribbean as “a fluid space of plurality, difference and discontinuity” (Lawson Welsh, “Caribbean Cravings” np). This perception affects the formation of the fat black woman’s identity, which in turn affects the colonial divisions of the world and, therefore, it reframes our patterns. Ib Araújo, discussing the relation of Nichols’s prose and poetry, also argues similarly when discussing the poem “Like a Beacon” claiming that Nichols turns cold London into a place of affection by creating a link with Guyana and somehow returning home through her palate (69). Thus, it is more of a construction of a new expression than mere nostalgia for it changes the place where she is now.

By contrasting these two expressions of culture, the poem also points to the long-established common notions of high *versus* low cultures, which were imposed on colonized peoples. The category of low is usually attributed to the popular cultures, whereas expressions found in “official” spaces – e.g., the art galleries – are given the status of high culture. By associating herself with a beacon, always searching for the needed contact with home, the fat black woman suggests this new formation of identity, which encompasses both cultures in a dialogue instead of in hierarchical terms. In the last stanza, this dualism of high and low is countered by a new one:

I need this touch  
of home  
swinging my bag  
like a beacon  
against the cold (9-13)

The cold weather is again present, framing London with a literal and metaphorical cold that persistently appears in Nichols's poems. Such reference indicates a possible lack of hospitality London shows this fat black Caribbean woman. The Londoners call themselves civilized and regard their art galleries as true expressions of culture. However, these same Londoners are the ones who create such a hostile environment for the immigrants with whom they share space. London, thus, is seen as a cold and barbaric location, whereas the Caribbean is a place the light points to. Hence, the meaning of civilized and savage – commonly attributed to these two places, respectively – is challenged. In "Like a Beacon," the difference between London and the Caribbean is not blurred; it is reaffirmed but with a subversive intent.

These questionings do not mean that the fat black woman has found a home or a place of belonging in London. Neither is it an assertion of how her relation with the Caribbean occurs. Like the diasporic space, the notion of home provides the fat black woman with terrain for questioning. I agree with George, on her conclusion concerning home and "postcolonial" literatures, that "perhaps the stance to take, while writing and reading fiction as much as in living, is to acknowledge the seductive pleasure of belonging in homes in communities and in nations – while working toward changing the governing principles of exclusions and inclusions" (200). The fat black woman is able to enquire so many categories through the fixed notion of home only because this notion was built through the logic of exclusion brought about by colonization.

The "completely pure" British lineage, mentioned above in the discussion about immutable identities, is one of the main arguments in the idea of so-called pure races or pure cultures. Such idea insists on defending alleged high cultures against the influence of others, such as the Caribbean. This kind of thought fails to consider that these other influences installed in the London city "do not (yet) have the power, frontally, to confront and repel the

former [British culture] head-on. But they do have the capacity, everywhere, to subvert and ‘translate’, to negotiate and indigenized the global cultural onslaught on weaker cultures” (Hall, “Thinking” 222).

The Caribbean migration was very different from the process of colonization. When the Europeans arrived at the lands of the colonized, during the first encounters, the Caribbean culture was not considered important. It did not need to be maintained “pure” from the influences of other countries, as it was already considered polluted. The Caribbean culture was constructed by the diverse colonial formation that led white European, black African slaves, and Indian indentured workers to those lands. It also decimated those who originally belonged there. In fact, “what we call now *the* Caribbean was reborn in and through violence” (Hall, “Thinking” 210). The Caribbean cultural formation has always been a struggle against the violent acts of colonization. Such struggle still continues. Hall states that “the fate of Caribbean people living in the UK, the US or Canada is no more ‘external’ to the Caribbean history than the empire was ‘external’ to the so-called domestic history of Britain” (ibid 206). Caribbean culture is “essentially driven by a diasporic aesthetic” (ibid 213). Accordingly, it is driven by a reformulation of what it means to be Caribbean. By occupying London’s space and claiming the right to be part of it, the fat black woman also reformulates what it means to be British.

While Hall discusses the influence that immigrants may have on Britain, Rushdie focuses on how these people are affected by diasporic life. The Indian author names himself – and others in similar positions – “translated men.” He explains: “the word ‘translation’ comes, etymologically, from the Latin for ‘bearing across’. Having been borne across the world, we are translated men (sic).” Discussing common ideas of translation, he adds: “It is normally supposed that something always gets lost in translation; I cling, obstinately, to the

notion that something can also be gained” (“Imaginary” 17). Thus, these diasporic subjects constantly perform a cultural translation.

Simona Bertacco, discussing cultural translation of postcolonial texts, claims that “a single language approach to post-colonialism is unfaithful to one of the basic constituencies of the postcolonial world – its multilingualism” (26). “If the postcolonial is to survive as a viable critical discourse,” as Bertacco claims, “it will have to become literally a discourse *of* and *on* translation . . . In a world where bi- and multi-lingualism have become the norm for huge numbers of people, postcolonial studies should speak more than one language at once, pushing its field of inquiry toward the borders between languages and different disciplines” (26-27). The fat black woman lives in this very bi-lingualism – her nation language and the English of Londoners. In “The Fat Black Woman Goes Shopping,” the space the fat black woman occupies in this city is put side by side with the language used to express her dismay for the salesgirls: “The fat black woman curses in Swahili/Yoruba / and nation language under her breathing / all this journeying and journeying” (14-16). However, one may assume that the language here “is not an accessory to the work of the city, but an integral part. Contact, transfer, circulation among languages define the sensibility of daily life and the public presence of communities” (Bertacco 195). Thus, the insertion of such register in a scene that insists on erasing the fat black woman’s presence in London shows how language can be a tool of resistance. It occupies the city with the Caribbean presence and creates productive spaces of confrontation. In times when coloniality still rules and the main theories and ideas still derive from Eurocentric history and value systems, the cultural presence of this “inner translation” or “self-representation,” as Ashcroft terms it, is a response to this homogenizing threat.

The reason why language can be such an instrument is that the intellectual colonization of the Caribbean was performed textually, through “maps, treaties, settler’s

journals, letters, travel writing, novels, poems, etc.,” and now it is the time for postcolonial literature to arise as “vehicles of anticolonial struggle” (Bertacco 24). In the process of colonization, the English language and the culture it represents were imposed on the colonized peoples, and tried to erase other cultures and forms of expression. Although this process of erasure happened widely, some traces of the “original” cultures have survived, such as the influence on language. However, the remaining traces of these “original” cultures were placed in the intimate, private circles of interaction. The “proper” English, on the other hand, is the one taught in schools and used in work environments. Thus it is the official language that occupies the public, male space of culture. Because of this context, the Creole, Nation Language or Patois was constructed as a marginalized variety in opposition to the Standard English.

In the Caribbean, nation language was mainly constructed as a form of communication for people who did not share the same language, since communities of West and Central African slaves were forced to work together (Lockwood 85). The Caribbean critic Kamau Brathwaite wrote an important text defining nation language and giving a new perspective to its use and formation. He defines it as the language which is “influenced very strongly by the African model, the African aspect of our New World/Caribbean heritage. English it may be in terms of some of its features. But in its contours, its rhythm and timbre, its sound explosions, it is not English, even though the words, as you hear them, might be English to a greater or lesser degree” (550). After describing nation language, he questions if English can be a revolutionary language and answers that “it is not English that is the agent. It is not language, but people, who make revolutions” (551). Rushdie presents a similar idea when claims that “to conquer English may be to complete the process of making ourselves free” (“Imaginary” 17).

The poem “Epilogue” (85) from Nichols’s first book *i is a long memoried woman*, is present in the last section of *The Fat Black Woman’s Poems*. As other poems do, it suggests a concern about the use of nation language. In “Epilogue,” this long memoried woman describes, with very few words, the birth of nation language:

I have crossed an ocean  
 I have lost my tongue  
 from the root of the old one  
 a new one has sprung (1-4)

The poem describes, then, the forced diaspora of black people throughout the Atlantic and the process of intellectual colonization and cultural assimilation of the African cultures. The interesting fact is that the birth of this language is described as a plant whose “foremother” died and left the path to the growth of the new one. A new language has sprung from the death of the older one. Likewise, in the Caribbean cultural formation, a new meaning has sprung from the old ones erased in colonial times. The Caribbean history is marked by survival and constant changes – necessary and revolutionary –, which led to the establishment of the nation language as a new tool of confrontation.

In “We New World Blacks” (34), from the section “In Spite of Ourselves,” the description is no longer of its formation. The poem is about the conflicts of the speakers, who are divided between the alienation of the colonizer’s culture and the suffering entailed in belonging to a culture they try to hide.

The timbre  
 in our voice  
 betrays us  
 however far

we've been

whatever tongue

we speak

the old ghost

asserts itself

in dusky echoes

like driftwood

traces

and in spite of

ourselves

we now the way

back to

the river stone

the little decayed

spirit

of the navel string

hiding in our back garden (1-21)

The timbre personified in the ghost represents the African culture and the roots black people cannot eliminate. This presence is stronger than their will. In spite of themselves, they know the way back home. The navel string is buried, but always present. This poem may represent



the commonly necessary process that comes before acceptance and understanding that the black, afro-descendant culture is not an inferior but a discriminated culture. The acceptance of this fact and the struggle against such excluding colonial patterns lead to a new perspective on the use of nation language – a strategic one, as the one in “The Fat Black Woman Goes Shopping” discussed above.

It is important to note that, unlike Lockwood’s mathematics<sup>8</sup> (83), nation language does not refer only to the use of a different grammar, e.g., the verb conjugation. It is much more expressive than this limited understanding of African influence. The influence we talk about here is the influence on the way of thinking. Cultural translation transmits exactly this difference of perspectives and manners of thinking. The users of Standard English may usually think of poetry in very canonic forms with interpolated rimes. Contrarily, nation language, in the fat black woman’s case, will use a rhythmic sequence of verses that might not even rime, but it will have musicality. In the use of nation language, it is possible, for example, to borrow the form of old popular hymns or round songs, or to find symbols and specific meanings, rituals of a specific culture. By introducing these aspects in Standard English, the fat black woman produces a cultural translation. This translation operates in a space of dialogue between the two languages, producing a gap in which difference can be negotiated. Based on her own culture and language, the fat black woman can translate her thoughts and ways of seeing the world.

Using aspects of one’s own culture and cultural identity, in a language which was imposed and which represents a history of dominance, means to translate oneself – history, culture, and values – into a form of expression which was equally imposed, and which does

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<sup>8</sup> Michael Lockwood counts in percentage terms how many poems in Nichols’s children’s books use the creole (as he refers to it). However, he considers the use of creole in a limited way and does not take into consideration all the forms of expression of creole/nation language.

not reflect one's identity features. Ashcroft claims that "our language is us" (45). Thus, inserting nation language into Standard English, as Nichols does in her poems, is to defy this dualistic status. Ashcroft also claims that there is no pure language and that all relations between a sign and referents is already a translation, which means that all languages are unstable, unfixed. If language is a metonymic representation of a culture, then no culture can be fixed, pure or superior to another culture. The presence of two different cultures installs a gap, which is "a refusal to translate the world of the writer completely" (Ashcroft 61) and, I add, to alienate it completely too. This gap as a place of negotiation and reconsideration of ideas is exactly the gain that Rushdie claims all translations also have.

The presence of African influence on Nichols's poems is not only a cry of resistance, but it is also connected with all other elements in her work. If "the transcultural text is a space of negotiation, a space in which the boundary between self and Other blurs" (Ashcroft 53), a contact zone<sup>9</sup>, we may see a cord that connects all the aspects discussed here about *The Fat Black Woman's Poems*: the diasporic context, the transcorporeality of human and more-than-human, the nation language. All these elements constitute a contact zone, and they work to blur the lines dividing binaries and dualisms constructed by colonial thought. Nichols's work is tightly interconnected and functions as a disturbing instrument that unsettles the current, discriminating situation the poetic voice describes. Ashcroft even claims that the process of translating "cultural realities in a transformed language . . . has changed the field of English literature forever" (67).

More than a change in the literary field, this form of creative resistance has the force to influence our perceptions of the world surrounding us. Many authors discuss literature and

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<sup>9</sup> This term is related to Mary Louise Pratt's theorizations and borrowed by Ashcroft in the text quoted herein. In "Arts of the Contact Zones", Pratt defines these contact zones as "social spaces where cultures meet, clash and grapple with each other, often in contexts of highly asymmetrical relations of power, such as colonialism, slavery, or their aftermaths as they lived out in many parts of the world today" (34). For further references, see *Imperial Eyes: Travel Writing and Transculturation*, by Mary Louise Pratt.

its reflexive possibility that may provoke changes in our lives (Almeida, “Traçando” 25; Rushdie, “Imaginary” 14). In *Postcolonial London: Rewriting the Metropolis*, McLeod investigates how the confluence of people and cultures in the “postcolonial London” – term he extensively reflects upon – may modify the city. This process of modification can be carried out through the diasporic subjects’ writings, which offer “alternative and revisionary narratives of subaltern city spaces which do not easily succumb to the demands of authority” (4). The author claims that these writings have “enabled new ways of thinking about regional, national, diasporic and transcultural identities” (4) by taking “control not only of the spaces in which they have found themselves but also of the agency to make their own representations about the city and their experiences” (21).

McLeod examines Nichols’s *The Fat Black Woman’s Poems* and how it forces London “to accommodate black women whose subaltern spatial practices evidence important modes of resistance and agency” (95) by producing “tentative yet emancipatory visions of London . . . suggesting resources which resist the problematic construction of migrant women in London” (20). Like the British Empire was built through a narrative, this form of writing re-tells this narrative, and opens central spaces for new protagonists. Postcolonial London, for McLeod, is not a specific place that can be pointed to in a map, it is what emerges “between the material conditions of metropolitan life and the imaginative representations made of it” (7). With the growing prominence of diasporic, black, female writers, the city of London begins to change its scenario. Although literary works are not able to affect dichotomic divisions and discriminations, it is possible to identify alternative narratives and descriptions of ways of living that blur these dividing lines and, thus, contribute to the creation of more inclusive futures, as Nichols’s poems attempt to do.

## CHAPTER TWO

### **The Fat Black Woman's Carnival and the Subversion of the Binary Logic**

A gente combinamos de não morrer

Conceição Evaristo, *Olhos d'Água*

The Virago edition of 1984 *The Fat Black Woman's Poems* has been reprinted and its cover now presents a quotation from Terry Eagleton's review of the book published in the *Independent on Sunday*: "inside this slim collection there is a fat woman not even fighting to get out." This assertion points to how the fat black woman has a world of her own inside this collection of poems and how she freely occupies this place. The world of the fat black woman, as briefly mentioned in the first chapter, exists in another reality inside the book. In this world, the fat black woman and her body exist freely. White men are shown in postures of resignation whereas the fat black woman comes out of the forest at the end to stake her claim. In a different world of beauty standards, where racism and sexism predominate and where colonized peoples and their cultures are considered inferior, the fat black woman would have to struggle to be what she is: fat, black, woman, Caribbean, and a diasporic subject. There would be an internal struggle and a negotiation between what one is expected to be and what one actually is. However, the fat black woman does not live in this world. Her reality exists in a world of carnival, in which carnivalesque strategies are used to interrogate the hierarchical order that lies outside.

The purpose of this chapter is to discuss how *The Fat Black Woman's Poems* constructs a carnivalesque world and why the strategies used are important for the fat black woman's questioning of stereotypes and cultural constructions. Some critics and scholars have gone further than Eagleton in highlighting the fat black woman's world and connecting it with carnivalesque elements. Maite Escudero claims that *The Fat Black Woman's Poems* challenges "the possible univocity of sameness and difference respectively. The individual

and the community are no longer subject to totalitarian and monolithic conceptions of gender and race” (24). Simone James Alexander discusses the “vulgar,” redefined in Nichols’s book, which is “innately present in the promotion of gender and body conformity. Along these lines, acceptance of the body in all its forms—deviance, outcast, othered, grotesque—signals rejection of Victorian ideals of normalcy, femininity, decency, and the ideal citizen” (130). The assertions by both authors suggest a connection with carnival in Nichols’s work. The former points to the rejection of univocity and monolithic expressions. The latter points to the grotesque body amply discussed in Mikhail Bakhtin’s work, which rejects all imposed norms and forms of hierarchy. Although these scholars assign carnivalesque elements to Nichols’s collection of poems – and I agree with their points of view – an analysis of the fat black woman’s world as a world of carnival has not been thoroughly conducted.

The concept of carnival derives primarily from European folk festive manifestations in the Middle Ages, a calendrical ritual that took place before Lent – a Christian time of the year around the month of February, which precedes Easter and is marked by a “purification of sins.” During this period there were several public celebrations, usually in fairs. Such events were marked by social excesses, such as drinking and eating. In the 1930s, the Russian scholar Mikhail Bakhtin wrote what is considered the first theorization about carnival and its manifestations, which is entitled *Rabelais and His World*, an analysis of François Rabelais’s *oeuvre*, *Gargantua and Pantagruel*. The book addresses the carnivalesque world in Rabelais’s work, which had been, according to Bakhtin, continually misinterpreted by the academy since after the Renaissance. Because of the soviet socialist regime, the book was only published in 1965, but gained notoriety very rapidly.

For Bakhtin, the comprehension of carnival and its laughter changed from time to time and reached its maximum expression in the Middle Ages and in the Renaissance. The full experience of carnivalesque celebrations is explained by the Russian theorist as a time of

suspension of all hierarchies, “a completely different, nonofficial, extraecclesiastical and extrapolitical aspect of the world, of man[sic], and of human relations; they built a second world and a second life outside officialdom, world in which all medieval people participated more or less” (“Rabelais” 6) and “while carnival lasts, there is no other life outside it” (“Rabelais” 7). Bakhtin states that this nonofficial feast celebrated a “temporary liberation from the prevailing truth and from the established order” (“Rabelais” 10).

In order to describe carnival in its maximum expression, Bakhtin divides his book chapters according to certain elements: laughter, language, the grotesque aspect and others. For examining and associating the fat black woman’s world with carnival in this chapter, these three features are central. However, before exploring such associations and its effects, it is necessary to discuss Bakhtin’s work and then approximate his theoretical work to the analysis of *The Fat Black Woman’s Poems*. The first point to consider is the different context of Bakhtin’s theorizations from the Caribbean context. Not only was Bakhtin’s book written during the social and political environment of 1930s socialist Russia –different from the Caribbean’s political and historical formation –, but it also focuses on Renaissance carnival, which portrays a different structure from the more contemporary Caribbean Carnival.

Unlike what is usually assumed, Caribbean Carnival does not come from European traditions. It is a product of “precolonial Africa and South Asia” (Farrar 555). Therefore, it was formed in a set of configurations which are very different from those studied by Bakhtin. This form of Caribbean manifestation was transformed by “slaves, their descendants, and others into the site and occasion of an earnest reaffirmation of identity in the face of a history of socioeconomic oppression” by the colonial forces, expressed vividly in the planter class (Aching 59). This reflects Caribbean carnival purpose of producing “a shift in power configurations” (Aching 42). Furthermore, it can be said that “there was a clear picture of the

cultural frontiers, battle lines, and thresholds in the early history of Caribbean carnival” (Aching 11) because of the contestation of social hierarchies.

Although this carnival, as Max Farrar puts it, offers “the populace an opportunity for renewal and becoming through laughter, excessiveness and play” (554), it is also necessary to emphasize the “promotion of regressive sex roles, inter-ethnic antagonism, capitalism commercialism and non-transgressive excess” of Caribbean carnival (554). Both angles, however contradictory, are undeniable possibilities for understanding Caribbean carnival. As Peter Stallybrass and Allan White argue, “there is no a priori revolutionary vector to carnival and transgression” (16). It can be what its manifestors and revellers make of it, a site of political struggle or a mere calendrical ritual.

Accordingly, Caribbean carnival does have many connections with Rabelaisian carnival as described by Bakhtin: both are popular, comic, and call for social claims. However, these similarities do not erase the limited application of Bakhtin’s work to the Caribbean social and historic formation of multiethnicity, transnational population and carnival. Moreover, Bakhtin was largely criticized for his so called “optimistic populism” and for his positive emphasis on the grotesque bodily element (Stallybrass and White 9). The critique is indeed adequate as Bakhtin’s utopian view is responsible for his neglect of some issues, some of which are central in this thesis, such as gender inequality. In *The Politics and Poetics of Transgression*, Stallybrass and White give many examples of how women and other minorities were abused and violently mocked during carnival.

Despite these considerations and probably because Bakhtin was the first to theorize about carnival in such an extensive way, his work has been continually employed to analyze many colonial and postcolonial studies related to carnivalesque practices. The high and low division of Rabelaisian carnival is frequently attributed to the colonizer and the colonized

cultures, respectively. However, this division has shifted “into broader, less visible, and more cosmopolitan configurations in which class differences and allegiances across borders inform and affect definitions of local and national cultures” (Aching 42). As discussed further in this thesis, the colonial configurations of high and low have become more complex in contemporaneity. Therefore, Bakhtin’s ideas to analyze Nichols’s work must be used carefully and with adjustments, recontextualizing and specifying the carnivalesque framework that Bakhtin deemed as universal. Nonetheless, it is not possible to abandon Bakhtin since he produced not only the first theorization on the topic, but the most extensive one, which serves as a basis for most contemporary studies on new and different carnivals.

In fact, my tone in using *Rabelais and His World* is not one of dissatisfaction. After re-thinking the different contexts and the needed updates in terms of a more contemporary outlook, the bulk that is “left” in Bakhtin’s ideas is fundamental for the comprehension of any popular manifestation that makes social claims. I agree with Farrar, who states: “we should not abandon Bakhtin. Regulation is not complete. The people’s laughter is still to be heard. New types of bodies are visible. Bacchanal lives on” (555). In point of fact, Bakhtin warns his readers about the changes carnival and carnivalesque laughter suffer through time, which enables future uses of his theory in new and upcoming contexts.

Due to these changes, as mentioned before, carnival cannot be essentialized. It is not political by nature, but it can be used as such, as it can be a popular expression or a form of governmental control through a “bread and circuses” practice. Beyond considering the possible essentialization of carnival itself, it is necessary to point out that the terms and theorization by Bakhtin may also create an essentialized view of the social structure. Dividing the society into “high” and “low” manifestations, for example, points to a certain fixity, even if this division is claimed to have been created by the social constructions of a hegemonic logic. This inflexibility clashes with carnival’s prerogative of being opposed to a dominant



hegemonic culture. Through a revisited logic, Mary Russo claims that carnival can be seen as a “productive category, affirmative and celebratory,” moving away from these exact “modes of critique that would begin from some Archimedean point of authority without, to models of transformation and counterproduction situated within the social system and symbolically at its margins” (214). Here, following Russo’s line of thought, carnival is seen as “a set of mobile practices, images and discourses” (Stallybrass and White 15) that functions as an analytic mode of understanding.

In 1995, Mary Russo published *The Female Grotesque: Risk, Excess, and Modernity*, which is a proposal to realign Bakhtin’s carnival grotesque with gender theorizations. According to her, “Bakhtin, like many other social theorists of the nineteenth century, fails to acknowledge or incorporate the social relations of gender in his semiotic model of the body politic, and thus his notion of the Female Grotesque remains, in all directions, repressed and undeveloped” (219). Russo proposes, then, a new definition of the grotesque that is more conscious of the gender and social inequalities, pointing to a new way of theorizing the carnivalesque.

In the specific context of the fat black woman, carnival as a mode of understanding subverts the hierarchical construction of binary thought established by the logic of colonization. This subversion occurs not only through the inversion of this binary thought, as Bakhtin commonly states, but through a process of hybridization. The mere inversion of the fixed “high” and “low” would restate the division between these categories. On the other hand, the hybridization of forms of expression, the crossing of boundaries, and the creation of new values for these constructions is what produces “strange instabilities in a given semiotic system. It therefore generates the possibility of shifting *the very terms of the system itself*, by erasing and interrogating the relationships which constitute it” (Stallybrass and White 58).

Not only does the fat black woman assume another position in this system, but she also constructs new meanings for old impositions. The fat black woman may stand as a form of subversion through the hybridization and the heterogeneity produced by the carnivalesque logic. Russo claims that the very heterogeneity of carnival is what sets itself “apart from the merely oppositional and reactive.” Indeed, “carnival and the carnivalesque suggest a redeployment or a counterproduction of culture, knowledge, and pleasure” (218).

Accordingly, when carnival is hybrid and heterogeneous, it “refuses to surrender the critical and cultural tools of the dominant class and in this sense carnival can be seen above all as a site of insurgency, and not mere withdrawal” (ibid). As we will see in the following sections, *The Fat Black Woman’s Poems* crosses the limits of the binary categories with the use of laughter, language and the grotesque body, (counter)producing new possibilities for the system we are inscribed in.

*The Fat Black Woman’s Poems* does not mention directly the influence of carnival. However, in a later book, *Sunris*, published in 1996, the presence of carnival is amply discussed in the introduction and in the poem that names the book as well. In the introduction, Nichols explains such presence in her Caribbean memories and how it influences the literature by many authors, including her own. *Sunris* was published ten years after *The Fat Black Woman’s Poems*. However, the carnival influence is also present in the latter. In fact, the introduction begins with her adolescence memories of carnival, which suggests that this had been a topic for her for a long time. It can be said that the idea matured for ten years, before it became the central theme of one of her later books. Nichols recalls memories of Caribbean carnival: “I am fifteen, leaning through the window of our Princess Street home, having picked up the unmistakable sound of a metallic ringing - and sure enough two minutes later, a lorry full of steel-band men come into being.” Afterwards, she describes her own entrance in it: “and since I can’t bear to be outside such energy, as they

move out of sight, I find myself dashing out of the house, . . . pretending not to hear the headmaster-voice of my father shouting from the window: ‘Come back here, girl, I say come back.’” (“Introduction to *Sunris*” 89).

In this scene, we can notice the collective energy of carnival, the free spirit it represents, and a voice (her father’s) trying to prevent her from participating in it. The position her father’s voice represents is better explained in the following quotation from the introduction: “as a child, steelpan, calypso, in fact anything that came from the ordinary folk including the everyday creole speech, were regarded as ‘low-class’ not only by the colonial powers that be (in our case British) but also by the more snobbish of the upper and middle classes who frowned on folk-culture as common” (“Introduction to *Sunris*” 89). Nevertheless, she argues, “despite various measures which included historical banning of the drum, both carnival and steel drum continued to flourish” (“Introduction to *Sunris*” 89).

This account shows how Nichols is connected, on a personal level, with Caribbean carnival, its rhythms, meanings, and philosophy, letting us know the origin of this celebration in her life. Nichols’s experiences as a child and as a teenager are deeply marked by the carnival experience: “I myself have grown up with the words, tunes and rhythms of calypso constantly in my head” (“Introduction to *Sunris*” 90). Carnival is not just a theme, but an experience which is alive in her memories.

## **2.1 The Carnavalesque Narrative: Laughter and Seriousness Undivided**

In order to begin addressing laughter and humor in *The Fat Black Woman’s Poems*, the structure of the book itself must be considered. The fat black woman, with so many poems expressing her physical magnitude, is portrayed in a slim collection. When looking at the book, before even opening it, this first irony draws laughter. The Virago edition cover,

mentioned in the beginning of this chapter, is also considered important for the analysis of the book. It presents a fat black woman posing with a performatic expression in her face, which is ironic, playful, and provocative. This image is part of the comic air of this book and one does not even need to start reading its poems to notice it.

Many poems in Nichols's book describe the fat black woman's quotidian actions, which acquire a broader and political meaning in the weavings of the writing, as shown in the analysis of the poem "The Fat Black Woman Goes Shopping" (8-9). In this particular example, the act of shopping for new clothes may provoke the reader to think about questions of citizenship, and it also creates a certain amusement.

The fat black woman could only conclude

that when it come to fashion

the choice is lean

Nothing much beyond size 14 (18-21)

The end of the poem presents a certain play with the ambiguity of the meanings of "lean" and with the questioning of beauty patterns. By referring negatively to small sizes of clothes, hence thin bodies, the fat black woman gives the poem a humorous tone. The playfulness of this inversion of beauty patterns (fat/thin) may look like a mere reinforcement of the binary logic. Nonetheless, there are other nuances to be considered regarding the fat black woman's laughter.

In the centuries following Renaissance, the notion of carnival laughter was conceived in a very derogatory manner. During the seventeenth century, laughter became a low genre in literature, being considered only as a "light amusement or a form of salutary social punishment of corrupt and low persons" (Bakhtin, "Rabelais" 67), not a universal and

philosophical form as it had been before. It became individual, private, and it was banned from social and historical spheres. Bakhtin claims that "neither can history and persons representing it – kings, general, heroes – be shown in a comic aspect . . . the essential truth about the world and about men[sic] cannot be told in the language of laughter" ("Rabelais" 67). This attitude toward the humour aggravated in the eighteenth century, and lasted until Romanticism, when the grotesque genre was revived, even though such revival brought a "transformed meaning" ("Rabelais" 36). During this period, laughter and the grotesque – concepts that are connected – saw some renewed interest, but were not comprehended as they used to be in carnival times.

After the decline of Romanticism, this concern once again decreased and laughter returned to its confines of the private domains. This pendulum of renewed interest and its retrograde aspect continued in history, and it reached modernism and other schools of thought, as Bakhtin observes in the introduction of *Rabelais and His World*. However, the theorist claims that none of these periods were able to fully comprehend the ambivalent and regenerating character of carnivalesque laughter. Interestingly enough, according to Russo, "Bakhtin's focus on carnival in early modern Europe contains a critique of modernity and its stylistic effects as a radical diminishment of the possibilities of human freedom and cultural production. He considers the culture of modernity to be as austere and bitterly isolating as the official religious culture of the Middle Ages" (218). This suggests how Bakhtin's interest in the carnival in the Middle Ages is a critique of his own time.

If we consider such "austere" characterization of laughter, "The Fat Black Woman Goes Shopping" cannot be about other things rather than the mere act of shopping and the victory of the fat black woman over the "salesgals," who "exchange slimming glances / thinking she don't notice" (9-10). The humor in the poem becomes an individual laughter that points to the other – the "salesgals" –, by ridiculing their behavior and their prejudice.

However, the fat black woman is not mocking the salesgirls; she is mocking the logic that creates the divisions between her and these other women, between the fat black body and the thin bodies. Although the salesgirls may represent the conformity to the beauty patterns, they are not the pattern itself. Of course, under the characterization of laughter of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, the fat black woman is only amusing herself and cannot deal with such “serious” aspects of life. Therefore, the mere presence of laughter in “serious” discussions brings about a destabilization of social constructs, since laughter is supposed to remain in the private, individual realm.

Contrary to common belief, seriousness is not the opposite of carnivalesque laughter. Laughter is only opposed to intolerant, dogmatic seriousness. The carnivalesque “laughter does not deny seriousness but purifies and completes it. Laughter purifies from dogmatism, from the intolerant and petrified, it liberates from fanaticism and pedantry, from fear and intimidation, from didacticism, naiveté and illusion, from the single meaning, the single level, from sentimentality” (Bakhtin, “Rabelais” 123). Indeed, in “The Fat Black Woman Goes Shopping,” a posture of intimidation is established by the “salesgals.” The entire process of buying clothes in London winter is described as intimidating and, perhaps, humiliating as well. From the beginning of the poem, the reader is told that shopping is a “real drag” and the atmosphere of the poem is the weather of London. This cold feeling, as seen in the previous chapter, represents in Nichols’s poems a metaphorical cold too. The fear of judgment and humiliation is overcome through laughter. While one may expect that the fat black woman would feel uncomfortable and assume a passive attitude, she fiercely ascribes to herself the control of the situation by playing with the fashion patterns.

This play with beauty standards and with the meanings of “lean” represents the ambivalent and regenerating aspect of carnivalesque laughter. According to Bakhtin, “the characteristic trait of laughter was precisely the recognition of its positive, regenerating,

creative meaning” (“Rabelais” 71). Laughter, in its connection with the grotesque, is ambivalent inasmuch as it represents life and death. It is ridiculing and regenerating at the same time. The common Renaissance carnivalesque act of throwing urine at people may demonstrate this better: by throwing urine, people were debased, but this very same act represented a renewal of those who were thrown urine at – they were not laughed at, but laughed with. Thus this laughter is collective, rather than individual. Seen outside its own logic, the act of throwing urine, as well as the fat black woman’s acts, may be related to “cynicism and coarseness” (Bakhtin, “Rabelais” 149). However, such acts are devoid of these features. Therefore, in “The Fat Black Woman Goes Shopping,” the fat black woman mocks the situation and regenerates it by laughing.

Moreover, the fat black woman purifies the excluding logic, by proposing a new one which is comic and serious at the same time, and also collective and more inclusive. She is subject to dual constructions and so are the salesgirls. The binary logic affects all. Even though such girls represent the conformity with this logic, they must also deal with imposition in order to conform. This collectivity of carnivalesque laughter reflects “the social consciousness of all people” (Bakhtin, “Rabelais” 92). When a person experiences the festive carnivalesque expressions, he or she comes “into contact with other bodies of varying age and social caste”; and thus becomes aware “of being a member of a continually growing and renewed people” (ibid). There is no individual power. Ergo, laughter represents the defeat of “earthly kings, of earthly upper classes, of all that oppresses and restricts” (ibid).

“The Fat Black Woman’s Instructions to a Suitor” (22) is another poem that prompts the discussion of seriousness and laughter together. The fat black woman tells a possible suitor what to do to supposedly be with her.

Do the boggie-woggie

Do the hop

Do the Charlestown

Do the rock

Do the chicken funky

Do the foxtrot

Do the tango

Drop yourself like a mango

Do the minuet

Spin me a good ole pirouette

Do the highland fling

Get down baby

Do that limbo thing (1-13)

These instructions are all connected to Caribbean dances and body movements. For obvious reasons, it is funny to imagine that a suitor would go through these steps to be with the fat black woman. In the Western society logic of stereotypes, which praise thin, white, European bodies, the fat black woman would occupy a place of inferiority. Unlike such logic, in her world of carnival, her suitor would do all kinds of things to have a chance to be with her. In the last stanza the poem changes its tone, or better, it is complemented. Laughter and seriousness complete each other to achieve the fat black woman's manner of expression.

After doing all that, and maybe mo



hope you have a little energy left

to carry me across the threshold (14-16)

The end of the poem indicates how the comic dancing movements actually represent the difficulties one needs to go through in order to be with the fat black woman. Being with her means crossing the “threshold.” It means inhabiting this world of carnival and engaging in the struggle against social stereotypes and constructions. It is ironic to think that, to be in this free world of carnival, one needs to cross a threshold to a non-binary logic – hence a logic without dividing lines. This thought adds other comic layers in this laughter-seriousness form of expression. If this poem did not have comic parts, the meaning might not reach its capacity of articulation. Both laughter and seriousness (non-excluding seriousness) are needed in the fat black woman’s world.

Besides the combination of laughter and seriousness, the laughter present in *The Fat Black Woman’s Poems* is very much connected with irony. In another book, *Estética da Criação Verbal*, Bakhtin comments on irony. He claims that irony is related to the multiplicity of tones and that only dogmatic and authoritarian cultures are unilaterally serious; violence does not know laughter (“Estética” 371). This explanation is very close to his definition of carnivalesque laughter. Bakhtin even claims that irony can be used to overcome situations, and to rise above them (“Estética” 371). Accordingly, irony functions as an instrument or strategy of, perhaps, subversion.

Linda Hutcheon, in the well-known *Irony’s Edge*, also regards irony as a “powerful tool or even weapon to fight against a dominant authority” (26). The author states that “most recently, it is feminist, postcolonial, gay and lesbian theorists who have argued this position [of a weapon] in different but related ways.” Those who do not view irony as such tool or weapon, who understand it as “negating, largely destructive,” are the ones “for whom the

serious or solemn and the univocal are the ideal” (26). Consequently, it may be assumed that irony, like carnival laughter, is opposed to the serious and univocal, and can function as another tool of subversion through humour. A lot like carnival laughter, irony impedes the separation of binary thought. Its “semantic and syntactic dimensions cannot be considered separately from the social, historical and cultural aspect of its contexts of deployment and attribution” (Hutcheon 17). Even more, irony has an “affective charge,” which impedes the separation of its politics from its emotional response (Hutcheon 15). It is another instrument, in the fat black woman’s world, to subvert the binary logic.

Nichols’s entire book has a very ironic tone; many things are said with the most varied layers of meanings and yet not entirely said. In “Invitation” (10-11), the first part of the poem is thoroughly composed of conditionals with “if” and “would.” The unsaid is much more present and much more relevant to the comic aspect than what is actually written. In “Fear” (30-31), when the fat black woman is questioned “Are you going back sometime?” (8), instead of naming all the prejudices that such question entails, she only answers, ironically: “but of course / home is where the heart lies” (9-10). By giving the interlocutor an emphatic answer of what he/she probably wants to hear – since the question is almost an imposition to remind the fat black woman she does not belong in London – the fat black woman jokes about the listener’s expectations. The greater space before the word “lies” in the last verse quoted here also suggests a possible pause in the speech. “Home is where the heart lies” is a famous saying, but the separation of such word from the rest of the sentence points to another meaning of “lies,” i.e., untruth. Ironically, as if she did not understand what was implicit in the question, she gives an answer with its own implicit meaning. Such answer redefines what her interlocutor – probably a Londoner – calls home.

Bakhtin also lists other three characteristic traits of laughter: universalism, freedom, and the relation with people’s “unofficial truth.” In this thesis, I will refer to what Bakhtin

names “truth” as “narrative.” These three elements show why the fat black woman’s laughter is carnivalesque. Although they are intrinsically connected with one another, they will be examined separately.

As already pointed out, the carnivalesque laughter is not limited to the private realm – privatism and individualism, as in the Romantic period, make laughter “unregenerative and lacking in communal hilarity” (Russo 218). Laughter exists both in the “marketplace” and in the interior of Renaissance homes. The carnivalesque logic does not laugh at one individual or excludes him or her; it debases and renews. Therefore, it always includes the one who laughs as the one who is laughed at and vice versa. It is universal, although it is needed to be careful with what Bakhtin names “universal.” In fact, during the Middle Ages and the Renaissance, carnival had no spectators. People offered carnival feasts to themselves. There were only hosts in carnival and everyone was a participant (Bakhtin, “Rabelais” 249).

Because it is universal, it is related to a more inclusive and popular narrative. Being universal means – if not for Bakhtin, for the fat black woman – being malleable to include and embrace new forms of expression, of culture, of social classes, as they appear and present themselves over time. The official Renaissance narrative, for example, was the dogmatic Catholic rule imposed by the Church and the kings who used religion to maintain their power. However, the people’s narrative – in the context of this thesis, the fat black woman’s narrative – is not restrictive. It refers to a non-binary logic, to the ever-changing identity of people and of the world and nature. Her narrative “expresses the people’s hopes of a happier future, of a more just social and economic order” (Bakhtin, “Rabelais” 81). This happier future is what Russo calls “future social horizon,” which may “release new possibilities of speech and social performance” (218) and can be seen as the world in which the fat black woman comes out of the bushes, as she does in “Afterword” (25-26). This world is where “high” and “low,” body and soul, nature and culture are understood as a set of expressions

that have been fixed as dual divisions, but do not need to be seen as such. In the future “Afterword” refers to, then, people (or the fat black woman) are free – freedom is the last trait Bakhtin associates with carnivalesque laughter. They are free from compulsory and univalent rules.

Again, I must stress how utopian this is and how Bakhtin reserved the freedom, universality, and collectivity of laughter to some parts of society. Russo observes how some supposed universal and collective manifestations of laughter may have involved coercion, in which the marginalized only participate as “an effort to pass” (226). However, even if these categories are still used here under the same names, they are expanded. In the fat black woman’s world, laughter is in fact free, universal, and related to the people’s narrative, and therefore, it is collective – and here there are no caveats as to the use of these terms.

In “The Fat Black Woman Remembers” (5), for instance, it is possible to see how laughter, when carnivalesque, is always liberating. In this poem, the fat black woman comments on the roles of slaves imposed on black women, in a reality outside the carnival world. However, the fat black woman talks from inside the carnival world, hence her laughter and narrative constitute the tone of the poem.

tossing pancakes

to heaven

in smokes of happy hearty

murderous blue laughter (5-8)

This part differs from the rest of the poem, in which the stereotypical role of black women as slaves is described. In the quotation above, there is a suggested reference to slaves who were known to poison their master’s food. The laughter here, unlike the laughter with the

salesgirls, is directed to a person – the master – in relation to a metaphorical or material death.

In a reality far from utopic, this black enslaved woman managed to laugh. In the last two verses, the future social horizon is expressed by the fat black woman, who breaks away from this form of exploitation: “But this fat black woman ain’t no Jemima / Sure thing Honey/Yeah” (15-16). Mentioning “Jemima” is a reference to the figure of “Aunt Jemima,” a fat black woman who was for a long time the face of a pancake syrup brand widely known in the United States in the twentieth century. Her clothes suggested a representation of a housemaid and, therefore, such image perpetuated black women’s stereotypes. The constructions of the binary logic repeatedly mentioned in this thesis are based on stereotypes, fixed characterizations and restrictive images of certain classes of people. Therefore, when the fat black woman breaks with black women’s stereotypes, she also breaks with binary constructions.

The death of the master, then, is not a complete and final death; it is a death of renewal. By killing the one who represents the excluding logic and works to maintain it, this laughter purifies. In fact, when describing some characteristic of common folktales - the origins of Renaissance and medieval carnival - Bakhtin mentions that “death is never such a completion in the folktale. Even if it appears at the end of the story, it is followed by the funeral banquet . . . which forms the true epilogue. This form is related to the ambivalence of all folk images. The end must contain the potentialities of the new beginning, just as death leads to a new birth” (“Rabelais” 283). In “The Fat Black Woman Remembers” (5), then, it is possible to see how laughing at death represents a carnivalesque narrative of non-exclusion and provides freedom for the fat black woman and for the enslaved black women therein symbolized.

Another example of a carnivalesque laughter facing a non-carnavalesque reality is “Looking at Miss World” (21). In this poem, the fat black woman is watching the Miss World contest on television and making considerations about what she sees and thinks. After watching “slim after slim aspirant appears / baring her treasures in hopeful despair” (6-7), the fat black woman decides for herself the result of the contest:

The fat black woman gets up  
 and pours some gin  
 toasting herself a likely win (17-19)

In this unexpected decision, the fat black woman jokes about the beauty standards of the contest, asking if “will some Miss (plump at least / if not fat and black) uphold her name” (3-4). Seeing that only slim aspirants appear, she decides to assert herself as fat, black and the likely win, since she is, from the beginning, the Miss in her world (“uphold HER name”). There is a shift in the poem from the passive television viewer to the active judge of the contest, as Brandão examines. Such shift marks the invasion of technology in people’s quotidian lives and its fomentation of idleness (“Grace Nichols e o Corpo” 104), which is commonly associated with fat bodies. The shift works as another unexpected action. By playing with our common notions of passivity and agency, the fat black woman depicts the usual associations of idleness with fat, and beauty with thin, only to invert them afterwards.

This scene expresses very well how the non-carnavalesque world remains outside the fat black woman’s reality and how she lives in a free world of laughter. It is almost as if she is watching fiction on television and in the end her thoughts go back to her real world. In this world of fiction - almost dystopic - Miss World is a thin contestant, but in the fat black woman’s free world, things work differently. She gets tired of this boring reality “O the night

wears on / the night wears on / judges mingling with chiffons” (14-16) and establishes how much more interesting her world is.

The fat black woman’s narrative represents the wish for a non-excluding logic. Thus, it symbolizes the unofficial point of view of a utopian carnivalesque reality. In fact, an “invitation to drink, in Rabelaisian imagery means to be in communion with truth[sic]” (Bakhtin, “Rabelais” 175) – Bakhtin believes the people’s narrative could be asserted as the truth of the world. This is why the final toast with gin is very suggestive of how the people’s narrative comes along, unavoidably, in the end. The choice of gin in the midst of all possible drinks is also a provocation by the fat black woman. Gin is a typical British drink and she uses it to subvert and to play with the binary logic instituted by the English domination of the Caribbean. The very elements of the British culture are used to unsettle the categories its domination established.

The fact that the fat black woman faces non-carnavalesque realities does not place her in a non-carnavalesque world. She faces these events from inside her own world, which is a world of carnival. Therefore, her actions, even if they are dealing with aspects from the outside, are all carnivalesque. Her narrative is always one of inclusion and communion. Her laughter always regenerates the limited seriousness of the binary logic and she always makes it possible for anyone to enter and enjoy this universal laugh as well. Her humor is one of her weapons. Laughter, which exceeds the limits of the private and deals with serious matters, is a starting point and a guide for crossing and hybridizing other binary constructions as well. Further in this thesis we will see how language and the grotesque join this laughter and provide a full comprehension of the fat black woman’s world of carnival.

## 2.2 Marketplace and Nation Language: The Hybrid Expression

Although laughter has a way of its own in the book, it can only occur through language, just as the entire presence of carnival can only take place in the poems through verbal expression. In the Rabelaisian context, the language of carnival is popular. Having originated in folk culture, it is several times referred to as the “language of the marketplace.” It is a form of mixed expression, combining elements of “official” and “unofficial” speech of the Middle Ages. The constitution of this “marketplace expression” is very similar to the formation of the language used in *The Fat Black Woman’s Poems*. The fat black woman’s nation language has been disregarded and considered different from the English language in general, as if the English spoken by Caribbean people, mixed with other influences from their historical background, could not be considered “true” English. This division was not instituted by the fat black woman; it was imposed on her. When she has to express herself in the Londoner space, she has to face this supposed “official” and “proper” English.

The fat black woman’s language is not a proposal to uphold and maintain the division between nation language and “official” English – it does not have the dual separation, like Bakhtin’s division between the expressions of the Middle Ages. The language used by the fat black woman is a fusion of these languages. This amalgamate expression shows that the fat black woman does not sustain or confirm this division. Instead, she hybridizes both languages and creates a new form that does not follow a binary logic. It is English and Caribbean nation language together – there are no divisions between them; nor are there different values assigned to them. I aim to approximate the language used in the fat black woman’s world to the carnival language, as an attempt to show how this hybridization is a carnivalesque strategy.



To begin with, it is difficult to “trace a dividing line” (Bakhtin, “Rabelais” 153) between these forms of expression. The fat black woman’s use of nation language is a modality formed through a mixture of British English, African, and Amerindian elements. Likewise, the carnival language combined “many forms, all filled with the same unofficial spirit” (Bakhtin, “Rabelais” 154). It is a mixture of the forms of expression considered “lower” and formal, “official” elements that are travestied and parodied, in order to make a critique of their constitution (Bakhtin, “Rabelais” 167-68).

“The Fat Black Woman Versus Politics” (23) is an interesting case of how this hybridization presents itself in a manner which is not obvious but which is nevertheless very effective as a critique of the norm. The spelling of words does not present clear-cut differences from the “official” English grammar as in “and de weather so cold” (5) in “The Fat Black Woman Goes Shopping” (8-9). It is subtler and perhaps, because of that, more efficient in this poem’s context. Here, the fat black woman is confronting politicians and their disregard for the people on behalf of whom they are supposed to act.

The fat black woman  
 could see through politicians  
 like snake sees through rat  
 she knows the oil  
 that ease the tongue  
 she knows the soup-mouth tact  
 she knows the game  
 the lame race for fame

she knows the slippery hammer

wearing down upon the brain (1-10)

In the first part, the fat black woman opens up the game of politics and explains its functioning - the snake preying on the electors-rats with a “sweet-talk.” This game is presented as these politicians’ (snakes) race for fame. At the end, there is a final strike on the head of these same rat-electors that are betrayed. Although this interpretation may seem harsh, we have seen how politicians are referred to in “Fear” (30-31): “I come from a backyard / where . . . / politicians turn cruel clowns” (11,12,14). Because of this political game of acting behind the curtains, the fat black woman also expresses herself subtly. In this poem, she uses what seems to be the official norm of the English language. However, a more attentive look demonstrates that the rhythmic patterns are based more on fluency and musicality rather than on typical rhyme. Even when the rhymes do appear, they present a pulse, a strong marking that is not interpolated in symmetrical ABC patterns of the canonical English poems.

In the stanza cited above, the verses seven to ten portray an increasing emphasis on the final syllables, similar to folk music of Caribbean origin. As an example, I shall mention Kamau Brathwaite’s description of the differences between the sound patterns in Shakespeare’s poems and in one of his own poems. In the former, there is an iambic meter and there is the pentameter, whereas the latter “mandates the use of the tongue in a certain way, the use of sound in a certain way” (553). In Shakespeare, “the voice travels in a single forward plane towards the horizon of its end. In the kaiso . . . the voice dips and deepens to describe an intervallic pattern” (553). This analysis indicates how the different stresses and flows of the poems are more than just musicality. They make a political statement to value

one's cultural roots, as in Brathwaite's example and in "The Fat Black Woman Versus Politics."

In the introduction to *Sunris*, Nichols comments on the Caribbean sounds and music that are present in literature, including her own, and she draws some considerations about calypso. "It is the music of my childhood, [...] through which we got the news and scandals of the day, love and celebration; crime and tragedy, fantasy, politics, philosophy, in fact all human experience and all in the cadences of the people's language, no matter how 'high-sounding'" ("Introduction to *Sunris*" 90). According to Nichols, not only are the Caribbean rhythms present in music and festive celebrations, but they are also part of the day-by-day rhythm of living and talking.

The appreciation of such popular Caribbean roots can also be noticed in the images from the Caribbean imaginary in Nichols's poetry, as follows:

But if you were to ask her

What's your greatest political ambition?

she'll be sure to answer

To feed powercraze politicians a manifesto of lard

To place my X against a bowl of custard (15-19)

This answer to her political ambitions is very common in typical political talk and promises. To feed the poor, for example, becomes to feed the politicians. There is an inversion of roles, but that is not all. In the beginning, in an inverted logic, the image of the snake represents the fat black woman and the rats represent the politicians who should be afraid of the people. The images in the final verses show this inversion with culinary elements. The lard, typical in Caribbean cooking, is to be gulped down by politicians, and the bowl of custard, so

traditionally European, is to be thrown out of this game. In such a way, the fat black woman travesties and parodies the official form of speech - the one of custard bowls, perfect political speeches in “perfect English” which are to be examples of elegance and education. In the fat black woman’s world, this “perfection” is laden with hypocrisy. Through such inversion, the fat black woman gains power, whereas politicians lose it. However, it is more than just that. The inversion may be seen as an affirmation of the fall of “earthly kings” in the carnival world. As evidence of this, the fat black woman’s political ambition is not to escalate and to gain power to do things as she pleases, but to regenerate the system with a manifesto of lard, associated with folk Caribbean roots and Caribbean carnival.

Another parallel between the language of carnival and the fat black woman’s language is that the access to both is limited, restrained to private circles. The Caribbean nation language is not present in official places where there is the domain of “proper” English. Likewise, the carnival language “had its own territory and its own particular time, the time of fairs and feasts” (Bakhtin, “Rabelais” 154) and it was different from the official expressions in palaces, churches and in the midst of ruling classes. But when carnival happened, on feast days, for example, the folk language penetrated those “high” circles – “this force broke through every sphere, and even through the Church” (“Rabelais” 154). The use of such language is analogous to the language used widely in the most different situations in the fat black woman’s life events. In the fat black woman’s world, there is nothing but carnival language. The hybrid manifestation is present in all the poems, in all forms of expressions. There is no other manifestation. Although the presence of nation language, mixed with “official” English in the poems, has been analyzed and demonstrated in the previous chapter, here it is possible to see how the structure of this language behaves as carnivalesque.

The prevailing tones in the carnival language are “the superlative” and its “exaggerated style” (Bakhtin, “Rabelais” 160-61), characteristics of folk expression. The fat black woman is a superlative per se. She is not just fat; she is “Heavy as a whale” (“The Assertion,” 1) and big, or steatopygous, as the sky, the sea, and the waves (“Thoughts drifting through the fat black woman’s head while having a full bubble bath”). Exaggeration appears frequently in many of the poems in the book by means of repetition, which is also a common feature in folktales and folk music. To assert her blackness, in “The Fat Black Woman Composes a Black Poem...” (14-15), the first verse of all stanzas begins as “black as the.” In the poem “Alone” (6-7), the loneliness of the fat black woman is not just reaffirmed through the repetition and exaggeration, it is created through such forms.

The fat black woman

sits alone

gathering

gathering

into herself

onto herself

soft stone

woman moan

the fat black woman

sits alone

gathering

gathering

into herself

onto herself

drift dome

river fome

.....

gathering gathering

gathering gathering

gathering gathering

silence (1-16, 23-26)

The poem creates a rhythm of its own, a movement to and fro as if the fat black woman were rocking herself back and forth to calm down and console her own loneliness. The rhythm here is not just a matter of structure or of composing a certain nation language. It is the very substance that gives life to the poem. In the end, the “rocking” intensifies in verses twenty-three to twenty-five. These verses present a growing distress or intensity and the final silence breaks the rhythm and exposes the harsh truth of the fat black woman’s loneliness. The carnival world, in which the people’s narrative is official and laughter is universal, can be lonely if the rest of society does not take part in it as well.

To understand “Alone” (6-7), the sound as an imminent part must be considered as necessary as the written text. The role played by sound is another important element connected to the origins of folk culture. Nation language has orality inscribed in its core, in its formation. The orality of the language of the marketplace comes to show that, although the formation of both – carnival and nation language - is very distinct, the context of being a

culture considered inferior establishes similar circumstances and draws resembling characteristics from them.

The origins of Caribbean nation language have a history of death and renewal. The forced death of African and Amerindian elements caused by the imposed insertion of European influences led to a revolutionary language-strategy through a process of forced regeneration. Similarly, the hybridization of this nation language with “official” English points to a necessary overcoming of the negative effects of colonization. When addressing the formation of nation language, Brathwaite claims its forerunner “was Dante Alighieri who at the beginning of the fourteenth century argued, in *De vulgari eloquentia* (1304), for the recognition of the (his own) Tuscan vernacular” (551). Brathwaite analyzes how the development of the canonical European languages went through a process of selection among different vernaculars and ended up repeating a cycle of exclusion, which happened not just in the colonies, but also inside the European countries corresponding to such languages. Therefore, it might be easier to understand how the language of the marketplace in Bakhtin’s theorization constituted a form of vernacular which is similar to the fat black woman’s language and to its Caribbean influence. They were both languages of revolution: repressed and insistently subversive.

I have been showing the parallels between the contexts of the marketplace language and the fat black woman’s speech, as well as and their respective carnivalesque expressions. However, it is important to remember that such parallel is not a replication of Renaissance carnival in contemporary Caribbean carnival expressions. Renaissance carnival is a starting point to think how other forms of carnivalesque expression can be subversive. A main difference here is the fat black woman’s concern about different social issues that were not present in the Renaissance carnival, which was still binary and excluding, at least for women, for black people and other social groups considered minorities.

The connection with orality in “Alone,” which presents a conflation between written and oral literature, is intrinsically connected with the performative stance of these poems. The oral crosses the limits of its attributed realm and joins the written literature in its allegedly superior position. Usually reading is considered an “isolated, individualistic expression,” whereas oral tradition demands “the audience to complete the community: the noise and sounds that the maker makes are responded to by the audience and are returned to him (sic). Hence, we have a creation of a continuum where meaning truly resides” (Brathwaite 553). Accordingly, the interconnection of oral and written literature leads to a “total expression” (Brathwaite 553). This total expression involves the body in all its articulations. It is a language of the whole.

Many of Nichols’s poems, mainly those with repeated verses, demand an exercise of the body for its reading. To begin with, these poems are not to be read silently; they are supposed to be read aloud. This reading has a way of requiring different attitudes and tones in each part of the poems. In “Thoughts drifting through the fat black woman’s head while having a full bubble bath” (13), the first and the last stanzas are the same:

Steatopygous sky

Steatopygous sea

Steatopygous waves

Steatopygous me (1-4)

When the reader begins to read the poem, he or she may be led to read the first stanza with an intonation of “thoughts drifting,” i.e., one’s mind casually flowing. However, when reading the entire poem and understanding the use of the word “steatopygous,” the last stanza should not be read the same way. After understanding the pain, the suffering, and even the anger this



word symbolizes, the last stanza must contain a much more conscious and active political intonation.

A similar reaction happens in “Invitation” (10-11), when the verse “come up and see me sometime” is repeated at the end of section one, in the beginning of section two, and at the end of section two. In each of these times, the intonation demands a different posture. The first time it appears, it may be thought of as a mere invitation, maybe even a provocative one, as a self-esteem affirmation. However, in the second section, the reader begins to see that this invitation is not so literal; it is not a casual invitation. It is a challenge to come up and see the fat black woman’s body without judgement or beauty impositions. She feels fine with her “lines” and challenges the reader to see her for what she actually is.

Although these different intonations may seem to refer only to the movements of the mouth and tongue, it is difficult to change one’s tone (in voice and mind) and not change one’s bodily posture. The performative expression in these poems is an intrinsic element. It combines elements of collectivity of carnival and it is also a critique of stereotypes and binary thought. Furthermore, through the emphasis on the body, it points to the grotesque element of carnival and its importance for the fat black woman’s world.

### **2.3 Flesh of Carnival: The Grotesque and the Masquerade Embodied in the Fat Black Woman**

In the poems “The Fat Black Woman Goes Shopping” (8-9) and “Invitation” (10-11), the reader can see how the fat black woman’s body is a bothering presence in the Londoner space. The salesgirls “fixing her with grin” (7) demonstrate a judgmental attitude toward the fat black woman and an attempt to cast her out. “Invitation” seems to be a response to a negative comment on her weight. Both poems show us how her presence produces a

disturbance. Even though hers is a body of non-conformity, continually excluded, it also instills a certain uneasiness for those watching it as she claims her space and her voice in the poems. The discomfort the fat black woman's presence creates arises from her grotesque body.

Russo begins her chapter about carnivalesque female grotesque, by referring to a phrase that “resonates from childhood”: “She [the other woman, any other woman] is making a spectacle out of herself!” (213). The spectacle could be “dimpled thighs displayed at the public beach,” a “sliding bra strap,” a “voice shrill in laughter,” or even “overly rouged cheeks” (213). To make a spectacle out of oneself is a feminine danger. Men exposed themselves deliberately. But for women it “had more to do with a kind of inadvertency and loss of boundaries” (213). This exposure, which is only condemnable for women, is the point of departure to think the female grotesque. First of all, it is necessary to understand this notion of the grotesque, in order to comprehend its connection with women.

The origin of the term “grotesque” comes from the findings of Roman ornaments during the fifteenth century. Such ornaments “were brought to light during the excavation of Titus’ baths and were called *grottesca* from the Italian word *grotta*” (Bakhtin, “Rabelais” 31-2). They were considered a new style and “impressed the connoisseurs by the extremely fanciful, free and playful treatment of plant, animal, and human forms. These forms seemed to be interwoven as if giving birth to each other. The borderlines that divide the kingdoms of nature in the usual picture of the world were boldly infringed” (Bakhtin, “Rabelais” 32). Russo, differently from Bakhtin, claims that this event cannot be considered the discovery or the findings of the grotesque. She states that “art historians have identified many examples of drawings and objects in the grotto-esque style which predated both classical and renaissance Rome” (3). According to Russo, even the discovery of the grotesque was socially constructed, since it emerged “only in relation to the norms which it exceeded” (3).

As pointed by Russo, the grotesque is what exceeds the norms and the hegemonic dominant patterns. Created through exclusion, the “center” corresponds to a “production of identity through negation,” and “like any other form of identity, created through negations, it produces a new domain by taking into itself as *negative introjections* the very domains which surround and threaten it” (Stallybrass and White 89). This is how a grotesque body forms itself: it is the unwanted, the margins, the hidden and excluded from the norm. Stallybrass and White define it, using Macherey’s term, as “a ‘determining absent’ presence in the classical body of Enlightenment poetic and critical discourse, a raging set of phantoms and concrete conditions to be forcefully rejected, projected or unacknowledged” (105). The grotesque involves, then, a “labour of suppression” and a “perpetual work of exclusion” (105).

Considering the binary logic that has dominated Western thought, it can then be stated that the grotesque is related to the female, to the black, to the body, to nature and to the private realms. It is considered ugly, strange, and unwanted. It is what has to remain hidden, but does not. All “wrong” forms were put together in the grotesque body and the grotesque must stay away. It is similar to a ghost that has been hidden long enough, and now it comes out with an uncontainable force.

Russo describes it as “the open, protruding, extended, secreting body, the body of becoming, process, and change. The grotesque body is opposed to the classical body, which is monumental, static, closed, and sleek, corresponding to the aspirations of bourgeois individualism; the grotesque body is connected to the rest of the world” (219). It is the fat black woman’s body confronting the limited binary logic. Fat, black, old, or pregnant female bodies are evidently grotesque because they remain on the margins of what is established. Thin, white and “complicit” female bodies still remain grotesque, even if authorized, just for being female.

The connection of such grotesque body with the female body, completely neglected by Bakhtin, comes from valuing “traditional images of the earth mother, the crone, the witch, and the vampire that posits a natural connection between the female body (itself naturalized) and the ‘primal’ elements, especially the earth” (Russo 1). In other words, it comes from the essentialist connection of women with nature, the point of departure of the binary thought, as discussed in the first chapter. Therefore, the association of the female body with the grotesque body comes from the inferior hierarchical position that women and their bodies occupy in Western thought.

For Russo, “in the everyday indicative world, women and their bodies, certain bodies, in certain public framings, in certain public spaces, are always already transgressive - dangerous and in danger” (217). These bodies are dangerous because they challenge the preservation of artificial constructs, and, therefore, they unsettle the supposed monolithic mode of existence. They are also in danger because the society in which they live will reject them and will fight to maintain its status quo. That is why the fat black female body is so disturbing and also why it can be the route to destabilize this logic. The grotesque body involves a possibility of insurgency, even if it has not been an empowering element for women. Like the ambivalence of carnival can turn the oppressed fat black woman’s body into a site of subversion, the female grotesque can be revalued through carnival.

The transgressive woman that “makes a spectacle out of herself” may have occupied this locus of spectacle as a result of marginalization, but “the figure of the female transgressor as a public spectacle is still powerfully resonant, and the possibilities of redeploying this representation as a demystifying or utopian model have not been exhausted” (Russo 217). Since the grotesque is an open body, always in the act of becoming, it is created and destroyed continually. It creates a new identity as it changes and destroys an old one. Consequently, it remains in a place of mediation between old and new, life and death,

seriousness and laughter – a “taboo-laden space *between* the topographical boundaries which mark off the discrete sites of high and low culture . . . transgress[ing] domains, moving between fair, theatre, town and court, threatening to sweep away the literary and social marks of difference at the very point where such differences are being widened” (Stallybrass and White 113-14). Not only is the grotesque the hybridization of the norms with the excluded, but it also unsettles the comprehension of a norm *per se*.

The grotesque is also the focus on the “trope of the body” (Russo 8). In the first chapter, I have discussed how the materialization of the world was suppressed during colonization. The mind and the intellect earned a higher status and the body and nature were put aside. Accordingly, the grotesque becomes an upfront threat to the colonial rule for representing this unwanted materialization of the world.

In “Like a Beacon” (29), this grotesque body navigates in the Londoner space, expressing the cravings of the fat black woman’s body for the Caribbean cuisine. The desires of a body not only represent this body, but they also give a life to it, inasmuch as it cannot always be controlled by the mind. The fat black woman leaves art galleries to go to the streets because her body orders her to do so. It is the grotesque body that leads her through the in-between of London and the Caribbean, playing with the separation of mind and body, and showing how the body can be in charge too. In “...And a Fat Poem” (16-17), the material gains evidence and a life of its own.

Fat does

as fat thinks

Fat feels

as fat please

Fat believes

.....

and fat speaks for itself (4-8, 20)

Giving fat a mind of its own might mean giving the grotesque body the acknowledgement for its doings. In Nichols's texts, it is through the grotesque body that questions are asked. However, no question marks are used. Instead, the grotesque shows us other forms of existing without being complicit with the norm and how free and beautiful this can be. Perhaps there cannot be a bigger revolution than this: awaking in people the desire of living freely.

The grotesque body has to do exactly with the limits imposed by the logic that claims that the binary divisions are natural and universal. The grotesque body exists in the frontiers, exceeding the limits and the borders. It transgresses these boundaries and even its own corporeal limits. It is "as if the carnivalesque body politic had ingested the entire corpus of high culture and, in its bloated and irrepressible state, released it in fits and starts in all manner of recombination, inversion, mockery, and degradation" (Russo 218). That is why drinking and eating are seen as common images of the grotesque. Such acts involve the communion between the inside and the outside, the swallowing and the expulsion of another body and the growing of one's own body. This connection with the exterior points to a central image that expresses the performance of the grotesque in Nichols's poems in relation to nature, as discussed in the first chapter.

The grotesque body is open, it stresses "elements common to the entire cosmos: earth, water, fire, air, it is directly related to the sun, to the stars . . . This body can merge with

various natural phenomena, with mountains, rivers, seas, islands and continents” (Bakhtin, “Rabelais” 318). The descriptions of the fat black woman’s body in “Invitation” (10-11), “my thighs are twin seals / fat slick pups” (24-25); the recreation of “Beauty” (3) along the association of body and nature, “Beauty / is a fat black woman / riding the waves” (9-11) are two of the many poems in which the fat black woman’s body exists in continuation with nature. This demonstrates the openness of her grotesque body.

The grotesque is based on the material bodily lower stratum, which is symbolized by the lower body parts, mainly our genitalia. These organs are double-faced because they represent fertility, hence life, but they also produce excrements, hence death. It is through the material bodily lower stratum that important transcendental questions are materialized in the body, which reverses the mind-superior *versus* body-inferior order.

The focus on the material lower body is a literal and physical descent, obviously, but its logic encompasses a more abstract descent as well. Instead of the medieval center on heaven, to where our souls are supposed to go after death, the material bodily lower stratum has built a logic that “drew the world closer to man (sic), to his body” (Bakhtin, “Rabelais” 381). The center of the universe was transferred “from heaven to the underground,” so now it is everywhere, “all places are equal” (Bakhtin, “Rabelais” 369). The logic of the ascension of the individual soul – as the Middle Age Catholic narrative established – is substituted for a collective movement “forward of all mankind, along the horizontal time” (Bakhtin, “Rabelais” 404). This medieval logic believed that “having done its part upon earth, the individual soul fades and dies together with the individual body.” However, according to the material bodily lower stratum, whose logic is collective, “the body of the people and of mankind, fertilized by the dead, is eternally renewed and moves forever forward” (Bakhtin, “Rabelais” 404). This is what Russo refers to when she states that carnival “remain[s] on the horizon with a new social subjectivity” (226). Unfortunately, we have not reached the stage

of “a new social subjectivity” described by Russo and portrayed by the fat black woman. Carnival laughter is still a “laughter for other times” (226) and so is the comprehension of the female grotesque.

In “Looking at Miss World” (21), the fat black woman spends most part of the poem watching the Miss World contest and its “slim aspirants,” but at the end her own narrative related to beauty comes along as she finishes the poem “toasting herself a likely win” (19). In “The Fat Black Woman Versus Politics” (23), her own narrative comes along as well when the fat black woman materializes the political questions with a “manifesto of lard.” The questions from the realm of the intellectual and the mind, which are political, public, and considered superior, are transferred to the bodily realm. They go from the excluding seriousness to laughter, from an excluding narrative to the fat black woman’s. It is through these renovations that the renewal of culture takes place, as portrayed in the poems. Even if the fat black woman cannot change all there is to change, she is adding her contributions to the weaving of history. She is taking one step further than those who came before her, and she is one step behind those who are to come after her – those who can base their struggles on her achievements.

It is interesting to observe how the book – specially the section “The Fat Black Woman’s Poems” – follows a horizontal sequence as if it were constructing the meanings of the later poems upon the previous ones. By looking at the second and the last poems of such section, one may not be able to tell that the last one was only possible because of the construction along the section. Nonetheless, because of this order, the poem did acquire other meanings, which are important for its comprehension, and which would not be grasped without reading the entire book in its exposed order.



In “The Assertion” (4), the fat black woman tells us about a history which is different from the one that happened during colonization. In her version, “the white robed chiefs / are resigned / in their postures of resignation” (7-9) while “the fat black woman sits / on the golden stool / and refuses to move” (4-6). This beginning of the book brings us to the context of colonization and suggests that all the disturbance the fat black woman provokes in the Londoner society is due to the binary logic of colonization. In the last poem, “Afterword” (25-26), we see a projection of the future. The fat black woman survives the collapse of a world based on the binary logic and rises to “stake her claim again” (21). This poem foresees an inevitable decline and claims that the fat black woman will be there to take control again. This would not occur through the creation of a new system in which she will have the power, but as the representation of people’s narrative and the free existence of all. How does the fat black woman survive this collapse? She does so because she hides in nature, she allies herself with the cosmic. In this carnivalesque existence, outside this world of suffering, she is able to survive and to carry people’s historical consciousness with her. Such things do not happen solely in this final poem. Throughout the entire section we can see the fat black woman, here and there, inside the world of carnival, allied with nature, living in spaces of mediation. “Afterword” is only the conclusion, in which we can see the fat black woman’s journey towards a better world.

According to Russo, this social horizon of a new future, towards which the fat black woman is walking, comes with new comprehensions of the world. Like nature and the body (in opposition to “mind”), the connection of the female body with the grotesque body, which has been based on essentialist and biased ideas, is also reconsidered. Such connection has been based on a fixed notion of what the feminine and the female are: similar to nature, passive, hence inferior. However, what Russo and the fat black woman portray is a different view of the feminine and of its identification with the grotesque. Indeed, the feminine is

usually associated with a set of characteristics and social practices that have been assigned to women. Nevertheless, for Russo and the fat black woman, it is not that women are, by birth, biologically bound to such expressions. They defend that, in a world which establishes such expressions as necessary for a woman not to be an outcast, women started to “wear” such expressions as a mask.

The exposed woman that “makes a spectacle out of herself” is only stripping off characteristics considered necessary for a woman to be “authorized.” Russo names this redefinition of the feminine and its expression as masquerade. The masquerade consists in the incorporation of the imposed elements of the excluding logic, as if one is wearing a mask, i.e., the grotesque body incorporates the rule. It is a performance of supposed acceptance that actually tries to subvert the very order that established those elements. It is recognizing that, to win a game, one must be inside it and follow its rules, only to later destroy them.

This may be seen as an attempt to force a certain type of femininity and a certain type of female body as the correct one. However, the masquerade becomes a strategy through which women can use their grotesque bodies as subversion. Russo discusses how “the relation between symbolic and cultural constructs of femininity and Womanhood and the experience of women [...] might be brought together toward a dynamic model of a new subjectivity” (Russo 214). The author affirms that this new model of subjectivity only comes into being in a world of exclusion, through the concept of female masquerade.

In the beginning of this chapter, I mentioned the book *Sunris* and its homonymous poem. I would like to bring back this poem for considerations about Nichols’s mention of Caribbean carnival and masquerade. The voice of the poem narrates an encounter with a carnival band, or something similar - as in Nichols’s memories, referred to in the introduction of this book.

From the depths of the unconscious I come

I come out to play - Mas Woman

This mas I put on is not to hide me

This mas I put on is visionary -

A combination of the sightful sun

A bellyband with all me strands

A plume of scarlet ibis

A branch-of-hope and a snake in mih fist

Join me in dis pilgrimage

This spree that look like sacrilege

.....

I'm a hybrid dreamer

An ancestral-believer

A blood-reveller

Who worship at the house of love. (13-22, 27-30)

This poem is very emblematic and through the description of a woman joining the carnival party, there is much more than just a popular festive manifestation. The woman comes out to play with a mask: "Mas Woman," which makes reference to the typical carnivalesque mask, but possibly to the mascarade as well. While describing her ornaments and costume, important topics of debate are materialized. She clearly sees ("sightfull sun")

the people's hope through the pilgrimage of freedom that carnival is. In this mask, inside carnival, she is a hybrid-dreamer, which is an allusion to the in-between space of carnival and the hybridity the fat black woman incorporates in her dream of a better future. She is an ancestral-believer, which points to the horizontal historical consciousness and to the renewal of culture as to the importance of ancestral roots for the colonized peoples. The "Mas Woman" incorporates all carnival aspects because of the use of the mask, which should not be hidden – the mask is actually a way to be free and to create the future for which the fat black woman stands. It is "visionary." The incorporation of all these carnival elements by means of the mask clarifies what this mask means for the Mas Woman. This poem can explain the significance of the use of the mask and masquerade for the fat black woman.

By considering the fat black woman as this Mas Woman, it would become evident that inside the world of carnival she wears her grotesque body in a free and confident way. The masquerade, however, is only necessary when one has either to conform to or to struggle against an excluding hierarchical logic. In all of the poems, the fat black woman does not pretend to accept the impositions of society. She exposes her fat black body freely. She claims her fat is not too much for her, she wants billowing clothes, she is the very concept of beauty, she occupies the streets in London as she pleases. The fat black woman's actions are not affected by stereotypes nor by cultural constructions. Indeed, in a world of carnival the use of the masquerade would not only be redundant; it would be meaningless.

Why, then, should the fat black woman incorporate the elements of an oppressive logic to subvert it, if in this world this logic does not even exist? It must be acknowledged that this world of carnival is restricted to the pages of the book. It begins and ends inside *The Fat Black Woman's Poems*. In literature, imagination of new worlds may influence reality, but in a limited way. As Russo claims, there is an "extreme difficulty of producing lasting social change" which does not "diminish the usefulness of these symbolic models of

transgression” (215). Therefore, the fat black woman, viewed from the outside, uses a mask of happiness and of freedom. She portrays an existence in a world of carnival, and her reader knows the world outside is not that way.

In Nichols’s *The Fat Black Woman’s Poems*, the masquerade is inverted. It is the incorporation of the elements of a desired world, a desired society, and it aims to criticize and subvert the society that lacks such elements, which provokes disturbances and discomfort - the first step to re-think one's own bases. Therefore, even though the fat black woman’s world of carnival does not go beyond the pages of the book, the imagination of new possible models and images suggests positive alternatives in an excluding world.

The fat black woman’s project of subversion could not have been conducted without the notion of the grotesque body, the masquerade, and carnivalesque language and laughter. They are part of another form of comprehending the world that a traditional excluding and binary logic does not follow. In order to subvert such logic, new apprehensions of reality are needed, so that new forms of subjectivity can be built. These new forms of comprehension are necessary to bring about possible changes. Thus, the fat black woman looks at the past (carnival expressions), but adjusts it to her own necessities, so she can take a step further into the future.

Although there are many differences between the Caribbean carnival and the Rabelaisian carnival, the core of both contexts is this free world which, even if temporary, creates an alternative reality of more acceptance and fewer divisions. Destroying the basis of the excluding logic makes it possible to destroy its influence on our intellectual structures. The fact that the fat black woman’s carnival outgrows Bakhtin’s theorization of the Rabelaisian carnival is more than just symbolic. It is not a mere detail. She transgresses the limits of the theory and proposes a new form of knowledge. Instead of creating concepts and

imposing them on a concept of world, this knowledge departs from the different perceptions and their multiple expressions to produce new ideas. The fat black woman has more to teach us about our own world than about her carnival world.

## CHAPTER THREE

### The Self-Loving Body

La Iglesia dice: El cuerpo es una culpa. La ciencia  
dice: El cuerpo es una máquina. La publicidad  
dice: El cuerpo es un negocio. El cuerpo dice: Yo  
soy una fiesta.

Eduardo Galeano, *Las Palabras Andantes*

Pictures of perfection. . . make me sick and  
wicked

Jane Austen, *The Letters of Jane Austen*

It may be argued that the several forms of aggression and discrimination the fat black woman reports in her poems – from physical exploitation to verbal “fat-shaming” – derive from the colonial experience. Regardless of the level of violence – as if we could compare the experiences of violence and suffering – it is always on the body that these experiences are felt. All the violence (physical or psychological) resulting from the experience of exclusion passes through the body. It is not by chance nor by choice that the fat black woman’s carnivalesque poems and acts of subversion all go through the body as well.

The body has been a locus of oppression and point of departure of negative images for the social minorities considered “inferior.” This is because the body is a reflection of social and cultural constructions. According to Susan Bordo, the body is a medium of culture (165). Likewise, Mary Douglas argues that the body “is a microcosm of society” (77) and that the “social body constrains the way the physical body is perceived” (69). This explains why “the reintroduction of the body and categories of the body . . . into the realm of what is called the political has been a major concern of feminism” (Russo 214) and why for black people “the

body thus necessarily becomes central in a way it does not for whites, since this is the visible marker of black invisibility.” (Mills 16).

Despite having been this locus of oppression, the body may also be a locus of insurgency for the fat black woman. Just like she subversively uses her position as a diasporic Caribbean fat black woman, her body is used subversively too. Ironically, this is made possible because the body is a social construct. If it were a fixed natural category – and hence essentialist – there would be no possibilities of change or destabilization. The body as we know it is constructed by means of a binary logic. By questioning the status of the body, such logic is also questioned and unsettled. Similarly, according to Judith Butler, who questions sex and gender as fixed social constructions, “when the disorganization and disaggregation of the field of the bodies disrupt the regulatory fiction of heterosexual coherence, it seems that the expressive model loses its descriptive force” (“Gender Trouble” 185). Thus, in order to understand the body and its use by the fat black woman, we must first identify which model loses its descriptive force when the notion of body is questioned.

Western philosophy and religion – two main forms of knowledge that establish our understanding of life – have built the distinction between body and soul (or mind) as the foundation of our way of thinking. In Christian, mainly Catholic, tradition, the body is seen as mortal, sinful, and lustful (Grosz 52), whereas the soul is immortal and transcendental. The figure of Christ is perhaps the best example of this distinction: his soul and immortality derived from God, but his body and mortality were human (Grosz 53) and, consequently, inferior to the soul-God axis. This is a reflection of the Cartesian division of mind and body, which was not created by Descartes himself, according to Elizabeth Grosz, who states that such dualism has been present for a long time in Greek philosophy since the time of Plato. What Descartes defended, then, was the division between soul and nature (53). From this point forward, mind was not only opposed to body, but to the representation of the body as



nature. Accordingly, the mind began to represent culture. Hence the body was a machine, abiding by the laws of nature and by the laws of physics. On the other hand, the mind was not part of this material world. It was removed from nature; consciousness was removed from this world. The attribution of these meanings to the division between mind and body established a form of knowledge and science, which allegedly control nature, whereas the body is governed by nature and its laws (Grosz 53).

By attributing this inferior position to nature and to the body, everything that was connected to them gained immediate status of inferiority as well. Given the interconnection of binary logic, all the inferior categories of the binaries are associated with one another. Thus, women and black people, for example, are connected with body and nature. Therefore, men and white people are connected to the mind. Accordingly, the “woman represent a descent into materiality” (Butler, “Bodies that Matter” 43) and a black person was considered a “living tool” (Mills 7), property, not a human being, but a “subperson” (Mills 6). It is not that white men do not have a body, but their bodies are “the body that is reason” which “requires that women and slaves, children and animals be the body, perform the bodily functions, that it will not perform” (Butler, “Bodies that Matter” 49). This logic was built so well that “the norm in bodily formation produce[s] a domain of abjected bodies, a field of deformation, which, in failing to qualify as the fully human, fortifies these regulatory norms” (Butler, “Bodies that Matter” 16).

The body became a mere instrument, so did marginal and grotesque people. Jean Baudrillard comments on some current interpretations of the body. He claims that the body is a “cultural fact” (129), therefore it follows the mode of organization of each society. In the religious conception, the body is “flesh,” in the industrial logic the body is “labour power” (132), and society continues adapting the “function” of the body to suit the needs of each time in history.

Studying the body from the feminist perspective, Grosz presents the three existent research lines on the body in contemporary thought that summarize how the body is considered by Western society. The first line delineates the body in terms of its organic and instrumental functioning and is mainly used by the natural sciences (57). The body is as mere an object as any other. This line ignores the specificities of bodies. The second line, implied in many models of social construction and conditioning, regards the body as an instrument. The body is a machine at the disposal of consciousness, a receptacle occupied by a living subjectivity (58). The third line perceives the body as a vehicle of expression; it is the means by which one can communicate ideas, feelings, thoughts (59). These lines may have their specificities but they all understand the body as a passive instrument with no will of its own.

Grosz alerts that, if feminist criticism uncritically accepts these common suppositions concerning the body, then it is taking part in the social devaluation of the body, which walks hand in hand with female oppression (60). The revision of the notion of the body needs to be at the center of any social struggle that aims, for example, to live in a free world such as the fat black woman's.

The fat black woman's understanding and portrayal of the body is very different from the ones mentioned above. Since she lives in her carnival world, her body does not have to deal with stereotypes and impositions. In fact, she questions the constructions of the body through the body itself. The body is her main "battlefield." It reflects her subjectivity, which is always in construction, always changing, but also always free. In "Beauty" (3), we can see how the body becomes much more than an instrument – it becomes the very individual, the fat black woman herself. In an attempt to redefine beauty and, therefore, to redefine the patterns that construct the fat black woman's body as grotesque and excluded, the poem appeals to the materiality of this body, which is alive and in constant exchange with the world surrounding it.

Beauty

is a fat black woman

riding the waves

drifting in happy oblivion

while the sea turns back

to hug her shape (9-14).

This second and last stanza portrays the exchanges of this body with the outer world, showing how the body has a life and an intelligence of its own. Although this may seem strange, it is necessary to consider how difficult it is to work, study or even think, if basic bodily functions are not satisfied, for instance, feeling hungry or needing to go to the bathroom. Although such things may be, for our forms of understanding, vulgar or even inappropriate for a formal speech, they must be considered because they have direct influence on our lives.

The body in the poem is now the key to rethink our knowledge of beauty, a topic of concern for philosophers and thinkers since Ancient Greece. This knowledge is rebuilt through the very materiality that it had excluded in the first place. The carnivalesque body – and its laughter – remain restricted to the inferior areas of our lives according to colonial logic. However, in this thesis, and according to the theories on which it is based, the carnivalesque body and its laughter deal with the most serious and transcendental topics of discussion. It claims its right to be more than an instrument or an object; it wants to be part of the fat black woman's subjectivity. So does the mind, which is not separated from the body, as it has been alleged.

In her subsequent book, *Lazy Thoughts of a Lazy Woman* (1989), Nichols's poem "With Apologies to Hamlet" (77) goes as follows:

To pee or not to pee

That is the question

Whether it's sensibler in the mind

To suffer for sake of verse

The discomforting slings

Of a full and pressing bladder

Or to break poetic thought for loo

As a course of matter

And by apee-sing end it (1-9)

The poem depicts a battle between the body with its full bladder and the sensible mind that tries to write a verse. As the lyrical subject says, for the mind, it is more rational, or "sensibler," to hold a full bladder in order to finish a piece of writing. Nonetheless, yielding to the pressing bladder is more appealing. At the end, the bladder wins, showing that it is not possible to separate mind and body as two unrelated spheres. In addition, the victory of the bladder shows how the body dominates the subjectivity of a person, as much or more than the mind can.

Another battle inside this poem is marked by the presence of the famous Shakespearean quote, which is remodeled: "to be/pee or not to be/pee" and the reference to Hamlet in its title and structure. Shakespeare's famous soliloquy is a reflection on life and

death. The famous speech questions if it is better to continue living with the “the heart-ache and the thousand natural shocks that flesh is heir to” (Shakespeare 123) or if it is better to die. Death, then, represents the absence of flesh and its pains. It is a reflection on mind and body, on human consciousness and existence, and on the superiority attributed to the mind. When the fat black woman plays with this deep question that marked the entire English language and history, she mocks the duality in this discourse and the superiority attributed to the mind. Even more, she uses irony to shift this discourse from the essence of being to bodily matters.

Furthermore, this play with Shakespeare’s work also points to the British influence on Caribbean intellectual formation. In an interview to *The Guardian* in 1991, Nichols affirms that when growing up in Guyana “you have no reflection of yourself in books” (“Free Verse” np). The interviewer reports: “Her education was exclusively English and white Black Beauty, Enid Blyton, Chaucer and Shakespeare. Her small niece, asked at school to write a piece about her family, described her mother with fairy-tale blonde hair” (“Free Verse” np). The family asked this niece why she did that, “but we all knew the answer,” says Nichols, “Black women do not figure in literature, in stories” (“Free Verse” np).

The models available for education in Guyana are not Guyanese; they are first and foremost English, British. Not only literature, but also the forms of knowledge existing in Guyana differ substantially from that in Europe. However, even though Guyana is no longer a colony, school-age children and adults in the most diverse branches of academic learning often have to submit their form of knowledge to the European scientific basis. In Literature, for example, the Caribbean has a large tradition which departs from orality, myths and legends. However, children continue to only learn Shakespeare – this author’s importance is not to be devalued. In “With Apologies to Hamlet,” I do not believe the apologies are for debasing and changing the Shakespearean sentence. In fact, it is an apology in the sense that

(1) it demonstrates empathy for the foundations of European knowledge that fail to consider these other rich forms of philosophy available; and (2) it gives forgiveness for how Europeans imposed their limited science to a people who had a broader comprehension. To insert the body and its influence on scientific research is to remodel the entire basis of how science is thought of through the blurring of borders between body and mind.

The body is commonly viewed on the basis of its biological constitution, and Western thought still sees nature as passive and lifeless or, at least, through its lack of intelligence. On the contrary, the presence of the body in the fat black woman's world is understood in its racialized and gendered materiality. The binary logic and the forms of exclusion it constructs are embodied by the fat black woman, who turns the locus of the body into her battlefield. However, the main weapon of the battle is not violence. Violence and hate were the fuel for the establishment of this excluding logic. The fat black woman does not make the same mistakes. It is through her female, fat, and black body and also through humor that she manages to question gender inequalities, beauty patterns, and racial stereotypes. Beyond that, the body for the fat black woman is a fissure in the weaving of the excluding logic. Such fissure allows her to re-weave this web of violence with the workings of self-love.

### **3.1 A Gendered Knowledge of the Body: Women's Social Roles and the Erotic Energy**

The body comes into being through its gender. According to Judith Butler, the subject is "intelligible only through its appearance as gendered" ("Gender Trouble" 46). Before one is even born, diverse social symbols are invested in the body: a boy or a girl, pretty or ugly. Through these and other images transmitted by the family and society in general, the child's imaginary is formed and then builds and reproduces the social roles of femininity (Zozzoli 57) and masculinity. The body only begins to socially exist after it is gendered.

Such social roles were established by the division between man and woman, based on biological differences. Gerda Lerner states that there are indeed biological differences between men and women, but the values and implications given to these differences are cultural (30). This discussion between biological and cultural differences is usually spoken of in terms of sex and gender. However, Butler, for example, uses the word gender, not sex, in relation to the appearance of bodies in the quotation above. Her definition of the relation between sex and gender changes what is usually understood by them. The theorist draws attention to how sex and gender are both culturally constructed, by defending that “gender is not to culture as sex is to nature” (“Gender Trouble” 10). Sex, then, is not pre-discursive and natural; it was constructed through language; hence it is a product of culture. Questioning sex as a fixed natural category is important because it allows for the understanding of how the supposed female inferiority was created, “in such case, not biology, but culture, becomes destiny” (“Gender Trouble” 11).

In her book *The Creation of Patriarchy*, Lerner begins her research with the purpose to outline the origin of this mode of organization, which was based on a supposed female inferiority: patriarchy. However, she affirms that she soon realized that the origin was much less significant than the questions about the historical processes through which patriarchy was established and institutionalized (31). The strategies used to convince people of this system, and hence to maintain it, are far more interesting than the starting point of all this. Lerner traces several ancient civilizations and states at the end that there was no main point of departure, but a series of processes that led to the domination of one group over another.

The traditionalist explanation of such process, as Lerner names it, refers to the assumption that male domination is universal and natural (42). The man hunter, being superior in strength, “naturally” is granted a superior position. He is considered superior for being able to protect the so-called vulnerable woman, whose biological apparatus destines her

to motherhood (43) and to the domestic place. However, a lot of anthropological evidence denies such explanation for the fact that in most hunter gatherers societies, the hunting of large animals was an auxiliary activity. In fact, the supply of food came from harvesting activities and from the hunt of small animals, functions executed by women and children (44). Therefore, the superiority that supposedly derived from such societies was inexistent inside their very structure.

Furthermore, even if men were considered somehow superior because of their physical strength, it is important to remember that our history as civilization is based upon our distancing from nature (46). We no longer depend on rain to grow our crops, we do not need superior physical strength to overcome daily difficulties inasmuch as we have created technologies that can predict and manage nature in our favor. All the same, the traditionalist explanation still sees women only in their connection with nature while men have freed themselves from such link (Lerner 47). This explanation has proved to be adaptable and resilient. It changed over time, as it incorporated religious arguments. When those were no longer convincing, scientific arguments were used and so on (Lerner 44-45). However, it has repeatedly failed to provide a plausible explanation for patriarchy other than mere injustice perpetrated against women.

The binary gender division operates through the images and stereotypes that it creates, which goes as follows: men are rational and strong; they have the capacity for procreation, they have a soul and are made to rule. Women are emotional and incapable of controlling their desires; they are weak, they supply very little material for the procreation process, they have no soul and are made to be ruled (Lerner 256). Religious thought, specifically Christian, has produced several diminishing images of women. The most famous stories of women in the Bible encompass two opposing, but equally restricting, representations: Eve and the Virgin Mary. Eve represents the one who brought sin and death to humanity, whereas Mary is



the one who birthed the son of God – the virgin, sinless woman, the mother of Jesus Christ. Although they are opposing stereotypes, the message is the same: both women have to follow a strict ideal of female subservience, confined to motherhood and to domestic experience, otherwise they will be ousted from society and considered the source of all evil. It is worth noticing that the only power reserved to women who behave properly and occupy such established roles is through their male partners. The power of Virgin Mary in the Catholic imaginary is only achieved through her intervention with God, a male figure (Lerner 186).

The absence of strong images of women is also responsible for this imposed profile of subservience. The transition of ancient polytheism to monotheism eradicated the images of female goddesses or other female entities whom people could respect and worship. When there were goddesses as powerful as male gods, the equality between genders could not be banned from the imaginary (Lerner 204). The transition between these religious systems consisted of a series of choices that led to the representation of strict male power. Jeovah, for example, is understood as a male figure, but many theologians believe Jeovah could be conceived as a figure that incorporated both male and female aspects, based on the cultural parameters of the time (Lerner 223).

A specific meaning has been assigned to this and to other symbols throughout history. These meanings are the ones that carry authority. Despite that tradition, the fat black woman creates new ones by writing stories of women through a new religious optic. In “Why Shouldn’t She?” (56), she refers to her mother and provides the reader with a new meaning related to the miracles performed by males on which Catholicism is based.

My mother loves cooking

but hated washing up

Why shouldn’t she?

cooking was an art

she could move her lips to

then the pleasure feed the proverbial

multitude (us)

on less than a loaf

and two fishes (1-10)

In this poem, the miracle related to the multiplication of loaves and fish by Jesus Christ is related to the mother of the lyrical subject. The true miracle is the suffering a mother has to go through in her life, while she still manages to do the best for her children who depend on her in the most basic human needs to survive. What is being praised is women's strength to overcome the difficulties imposed on them by gender roles. Shouldn't a person who can impersonate all kinds of miracles to take care of herself and those who depend on her be allowed to do as she pleases? "Why Shouldn't She?" It is not the imposition of motherhood that is being questioned here, but its importance. Motherhood and domestic activities are commonly related to women and are considered inferior, despite their essential importance for life and for maintenance of society. By relating the female function of motherhood to an image of religious praise, the status of motherhood is enhanced and, therefore, the status of women is enhanced as well. The fat black woman creates an image of her mother as a religious entity and, by doing so, she provides for herself – and for her readers – a female entity whom can be admired. Lerner believes that revolutionary ideas can only be created when the oppressed have an alternative to the system of symbols and meanings that dominate them (272). It is exactly this alternative creation of symbols that the fat black woman proposes here.

Greek philosophy, the second root of the system of ideas in Western civilization (Lerner 248) alongside religion, did not present a different perspective. In one of his writings, *Generation of Animals*, Aristotle claims that women lack soul. This is a very incisive argument and if examined from the binary logic perspective, it may reveal more than it seems to state. By claiming that women have no soul, Aristotle was asserting that women are only connected with the body, i.e., that they have no intelligence or any other transcendental abilities, that they must stay in the private domain of the household, and that they must not interfere in political and scientific life. In conclusion, he was asserting that they are inferior to men. Therefore, this logic defends that being male means “not to be ‘sexed’, to be ‘sexed’ is always a way of becoming particular and relative, and males within this system participate in the form of a universal person” (Butler, “Gender Trouble” 154). Accordingly, the male is a “disembodied universality. Women, on the other hand, are a “disavowed corporeality” and the body becomes, for women, “a defining and limiting essence” (Butler, “Gender Trouble” 16).

Once again, women are considered inferior because of their biological nature. Nonetheless, as already mentioned, the biological features are not the problem. The real question concerns the values attributed to such biology. In the cases of religion and philosophy, as mentioned, the connection between women and nature is held through the notion of passivity. The vulnerability of women, their maternal duties, their supposed lack of intelligence, of morality and of any other transcendental qualities, associate women with nature and with its supposed underdevelopment. It is always through a supposed lack of agency that women and nature are considered inferior. Women were only given passive images to follow and mirror themselves so that their behavior could be controlled. The given examples of what happened if they did not accept such roles, as the cases regarding philosophy and religion, were aggressively educational. In other words, the notion of female

passivity derived from a strong and disturbing tendency to impose this role on them in order to make domination possible.

Gender has become a metaphor to define power relations with the intention to mystify and make such relations invisible (Lerner 259). According to Joan Scott, gender becomes the primary field – but not the only one – through which power is articulated (69). This is why the history of feminist thought has been a history of rejecting the hierarchic construction of the relation between male and female (Scott 65). The categories of male and female are, according to Scott, empty and overflowing at the same time. They are empty because they do not have definite and transcendental meanings; they are overflowing because, even when they appear to be fixed, they contain alternate definitions, the ones that are denied or repressed by exclusion (75). Thus, these concepts also become a gap of negotiation. For this reason, the sexed or gendered body is no longer a mere locus of oppression for women. In feminist criticism the body has not been regarded as such. It becomes, as in Nichols's case, a locus of questioning.

In her world, the fat black woman does not adopt a subservient position. The patriarchy and the system of gender inequality are not consistent with her carnival world. On the contrary, she is confident, tenacious and she wears this strength in her own skin. The poem "Trap Evasions" (12) shows how she denies the roles imposed on women.

Refusing to be a model  
of her own affliction  
the fat black woman steers clear  
of circles that lead nowhere

evades:

bushswamps

quicksands

cesspits

treadmills

bride ties

grave lies

Men who only see

a spring of children

in her thighs

when there are mountains

in her mites (1-16)

In this poem, the fat black woman compares her evasion of quicksands to the evasion of “bride ties.” The relation of marriage – and, often as a consequence for women, of motherhood and domestic enclosing – to quicksand not only indicates how the fat black woman repudiates the notion of marriage in the patriarchal system, but also to how it is somewhat a trap. This suggests that marriage is, from the fat black woman’s perspective, a strategy to make women conform to certain roles and to a certain stereotype. In addition, she denies motherhood as the sole purpose of female sexuality. Men can only see “a spring of

children” (13) in the mountains of her body. It is curious to see how nature follows a twin-track approach. It is equated with the negative stereotypes created for women, the things the fat black woman evades. However, it also has a positive association with the power of her body and its mountainous possibilities. Nature here underpins the fat black woman’s actions. Like the body, it becomes a locus of subversion.

It is important to notice that the fat black woman does not deny marriage or motherhood. She only denies them as the only and obligatory destiny for women. She shows how she has the power of choice and how she intends to embrace it. In “Trap Evasions” the fat black woman counterposes the common connections of the body with a supposed lack of intelligence and agency. She is intelligent enough to see such connections for what they are: entrapment. Moreover, she has the agency to evade them. Having “mountains in her mites”, according to Simone Alexander, “connotes an indomitable spirit and resiliency, invaluable character traits to which White and Christian earlier lend voice” (145). However, now such traits are appropriated by the fat black woman.

“Those Women” (49), in the section “Back Home Contemplation,” is another poem in which the fat black woman rewrites this connection with nature and the body as a strength. The section displays the fat black woman’s home and childhood memories. This poem in particular, which is the first of this part, discusses the women she used to see and live with, and their daily activities.

Cut and contriving women

hauling fresh shrimps

up in their seines

standing waist deep

in the brown voluptuous

water of their own element

how I remember those women

sweeping in the childish rivers

of my eyes

and the fish slipping

like eels

through their laughing thighs (1-12)

The first thing that draws the reader's attention here is how these women are described: strong and incisive. These women are collecting food. Therefore, they are breadwinners, they are the ones who bring food home, hence they disrupt traditional gender roles. Their power comes from nature: they stand in the water of their own element. They are connected with nature. They are described as an extension of the river water. The fish come towards them as if nature were willingly providing food. Their bodies are as alive as the fish: "their laughing thighs" (12). These images of connection, fluidity, and balance with nature portray these women as vigorous, voluptuous, capable and forceful.

According to Deborah Slicer, although it is naïve to "insist that the body or more generally nature can somehow escape the effects of institutional power" (60), the physical matter "imposes certain limits to malleability." She also states that "the physical is a 'player',

has its own agency in relation to social construction” (61). The body, then, is not seen as a mere instrument to make a change. It is not the means, but a player in the questioning process. In “Those Women,” the reader is presented with a female power that comes from the physical, from the matter of nature and the body. The body is not a way to demonstrate that this power derives from somewhere else – i.e. the mind. The body is the player that demonstrates this strength. Through this and other poems, the fat black woman uses her body to reconstruct the very meaning of body, of women, and of nature.

The poem also reveals the eroticizing of these women’s bodies, however differently from the usual female sexualization. Here, the woman’s eroticizing is connected with, built by and for herself. It is a new kind of female sexuality. Throughout history, sexuality has served as a main instrument to control women. To invoke the body and matter “is to invoke a sedimented history of sexual hierarchy and sexual erasures which should be an object of feminist inquiry” (Butler, “Bodies that Matter” 49). In the current system, sexualities derive from the heterosexual imperative, which produces femininity and masculinity by dividing and fragmenting the body in zones and organs. Such fragmentations and divisions are considered natural centers of the sexual difference (Preciado 414). Paul Preciado claims that this system creates an arbitrary set of regulations inscribed in the bodies that ensure the material exploitation of a sex over the other (414). I do not believe this set of regulations is that arbitrary. However, I agree with Preciado when he claims that sexual difference is a heterodivision of the body in which symmetry is not possible (414) and that such division constructs the sexual organs. In fact, they do not exist in themselves as naturally sexual, only as organs (418). The importance of understanding how this system works makes it possible to also comprehend how it can be counterposed.

Although this thesis does not focus on the heterosexual imperative with the purpose to address other forms of sexuality, it is necessary to emphasize that the colonial logic excludes



and turns into grotesque all kinds of expressions of sexuality and genders outside the men-women/male-female heterosexual axis. The focus that must be placed on the heterosexual imperative here is related to its connections to gender roles and to the alleged female passivity. Ancient Greek philosophers approached female sexuality in a way that can be succinctly summarized by Demosthenes's following words (qtd. in Foucault, "The Use" 143): "mistresses we keep for the sake of pleasure, concubines for the daily care of our persons, but wives to bear us legitimate children and to be faithful guardians of our households." Women, then, have no autonomy regarding their own sexuality like men do. Women's sexuality must be at men's service.

Accordingly, there is a double standard for sexuality: a man's marriage does not restrict him sexually – much less his life as a single man –, whereas a woman is traditionally only allowed to express her sexuality if she is married and only with her husband. Women can only occupy two places: the lawful wife who does not feel pleasure and only has sexual relations to please her husband and bear children, or the prostitute that deserves no respect and must be ousted from society.

The statement above also mirrors the Victorian sexual repression – and its paradox – which, according to Michel Foucault, continues to dominate us ("The Will" 3). Rosamond King, by taking into account female sexuality in the Caribbean context, refers to the "cult of true oomanhood," a Caribbean re-writing of the word "womanhood." She refers to such term as the "definitions and expectations of ideal European women in the nineteenth century, specifically 'four cardinal virtues – piety, purity, submissiveness, and domesticity'" (125), which are based on Victorian standards.

Nevertheless, the author claims that in the Caribbean context, "the ideal Caribbean woman, with her histories of slavery, indentureship, colonialism, and pervasive poverty,

differs from the woman idealized in the original cult in more than geography” (125). She describes the Caribbean cult of true womanhood as follows: “piety is a plus but not a requirement and is not restricted to Christianity. Sexual purity in the Caribbean includes serial monogamy and cohabitation, as well as marriage. Domesticity endures as an ideal, though women working and socializing outside home are neither unusual nor scandalous” (125) and submissiveness also deals with matters of race and class. It can be concluded that, although this ideal of female sexuality varies, according to the history of the region, race, and class, the expected behavioral patterns for woman all entail passive roles. However, the fact that the mentioned Caribbean cult may change, and thus become to some extent malleable, only reinforces the notion that the ideal female sexuality was created to satisfy the patriarchal system. If it changes when necessary – as is the case with the financial needs of Caribbean society, which allows woman to work and earn an income – then, it may change into a more equal system as well.

The sexuality of the fat black woman and of the women she portrays in the book (for example, the women in “Those Women”) is presented from another perspective. It resides outside the scope of this excluding system, since the fat black woman lives in a world of carnival. Moreover, the notion of sexuality and of how it is lived in the body is also different. The fat black woman’s experience with the sexuality of her body involves primarily, and many times, only herself. It is a sexual drive directed to her own body and to the power it has. The poem “Invitation” (10-11) is one of the examples in which this sexuality focuses exclusively on the fat black woman herself. The second part of the poem is an exaltation of her body and a statement that such body is too much for others.

Come up and see me sometime

Come up and see me sometime

My breasts are huge exciting

amniotons of watermelon

your hands can't cup

my thighs are twin seals

fat slick pups

there's a purple cherry

below the blues

of my black seabelly

there's a mole that gets a ride

each time I shift the heritage

of my behind

Come up and see me sometime (19-32)

This second part depicts almost a kind of worship of this body through its association with elements of nature. The adjectives ("huge exciting") and the expressions ("your hands can't cup") all indicate that others are incapable of coping with this body, which is at its peak of sexuality, power, and energy. The sentence "come up and see me sometime" is a famous chorus from a Mae West song. The US Mae West has been considered one of the most controversial figures and sex symbol of all times. She adopted an allegedly deviant behavior and became a success as an actress, a playwright, a screenwriter, a comedian and a singer.

She spoke openly about sex in the 1930s, and wrote a play named “Sex,” about which the newspapers refused to comment. She was arrested for corrupting young people and many of her words were censored. Nevertheless, at the age of 38, too old an age according to beauty standards for actresses and singers, she still succeeded as a Hollywoodian sex-symbol. Mae West’s sexual freedom seemed shocking to society, for which she was considered vulgar. Unlike men, whenever women express their sexuality, they are strongly undervalued.

The use of Mae West’s chorus shows how the fat black woman’s relation to her body is a statement of her own sexual freedom. She does as she pleases and she speaks about pleasure. For centuries women could not admit to feeling pleasure or sexual desire; they felt guilty for having such feelings. This is very significant given that “the inclusion of pleasure is key to sexual agency because women’s sexuality is traditionally mandated to be in service of men, procreation, and the nation” (King 124). The drive here is directed to no one but to herself.

If this drive, desire, energy or any other name given, is related to the fat black woman herself rather than to possible partners – as it can be seen in the denial of this other person’s ability to “cup” her body – then perhaps it is restrictive to name it sexuality, according to Audre Lorde. The energy of the fat black woman’s body has always been related specifically to sexual activities only. Lorde proposes a new name for the energy that encompasses the way the fat black woman relates to her own body: the erotic, which is not just about sexual acts, but “a lens through which we scrutinize all aspects of our existence, . . . projected within each of us” (90). The word erotic comes from the Greek word “eros,” “the personification of love in all its aspects;” (Lorde 89) it is “an assertion of the life force of women, of that creative energy empowered” (89). It is an energy, a power which is not only related to sexual activities, but to all kinds of creative exercise that may, as well, lead to pleasure.

The erotic has always been misnamed or misunderstood. Lorde argues that there have been many attempts to “equate pornography and eroticism, two diametrically opposed uses of the sexual. Owing to these attempts, it has become common to separate the spiritual (psychic and emotional) from the political, to see them as contradictory or antithetical” (89). The erotic is not vulgarity. It is different from pornography, which is “the abuse of feeling,” according to Lorde (91). It is exactly the connection with a woman’s deepest feelings of love, not for the use of others, but for her own use.

From this definition, it is possible to note how the notion of the erotic is involved in the erasure of binary divisions between body and mind, according to which emotion and rationality are diametrically opposed. Furthermore, the erotic contributes to the fat black woman’s connection with her body and with the power of this body to create a carnivalesque world. Therefore, the erotic also defies the binary logic of social and cultural constructions and gender inequalities, and enables the woman to make her own life choices. Lorde states that being in touch with the erotic makes her “less willing to accept powerlessness, or those other supplied status of being which are not native to me, such as resignation, despair, self-effacement” (90), all of which have been imposed on women’s behavior. This is reflected on the fat black woman’s strength to occupy the Londoner space, the way she speaks with wit and tenacity, and the creative construction of her thoughts. All these forms of expression derive from this erotic energy and provide the fat black woman with much more than sexual freedom.

By being in touch with the emotional knowledge of which her body is guardian, the fat black woman recovers the wisdom that was denied to women. It is how she reacquires the agency of which women have been traditionally deprived. It is a rediscovered love for the body that empowers her and gives her the energy to create this new world inside *The Fat Black Woman’s Poems*.

### 3.2 A Homage to Fatness: Control Through Beauty Standards

To love one's own body is not such an easy task. There are far too many pressures and anxieties to deal with in the process of loving yourself and your own body – oneself and one's body many times become the same thing. People begin to equate the way their bodies look with what they are. Self-love goes through the analysis of this body's conformity to the generally accepted beauty standards.

There is a general conception that beauty patterns are superficial and not important for the development of society. However, they create a major impact on our lives. Susan Bordo defends that “prevailing forms of selfhood and subjectivity (gender among them) are maintained, not chiefly, through physical restraint and coercion . . . but through individual self-surveillance and self-correction to norms” (Bordo 27). Therefore, the influence of beauty standards as impositions on our bodies must be studied as a process that drives people to internalize specific norms and to police their own bodies. It is a self-monitoring system.

First and foremost, it is necessary to understand beauty standards as a form of control and coercion. According to Jean Baudrillard, the focus on the appearance of the body has attracted so much attention that “the mode of organization of the relation to the body reflects the mode of organization of the relation to things and social relations” (129). There is, for Baudrillard, an investment in the body (both economical and psychical) derived from the great importance assigned to it because of beauty standards. He claims that we have moved from a cult of the soul to a cult of the body; “since the eighteenth century, sensualist, empiricist, materialist philosophy has demolished the traditional spiritualist dogmas. . . This long desacralization and secularization in favour of the body has run through the whole of Western era: the values of the body have been subversive values, sources of most acute ideological contradiction” (135). However, this discovery of the body – which “for many

centuries represented a critique of the sacred, a call for greater freedom, truth and emancipation, in short, a battling for humanity, against God – today occurs as an act of *ressacralization*” (136).

This is not the same as saying that the body has gained more importance over the mind. Actually, the body itself is still in an inferior category and is still seen as a passive tool – the classes of people connected to it, i.e., women, are consequently still deemed inferior. The difference here is that the body, still seen as a tool, is being used for control and coercion (Huff 47) as a supposed reflection of the soul and its actions. Symbols are attributed to the human bodies and to their corporeal attitudes, which are embedded, then, with social marks that insert these bodies in certain social and cultural spaces (Zozzoli 59). Face expressions, body posture, attitudes and gestures, modes of behavior, dress codes, and accessories relate each individual to specific groups of gender, race, class, culture, geographic location, etc. Some of these symbols are legitimated and others are not, which leads to social fragmentation and marginalization of certain classes associated with illegitimated or transgressive symbols (ibid). Susan Bordo establishes that “ultimately, the body . . . is seen as demonstrating correct or incorrect attitudes toward the demands of normalization itself” (203). The legitimated symbols or correct attitudes become idealized images of the body and any deviation from these ideals is regarded as failure. Therefore, physical difference turns into a form of social control, which leads to a vicious cycle of attempts to conform to such ideals.

This conformity is many times unachievable, and results in endless pursuits. This continuous search for an unreal body type is the main point of these impositions of beauty standards. When the body was “reappropriated” and (falsely) “liberated” from the cult of the soul, it was, according to Baudrillard, to “meet ‘capitalist’ objectives . . . The body is not reappropriated for the autonomous ends of the subject, but in terms of a *normative* principle of enjoyment and hedonistic profitability” (Baudrillard 131). The body becomes an economic

capital through the act of convincing people that there is only one type of beauty and that it is not a cultural ideal. As a result, people become increasingly insecure, anxious about their own bodies, and are driven by a strong impulse to pursue a surreal ideal. This drive is then turned into a persistent urge to buy – “consume certain products and you will achieve the beauty ideal” seems to be the general motto.

The profitability derived from such logic is not restricted to the beauty products industry. Beauty standards build a way of life and usually show how to achieve it, by presenting the correct outfit, the correct place to live, the correct job, the correct attitude. Furthermore, this drive to purchase stokes up “this irrepressible, irrational, self-destructive frenzy in which beauty and elegance, which were the original goals, are now merely alibis for a daily, obsessive disciplinary exercise” (Baudrillard 142). It becomes a violent repetitive attempt to be – the body represents what one is and one’s value – something unattainable.

I have previously shown in the analysis of “The Fat Black Woman Goes Shopping” (8-9) how the fat black woman counterposes the logic that considers her fat body as grotesque. It is also important to discuss how the capitalist logic underlies such construction. The title of the poem itself points to this capitalist logic. By “going from store to store / in search of accommodating clothes” (3-4), the fat black woman is saying she cannot find stores that sell clothes suited for her body. She has to endure humiliation and the “journeying” to find warm clothes to go through the London winter, which indicates how this system predominantly sells what fits the body image it creates. In the stores she enters, there is “nothing much beyond size 14” (20), hence it reveals how her body, for being fat, does not fit what the capitalist logic proposes. When she cannot find clothes or other basic products that suit her, not much more is needed to convince her that her body is wrong. Therefore, she begins to strive to achieve such standards and does so by consuming products that will lead her to fit the specific body type so that she can consume the products available. By using the



ambiguous meanings of “lean,” the fat black woman also suggests how this logic is “lean,” i.e., weak, feeble, poor in values. By making everyone alike – since we are all pursuing the same idealized image – the capitalist logic is also poor when it comes to diversity of people, of bodies, and of beauty.

The fat black woman’s body is challenged in such a way because being fat is considered as “repulsive, funny, ugly, unclean, obscene, and above all as something to lose” (Braziel and LeBesco 2). The fashion pendulum shifts in the different historical times, establishing either thin or fat as the standard (Klein 20). It appears that, nowadays, fat has gained the inferior status in this dual construction. Constructions like that shift in different times, the notions they establish are not universal, even if they are imposed and perceived as such. In fact, “these judgments are saturated with cultural, historical, political, and economic influences” (ibid). However, we still “fear fat every day” (ibid).

We have been told so many times, through the most varied forms of discourse, that fat is grotesque, ugly or innumerable other negative adjectives, which has made us begin to interiorize this construction. We have started to believe that we are nothing unless we are “trim, tight, lineless, bugeless and sagless” (Bordo 32). However, body management is not something new. In the late Victorian period “those who could afford to eat well began systematically to deny themselves food in the pursuit of an aesthetic ideal” (Bordo 185). In the Middle Ages, Christians saw fasting as a path to spiritual purification and domination of the flesh (ibid). With time, these preoccupations ceased to be a subject for the select few. The development of technologies of dietary intake, physical exercises, and even weight loss drugs and surgery (ibid) spread the possibility of body management among many people.

There is a concern about managing the margins of the body so that it does not transgress the established norms, which shows how the thin ideal is connected with the idea

of control. According to Bordo, people are anxious about their “internal processes out of control – uncontained desire, unrestrained hunger, uncontrolled impulse” (189) on the basis of the “tyranny of slenderness.” It is even worse for women who “in our culture are more tyrannized by the contemporary slenderness ideal than men are, as they typically have been by beauty ideals in general” (Bordo 204). The gender approach can also be associated with this fear of losing control. For centuries women’s bodies have been controlled in several ways, including in terms of sexuality. Beauty standards have developed as another strategy to control people, especially women and their bodies.

In “Looking at Miss World” (21), the very presence of a beauty contest, based on such controlling strategy, is a demonstration of how our world still sees and values women for their physical appearance. Although the fat black woman “toasting herself a likely win” (19) provides us with a new ideal of beauty, the existence of an ideal of beauty – however excluding it is – is not the main problem presented by the fat black woman. The main issue is that women are only valued for their looks, and the society devalues the body in opposition to mind. In the fat black woman’s world, there cannot be a focus solely on the body or solely on the intellectual because these two are deeply interconnected. Hence, when the fat black woman poses herself as beautiful, it is not merely an assertion of a bodily status in a system of beauty standards. It is also a praise for her black body as an agent – a body which is alive and beautiful with all its possibilities and its non-fixity. It is a praise for a new comprehension of body image and of beauty.

There are two main types of gender control exerted by the tyranny of slenderness – to use Bordo’s expression. The first one is related to the standards that require “that the ideal feminine body be small. A woman is taught early to contain herself, to keep arms and legs close to her body and take up as little space as possible” (Hartley 61). Of course, men are under “no such size restriction and are allowed – often encouraged – to take up as much

space as they can get away with” (Hartley 62). According to Cecilia Hartley, as women have claimed more space in intellectual and economic areas, and hence have achieved more power for themselves, “culture has simply found new ways for them to be inferior” (62). If we really are in times of the cult of the body, as Baudrillard claims, when appearance is equated with what someone is, the restriction on literal spaces women can occupy is equated with a metaphorical space and with the related thereto. Through a repetitive construction of negative images, “women today are bound by fears, by oppression, and by stereotypes that depict large women as ungainly, unfeminine, and unworthy of appreciation” (Hartley 64). Thus, “large chunks of time and energy that could be channeled into making real, substantive changes in society are being spent in pursuing the ideal body image” (ibid).

Many of the fat black woman’s poems reveal how she freely occupies all spaces. In “Invitation” (10-11) and “Thoughts drifting through the fat black woman’s head while having a full bubble bath” (13), two poems already discussed in this thesis, the fat black woman shows how her body weight is ideal for her. In “The Assertion” (4), she describes herself as “Heavy as a whale” (1) and claims she “refuses to move.” This place she is occupying – and it should be emphasized that this place is a throne – is her “birthright,” from where she refuses to move. The fat black woman will occupy all places and spaces and she will do so “giving a fat black chuckle / showing her fat black toes” (16-17). In another poem, “...And a Fat Poem” (16-17), it is not her body being validated; her fat is. Not only is fat the greatest thing (“fat is a dream / in times of lean” [13-14]), but it also “speaks for itself” (20). This proclamation of fat works as an occupation of space: fat is big, large, and great, and it is here to stay.

The second type of gender control is associated with food. Bordo establishes “the symbolic potency of female hunger as a cultural metaphor for unleashed female power and desire” (116). The control of female hunger is also a way to control female sexuality, and

consequently women's freedom. In such context, women are not only told to be thin, but they are also told to eat as little as possible and not to have an appetite at all, if possible. Men, on the other hand, are allowed to have big appetites and eat as much as they want. In fact, the ideal relation of women with food should be limited to preparing it for her loved ones – husband and children. Food “is equated with maternal and wifely love” (Bordo 122) and men expect to be served by their wives with both food and love. Women, on the other hand, when equate food with love for themselves, face a representation of food as “substitute for human love” (Bordo 126). Women's self-denial of food “becomes central micro-practices in the education of feminine *self-restraint* and *containment of impulse*” (Bordo 130).

It is worth noticing that the connection of fat bodies with unrestrained appetite is the reflection of secular prejudices. Health and medical discourses in general have created the idea that fat people are unhealthy and that they are fat because they lack discipline and will. In other words, they eat too much. That is why fat people are seen as lazy, without self-control or willpower (Bordo 202). Baudrillard states that “health today is not so much a biological imperative linked to survival as a social imperative linked to status” (139). Therefore, we need to be careful about these associations, even if we are only discussing their cultural imposition, not their values.

Despite what may be argued, not all fat bodies are unhealthy and being thin does not necessarily mean being healthy. We should not haste to make anticipated and ill-considered assertions. Grace Nichols claims that she “wasn't setting out to write a polemic or being an advocate of obesity.” In fact, the author explained that fat black woman “doesn't represent just fatness per se but rather a largeness of spirit, a generosity of being and a sense of unbounded freedom” (Nichols, “Personal Interview” np).

The fat black woman portrays a different relation with food and with the space she occupies. In “Like a Beacon” (29), the food that calls the fat black woman’s body to the streets is connected with her Caribbean roots. The hunger for food then is the hunger for more - hunger for more knowledge and for forms of art other than those inside official galleries. It is the fat black woman’s craving for more than what she is told she may have. When she claims that: “I need this link / I need this touch / of home” (8-10), she puts food and her appetite in a positive fulfilling place. The metaphor for food here is a beacon, something that shows the way, that illuminates. It is a new world of possibilities for food to exist.

“Praise Song for My Mother” (55) also depicts the fat women’s relation with food. In this poem aspects of nature are used to describe the fat black woman’s mother, but especially, in the final stanza, such aspects are associated with food.

You were

the fishes red gill to me

the flame tree’s spread to me

the crab’s leg/the fried plantain smell

replenishing replenishing

Go to you wide futures, you said (10-15)

The praise for her mother also becomes a praise for these elements. The food, like the mother, is “replenishing.” It is not seen as a mere basic need or a hollow desire. It is a person’s transcendent fulfillment. Not only is it related to the survival of the body, but it also refers to the most intimate levels of the fat black woman, due to her Caribbean background

and her childhood memories. The poem also presents a new relation to motherhood in association with food. Although it still portrays the mother feeding her children, such feeding does not entail obligation or restriction for the mother. Instead, it shows an act of love and food is the way through which feelings are conveyed. These forms of understanding food and women's roles are connected with how the fat black woman reacts to the beauty standards as forms of social control and, more importantly, as limits to women's freedom.

The fact that the poem refers to the mother and mentions typical Caribbean food makes us think about how the fat black woman's experience with her fatness is being portrayed in the scenario of London. It is interesting to notice how the fat body is constructed in cultures which are so different. In a private interview, Grace Nichols, commenting on *The Fat Black Woman's Poems*, states: "I doubt that I would have written 'The fat Black Woman's Poems' had I remained in Guyana, for example, because that obsession with body-size doesn't really exist. So she does come out of a particular cultural matrix which sees in a negative light the very two characteristics that she embodies. Namely fatness and blackness" (Nichols, "Personal Interview" np). The typical Caribbean body, then, did not have such an obsession, at least not as in the context of London. It should be said that when Nichols went to England, the media and internet technologies were not as developed as they are now, which may have affected the different notions of body-types, as mentioned in the interview. However, the relation this fat black woman has with her own fat body is also a relation with her Caribbean cultural roots.

The fat black woman's maxim, expressed in the poem "The Fat Black Woman's Motto on Her Bedroom Door" (18), shows exactly how she sees her fat body, as follows:

IT'S BETTER TO DIE IN THE FLESH OF HOPE

THAN TO LIVE IN THE SLIMNESS OF DESPAIR (1-2)

The words “hope” and “despair” in the poem above indicate how she rejects any fixed norm or rule that excludes and creates malaise. The tyranny of slenderness creates violent scenarios. It produces anguish and desperation. It leads people onto unhealthy and irresponsible actions. It is better, then, to live in the hope of what her fat body represents: a more embracing world. The fat body is about love for others and for oneself. Klein goes even further to say that “fat people are not hungry like imperialist, impatient like exploiters, intolerant or warlike . . . If everyone were fat, the world would be fat and happy and peaceful” (37). I am not sure we can establish a person’s personality based on his or her appearance without falling into stereotypes. Nevertheless, I do agree with Klein in that the existence of such a tyranny of slenderness is based on repression of desire and freedom. Therefore, if such a logic did not exist, perhaps, we could all live as the fat black woman’s “flesh of hope” envisions.

Although the poem “Beauty” (3) has been widely discussed in this thesis, there are some points I would like to investigate further. This poem is about a reconfiguration of beauty, as already mentioned. However, beauty, for us, is considered within the scope of the Western social parameters, i.e., beauty depends on another person’s gaze. To be beautiful is to look beautiful and for that there must be others appreciating one’s appearance. Nonetheless, in a poem entitled “Beauty” there is no other gaze; only the fat black woman’s and nature’s.

Previously, I have mentioned how we interiorize the fat-related stereotypes with negative images and then start to monitor ourselves. Hartley explains that “because the male gaze is always present, even when it is physically absent, women must continually produce bodies that are only acceptable to that gaze. Thus, women’s own gaze becomes a substitute for man’s gaze, and she evaluates her own body as ruthlessly as she expects it to be evaluated by him” (62). Therefore, any sense of self-love for her body or herself is undermined, even in

case of those bodies that meet the ideal (Hartley 66). In other words, a woman's appearance becomes the measure for her self-esteem.

In the fat black woman's world, there are no impositions as such; hence, no internalizations of stereotypes. The main point in her world is that she is not preoccupied with the male gaze. None of her poems indicate expectations as to nor relation to the importance of men in her life. Likewise, her sexuality is only related to herself and to her body, which is in line with Lorde's concept of the erotic. The fat black woman's notion of beauty and love for her body only go through her own perspective.

The last verse of "Beauty," "to hug her shape" (14), symbolizes how this new beauty is an introspective process of self-appreciation. Instead of depending on external standards and images, the fat black woman drifts in happy oblivion; she is involved only with herself and with the environment around her. Her beauty is also connected with the feelings of this body: the sun on her feet, the hibiscus on her cheek, the sea that hugs her. The beauty of this body is no longer only an appreciation by the other; this body is related to the feelings it renders the fat black woman, to the things it bestows onto her.

Thus the subversive aspect of this fat body lies in pure self-love. In a society that makes people hate themselves and puts them through the most violent and dangerous practices only to feel even more frustrated, self-love is the purest form of rebellion. This is the fat black woman's motto: she will not be run over by these brutal rules. She will occupy her space, she will love her body and herself, and she will make her readers desire such an independent and hassle-free experience.



### 3.3 Where Is the Female Black Body? Intersectionality and the Power of Defining Images

The two sections above have not elaborated on a specific and important dimension of the fat black woman's body: the fact that this is a black body. The discussions on body and gender, on beauty standards and on the impacts upon women have left out any reference to the black body. One could suppose that the specific mention to the black body, as a body, a female body, would not be necessary. However, there is no such a thing as universality, thus, the body in question, if not black, is probably white. Therefore, in the intellectual domination brought by colonization, the black body was erased and made invisible.

Does the black body not have its own specificities when it concerns aggressions and discrimination? Does the black body with "dark skin, broad noses, full lips, and kinky hair" (Hill Collins, "Black Feminist" 89) not suffer from the "universal" beauty standards of "blue-eyed, blond thin white women" (Hill Collins, "Black Feminist" 89)? This suffering is mainly related to women, as for men "valuations of self-worth do not depend as heavily on their physical attractiveness" (Hill Collins, "Black Feminist" 89). Then, I question why all of these analyses, books, and scholars I have used in order to build my arguments and my line of reasoning simply omitted it from the context. The effacement of the black body in these considerations indicate how centuries of male domination and colonization were able to simply claim possession of these black female bodies.

The violent process of slavery is usually spoken of in terms of a "universal" black subject, who is a man. For too long, "scholars have emphasized the impact of slavery on the black male consciousness, arguing that black men, more so than black women, were the 'real' victims of slavery" (hooks, "Ain't I a woman?" 36). Nonetheless, we know that while "the black male slave was primarily exploited as a laborer in the fields; the black female was

exploited as a laborer in the fields, a worker in the domestic household, a breeder, and as an object of white male sexual assault” (hooks, “Ain’t I a woman?” 39). This provokes a deliberate minimization of the black female experience – “although it in no way diminishes the suffering and oppressions of enslaved black men, it is obvious that the two forces, sexism and racism, intensified and magnified the sufferings and oppressions of black women” (hooks, “Ain’t I a woman?” 38-39). This same structure still lingers in current antiracism and black movements (Crenshaw 140). They often focus on a universal black male subject, fighting for racial justice and equality, but frequently leaving aside black women who are, we may say, doubly discriminated.

Within the feminist movements and struggles for women’s rights, black women have also been outside the scope of the universal white women. bell hooks, discussing the context of feminism in the United States, affirms that “every women’s movements in America (sic) from its earlier origin to the present day has been built on a racist foundation” (“Ain’t I a woman?” 169). This exclusion “is reinforced when *white* women speak for and as *women*” (Crenshaw 155). Consequently, the “authoritative universal voice – usually white male subjectivity masquerading as non-racial, non-gendered objectivity – is merely transferred to those who, but for gender, share many of the same cultural, economic and social characteristics” (Crenshaw 154). Historically, white women took advantages of the domination over black females as a way to gain some sort of power. However, if we truly wish for a “feminist revolution” or a revolution of any kind that fights for a more equalitarian world, “we must assume responsibility for eliminating all the forces that divide women. Racism is one of such forces. Women, all women, are accountable for racism continuing to divide us” (hooks, “Ain’t I a woman?” 213).

The poem "Loveact" (71-72), originally published in *I is a Long Memoried Woman* (1983), appears in the last section of *The Fat Black Woman's Poems*. It reflects on white women benefiting from domination over black women and its workings.

She enter into his Great House

her see-far looking eyes

unassuming

He fix her with his glassy stare

and feel the thin fire in his blood

awakening

Soon she is the fuel

that keep them all going

He/his mistresswife/and his

children who take to her breasts

like leeches

He want to tower above her

want her to raise her ebony

haunches and when she does

he thinks she can be trusted

and drinks her in

and his mistresswife

spending her days in ring

of vacant smile

is glad to be rid of the

loveact (1-21)

Not only the “mistresswife,” but the entire family of the “Great House” would use the black woman’s body. “He,” the “master,” and the children make direct use of this body through physical acts, whereas the mistresswife benefits from it indirectly, by being free from the sexual duties a wife was supposed to maintain with her husband. We can highlight the fact that, since white women knew how horrible it was to live under domination, it would be easier for them to ally with black women in order to overcome such oppression, and use their privilege of being white as an aid. However, this has never been the choice. Until today, many white women ignore and even take advantages of black women’s social status, masquerading – to use Crenshaw’s term – their white privilege with a false non-racial objectivity. White women have often become as much a part of the system that racially and sexually has oppressed black women as white men.

The title of bell hooks’s book mentioned above presents the question asked by the anti-slavery speaker Sojourner Truth in her speech given at the Women’s Convention in

Ohio, on May, 1851: “Ain’t I a Woman?.” This question points to how different discrimination against white women and discrimination against black women are, like in the poem “Loveact” (71-72). The reason is the obvious racial difference that is likely to be overlooked or belittled as if it did not have an enormous impact on the lives of black women. The patriarchal domination had different impacts on each of them. The femininity imposed on white women can be described through the “cult of true womanhood” as follows: “true women possessed four cardinal virtues: piety, purity, submissiveness, and domesticity. Propertied white women and those of emerging middle class were encouraged to aspire to these virtues” (Hill Collins, “Black Feminist” 72). On the other hand, black women were not considered passive, fragile, chaste subjects; they were often not considered subjects at all.

The set of images that defined black women’s expected behavior were part of a “generalized ideology of domination” (Hill Collins, “Black Feminist” 69). A central aspect of this process was their objectification. As subjects, people can define themselves; as objects, they are defined by others. Black women’s sexual exploitation, of labor, and of many other types of exploitation was justified through these stereotypical images which represented “elite White male interests” (Hill Collins, “Black Feminist” 84). Such stereotypes entailed images such as the “mammy,” “the faithful, obedient domestic servant. Created to justify the economic exploitation of house slaves and sustained to explain Black women’s long-standing restriction to domestic service.” In short, it was an image of a docile black woman who “by loving, nurturing, and caring for her White children and ‘family’ better than her own, the mammy symbolizes the dominant group’s perceptions of the ideal Black female relationship to elite White male power” (Hill Collins, “Black Feminist” 75).

Another image, as strong and common as the first one, is of the “matriarch.” If the mammy is the good black mother, the matriarch is the bad one. She “symbolizes the mother figure in Black homes . . . Spending too much time away from home, these working mothers

ostensibly could not properly supervise their children and thus were a major contributing factor to their children's failure at school" (ibid). This very image blamed the mother for the black family's economic disadvantage, poor education, and life conditions. A third image, out of the many that exist, is the image of Jezebel. Jezebel's function "was to relegate all Black women to the category of sexually aggressive women, thus providing a powerful rationale for the widespread sexual assaults by White men" (Hill Collins, "Black Feminist" 81).

Having only negative images to cope with, Black women would often aspire to assert themselves with the qualities expressed in the cult of true womanhood. They "bitterly resented that they were not considered 'women' by the dominant culture and therefore were not recipients of the considerations and privileges given white women" (hooks, "Ain't I a Woman" 74). Such negative images show how the control of female sexuality, discussed in the beginning of this chapter, worked differently for black women. Their sexuality was indeed controlled, but not in the sense that they were the white male's property that should remain untouched, as in the case of white women. Black women were perceived as promiscuous, and such image was used to justify why they were sexually exploited for white male pleasure and for economic endeavors.

The poem "Loveact" refers mainly to the "mammy" image, the one that "has accepted her subordination" (Hill Collins, "Black Feminist" 75). She does what she is told, she is subservient, she is "the fuel / that keeps them all going" (7-8). However, from the beginning, the poem indicates what the real situation is like. For example, "her see-far looking eyes" (2) suggests how this picture has more to show than it does on the surface. The verse "he think she can be trusted" (15) almost tells the reader she is not to be trusted, at least not by him. And the poem continues:

But time pass/es

Her sorcery cut them

like a whip

She hide her triumph

and slowly stir the hate

of poison in (22-27)

From a passive “mammy,” this black enslaved woman takes on a position of control. She gains power by letting the family believe they are in charge of her actions when actually she is the one who takes control of the house, which she does quietly and slowly. When there is an entire social structure that permeates the various official institutions, this may be one of the few ways this woman could overcome her subordinate situation. Through the supposed acceptance of the stereotypes that the white family imposed on her, she is able to subvert the controlled *versus* controller scenario.

In another poem, “The Fat Black Woman Remembers” (5), these stereotypes and their machinations are also present. The name “Aunt Jemima,” referring to the image in the pancake syrup’s advertisement, directly connects this black woman with the role of the mammy. Like in “Loveact,” the woman pretends to occupy a place of subordination while laughing her “murderous blue laughter” (8). However, the fat black woman does not comply with this subordinate position. She looks upon this scene and describes it to her reader: “But this fat black woman ain’t no Jemima / Sure thing Honey/Yeah” (15-16). Inside her world of carnival, away from impositions, the fat black woman does not have to pretend to comply with submissive roles. Instead, she denounces their workings. Even though the women in

“Loveact” and “The Fat Black Woman Remembers” manage to subvert the situation they are inscribed in, they still cannot escape these definitions.

Within the context of these controlling images, “Black women find themselves in the third person, as they speak about themselves through descriptions of *white* women” (Kilomba 120) and men. Patricia Hill Collins argues that “replacing negative images with positive ones can be equally problematic if the function of stereotypes as controlling images remains unrecognized” (“Black Feminist” 114). Indeed, not only does the fat black woman provide us with new positive images for black women to associate with, but she also shows how these women have been controlled by negative images attributed to them.

In an interview to *The Guardian*, Nichols comments on being constantly asked “why she doesn’t write more about the ‘realities’ of being black”: “[a]s if there is only one reality. As if I am more black than I am a woman, or a mother, or a poet . . . I refuse to be controlled in this way. I am all those things and no one thing” (“Free Verse” np). Her answer reveals how she strongly keeps on refusing controlling images and impositions. In addition to that, it also points to how she understands identity as a whole, not fragmented into its multiple aspects.

There is a certain tendency to compartmentalize the racial discrimination arising from the sexual or gender oppression, which black women face. The intersection between these two modes of identity is not accounted for, which leads, as mentioned above, to black women’s exclusion from feminist theory and from antiracist theory at the same time. This issue “cannot be solved simply by including Black women within an already established analytical structure. Because the intersectional experience is greater than the sum of racism and sexism, any analysis that does not take intersectionality into account cannot sufficiently address the particular manner in which Black women are subordinated” (Crenshaw 140).



Intersectionality, then, is the answer to understand black women's realities, conceived always in the plural. Such perspective does not consider only gender and race, but the multiple specificities of each woman.

These specificities can only be fully acknowledged and recognized if they are named by those who experience them. Self-definition is the only way for black women – and marginalized subjects in general – to survive. Hill Collins claims that “when Black women’s very survival is at stake, creating independent self-definitions becomes essential to that survival” (“Black Feminist” 112). Insisting on self-definition, black women question more than the stereotypes that were created with their image; they question “the *credibility* and the *intentions of those possessing the power to define*” (Hill Collins, “Black Feminist” 114). They become subjects, and hence they define themselves for the entire world surrounding them, defying those who try to disempower them. This self-definition does not need to be external or expressed widely. It may derive from the development of “the ‘inside’ of a changed consciousness as a sphere of freedom” (Hill Collins, “Black Feminist” 118).

The fat black woman in the poems analyzed here is aware of her freedom. That is why her definition of beauty comes from herself. That is also why, when faced with the unaccommodating clothes and city, she inserts herself in the center of society. Therefore, she manages to define and to love herself.

For black women and perhaps for black men too, love is a delicate topic – self-love or love for and by others. In a context restricted to repression and racism, knowing to suppress one’s emotions is a matter of survival (Silva 93). In view of such repression, love becomes luxury (ibid). When it comes to love relationships, many black women “want loving sexual relationships with Black men,” in heterosexual terms, “but instead end up alone. Black men may be closest to Black women, and thus receive the lion’s share of the blame for all the

daily ways that Black women are caused to feel less worthy, yet this societal judgment and rejection of Black women permeates the entire culture” (Hill Collins, “Black Feminist” 160).

Although the fat black woman does not measure her love and erotic relationship in terms of another person or partner, as already discussed, the poem “Alone” (6-7) provides a glimpse of her loneliness.

The fat black woman

sits alone

gathering

gathering

into herself

onto herself (1-6)

These six verses, repeated throughout the poem, and the final verse, which shows the word “silent” alone and detached from the rest of the verses, represent the idea of “the super strong black woman” and her silent suffering (Kilomba 118). This image praises “the ability to survive under the adverse conditions of gendered racism” (Kilomba 119). It allows black women to “express the profound wounds of racism” (ibid), and it also creates their solitariness. This situation can be so severe to such an extent that it can lead to suicide (Kilomba 116), reflecting the strong trauma such a collective solitude has entailed as commented below.

Discussing the experience of black women living in Germany, Grada Kilomba reaches the conclusion that the act of women greeting each other on the streets, even if one does not know the other, has become a sort of re-unification. Kilomba says that “African and African Diasporic people have been forced to deal not only with individual trauma, but also the

collective and historical trauma of colonialism, revived, and re-actualized by everyday racism.” In this context, “exchanging greetings becomes a short moment . . . where one fabricates a setting in which to overcome loss and racial isolation, and at the same time develop a sense of belonging” (130). This example shows how the sense of community, of not being alone, generates a revived esteem. In the absence of romantic love relationships, these women reach out for love in different ways.

I agree with hooks when she defends that “[w]hen we see love as the will to nurture one's own or another's spiritual growth, revealed through acts of care, respect, knowing, and assuming responsibility, the foundation of all love in our life is the same. There is no special love exclusively reserved for romantic partners” (“All About Love” 136). The fat black woman finds love to nurture her in communities – as analyzed in “Fear” (30-31) – and also and mainly in and for herself.

It is important to remember that the notion of body the fat black woman portrays is not a closed body, but one in communion with the outside, with nature, and with others. Therefore, the love she has for herself and her body is also a love for everything and everyone. By relating the beauty in herself to ocean's waves, for example, she expresses love for her body as it is and for nature in its power and magnitude.

According to hooks, love heals. The theorist states that “when we are wounded in the place where we would know love, it is difficult to imagine that love really has the power to change everything,” as it is frequently the case of black women who deal with everyday discriminations and pain. However, “no matter what has happened in our past, when we open our hearts to love we can live as if born again, not forgetting the past but seeing it in a new way, letting it live inside us in a new way. We go forward with the fresh insight that the past can no longer hurt us” (“All About Love” 209). It is through this love for her body that the fat

black woman heals the many wounds created by colonization and maintained in her diasporic world. Although it may seem very abstract and illusory, there is no better way to overcome the damages created by the hate stirred by greed of colonization than love.

## FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

### Change is the Word of Order

In Nichols's most recent book published in 2020, *Passport to Here and There*, the poem entitled "Destiny" (np) is dedicated to the "West Indian emigrés who arrived at Waterloo Station in 1962, and to the photographer, Howard Grey, who'd captured them" (Nichols, "Passport" np). At the time, when the photographer developed the photos, nothing could be seen, "just darkness" (ibid). Sixty years later, these photographs became visible, thanks to new technology. "There they were," says Nichols, "the last batch of the *Windrush* generation to beat the Commonwealth Migration Act which would limit the entry of people from the British colonies to the UK" (ibid).

Not seen. But there –

like the stored magic in a seed

that would one day flower –

they remained for over fifty years

A metaphor for endurance

a refusal to be erased, so they stayed

in the sublayer of themselves

awaiting the technology of a new age (1-8)

Although this poem is specifically about these immigrant people arriving in the UK, it may also be related to all who were hidden from official history, mistreated and made invisible, those who had to endure centuries of violence, awaiting the development of

humanity – our new “technologies” – to become subjects instead of “objects.” Until today these people have stayed in “sublayers of themselves”; they are repressed, afraid. Any black, fat, female subject can be related to this context of repression. Any subject that is part of the minority’s groups of society has endured living in the darkness of a damaged photo. Some of them may still be stored in a magic seed that one day will flower and allow them to be as they are.

That is why the fat black woman’s existence, with her free, humorous and ironic discourse is so intriguing. She is the representation of a desired future, a desired life for a large part of people in our societies. In this research I have analyzed how such a subject as the fat black woman can live freely. The impetus of this thesis is exactly to analyze Nichols’s poetry, focusing on such freedom. In my interpretation, the poems can depict a world in which the fat black woman can live unrestrictedly and, therefore, she can inspire others to envision their own existences as free as well.

The path taken to analyze *The Fat Black Woman’s Poems* in this thesis has been constructed in three steps. Firstly, I outline the context and the process that created the cultural and social constructions through traditional binary logic. Secondly, the fat black woman’s world is examined from the perspective of carnival. Accordingly, I demonstrate how the fat black woman counterposes the stereotypes and prejudices she faces daily and through which strategies. Finally, I describe, analyze, and investigate the fat black woman’s main battlefield and locus of questioning, by means of a subversive player: the body. These three steps, if I may call them as such, delineate the fat black woman’s journey from the hate and violence of colonization to the self-love for her herself and for her body. These steps are outlined in the three chapters of this thesis. Each investigation leads to a broader understanding of the fat black woman, her world, and of what she may symbolize.

The first chapter is related to the formation of the binary cultural and social constructions that have shaped our world. Even though the focus of the chapter is on the process of colonization and its consequences, the ancestral societies that lived in those lands before the Europeans arrived are not to be exempt from the fat black woman's critical eye. All the knowledge systems and cultures are questioned and reviewed in Nichols's work. Through this revision of world history and its drawbacks, the fat black woman depicted in the poems is able to point to what must be amended and overcome for a better world. The violent and barbaric process of colonization created divisions of power that cannot be maintained without being questioned. Therefore, the path for the fat black woman to achieve an all-embracing world is the balance with nature. A reconfiguration of the binary divisions is only possible if the more-than-human is also reconsidered.

Not only does the fat black woman indicate the path to a more balanced existence, but she also lives and experiences it. Questioning cultural and social constructions in her all-embracing world is only possible because she inhabits a gap. The globalized city where she lives becomes a space of negotiation of identity, culture, language, and the notion of home. In a diasporic context, the fat black woman constantly challenges the fixed definitions of these categories in order to unsettle the binary excluding division, which she counterposes so fiercely. She is more interested in inquiring and disturbing fixed patterns than in finding answers, perhaps because there is not a single answer to what she is questioning. In fact, it is this inexistence of a fixed response that she is looking for. By challenging our very categories and by making spaces for new ways of thinking, the fat black woman is able to change the stereotypical narratives that frame her body and her identity.

If the first chapter is about the world and its fixed categories, the second one shows the fat black woman's creation of her own world of freedom. My findings in the research about this world of carnival point to new possibilities of analyses. One of the most important

issues is the notion that violence does not know laughter or carnival itself. The violence used in the process of colonization is not part of the way the fat black woman's world functions. Her world shows other possibilities of existence. It provokes the desire for something better – a better world, a better co-existence, a better life, a better community, or, perhaps, all of that. The fat black woman's world outgrows the Bakhtinian carnival and becomes a collective and a means of free expression. The greater difference between her carnivalesque world and Bakhtin's is the knowledge foundation. Whereas Bakhtin still maintains the Western structure of knowledge, the fat black woman apprehends the world through a new form.

Instead of the science, the philosophy, and the religions upon which the Western society was built, the fat black woman's comprehension derives from the ancestral sources of our world, which incorporate the most different forms of knowledge. This mode of comprehension does not claim it is the final and best form of knowledge that exists. It is open to change and adaptation. By questioning the binary logic of cultural and social constructions, and the types of knowledge as well, the fat black woman creates for herself a new way of seeing.

In this second chapter, the structure of the fat black woman's world, depicted through the poems, is what receives more importance. The poems reveal a mixture of laughter, irony, and seriousness, of the official English with nation language, of oral and written expression. Such mixtures constitute the fat black woman as a means of disturbance, that is, as grotesque. She is a bothering presence and that is her most carnivalesque act.

After discussing the world as it is and its formation, and then moving on to the world the fat black woman creates for herself, the following question may be asked: what does she do with the new knowledge? The body is at the center of many discussions. We live and experience the world through our bodies. Ergo, the fat black woman's actions and her



challenging of cultural and social constructions by means of a world of carnival are carried out through the body as well.

In the third chapter, by analyzing the workings of this body and the new comprehension of the body itself, I come upon a new finding. If the body is the fat black woman's main battlefield and if she rejects the way our world is created, then what weapons does she use? How does she fight if not with violence? Although it seems illusory and, some might even argue, idealistic, love is the answer. In this thesis, I have shown how the perception of the world is closed and blind for many other existing forms of knowledge. The emotional aspect has been put aside as an invalid form of knowledge for centuries, even though it influences all our actions. Thus, attributing love as the answer to this final question is the fat black woman's ultimate confrontation of this logic.

Analyzing the fat black woman's body, we parade through the body's association with gender specificities, knowledge, sexuality, agency, social control, and trauma. These are the means to control and dominate the fat black woman. The use she makes of her body, however, presents three different possibilities of this self-love. The female body has shown how this self-love can be a creative force through the erotic. It is a force that enables the fat black woman to live inside the world of carnival, and to create new categories for herself. Her fat body shows self-love as rebellion. In our world, frustration and hate for one's own body are instilled in the most diverse branches of everyday life. Therefore, loving oneself and one's body is a form of rebellion, as it challenges the beauty standards. The black body depicted in Nichols's poems analyzed herein presents self-love as healing. Love becomes a way to deal with past traumas, not by erasing them, but by overcoming them. Since these bodies are grotesque and open, this self-love also becomes the love for nature, for the more-than-human, for the world surrounding us, for diversity, and for differences. It is an all-

embracing love. When love produces disturbance, we can state that our world is, indeed, flawed.

Even though it may be said that the fat black woman's body and its self-assertion is not limited to fat, black, female bodies, I would like to stress that the fat black woman does not propose an inversion of the norm. Instead, she proposes opening our categories. Instead of having one type of body as the norm, she proposes that all bodies, cultures, and forms of knowledge be accepted. She uses her own grotesque body to do so, but she does not limit this openness to her body type. The proposal is to erase the concept of acceptable or unacceptable. Different bodies and different persons do exist, they have a history, a culture, a form of apprehension of the world and no one should decide whether or not they can be accepted. They exist and their existence should not be questioned or belittled.

The fat black woman is a lyrical subject, not a real person. Although this may appear to be a pointless and rather too obvious assertion, we need to be reminded of it, as a confusion happens, for example, when Nichols's work is condemned for being a "praise of obesity." We must not forget that the fat black woman is a representation, not an actual entity.

Such representation of the fat black woman, as I have discussed in this thesis, can be summarized as a form of displacement. The fat black woman is opposed to fixity and stability. She is not open for anything other than change. She may be said to be, paradoxically, the permanence of difference. Our world cannot be perfect because the ones that inhabit it are flawed. Thus, there will always be exclusion and inequality. The fat black woman is the force that denounces and questions our blindness. She is able to do so because she lives in a gap - a position similar to what Hill Collins names the "outsider within" ("Learning from"), which is a strategic place. Although it usually means being in an inferior

social position, it allows her to have a unique critical view that she uses to challenge and destabilize the colonial constructions and the binary logic. She manages to turn negative situations into new possibilities.

Nonetheless, the fat black woman is not entirely free of cultural and social constructions and their effects. Following Bakhtin, it may be argued that, although she lives in a carnival world and is able to see the excluding logic working from a privileged standpoint, she still is inside this logic. Our language, our thought, our modes of expression, everything that exists and enables us to express ourselves are built upon this logic. Hence, the fat black woman cannot escape it entirely.

This impossibility to escape the binary logic is not an impossibility of change. The fat black woman is, as above expressed, the representation of continual change – an ever-growing and evolving change. In fact, it is a change towards an open future of possibilities that are, if not displayed by the fat black woman, instigated by her. She inspires a future which is open to difference and diversity. These are her words of order. The fat black woman, in her utmost form, is a symbol of inspiration and disturbance. She disturbs our common knowledge and inspires us to love. She is pulling us all to accompany her in this journey towards a self-loving body in communion with all that this body stands for.

Sarah Lawson Welsh claims that “Nichol’s work is one of constant border crossings in which a continuum of cultures, times, psychic and territorial spaces are creatively explored” (“Grace Nichols”, 12). Likewise, the theoretical approach to her *oeuvre* needs to be interdisciplinary. Although in this thesis I have managed to analyze *The Fat Black Woman’s Poems* through different theoretical contexts (postcolonialism, carnival theory, feminist criticism), there is more to be expanded in possible studies, thanks to the complexity and richness of the author’s writing.

Based on the considerations in this thesis, there are some aspects of *The Fat Black Woman's Poems* that could be further developed in other studies. For instance, the Caribbean context and the representation of its roots in the poems can be further explored in a study whose focus is specific for such purposes. Although I have analyzed the use of nation language and the presence of many cultural marks, these aspects have remained latent, as they were not the focus of this thesis.

The relation of literature with food, for example, a growing area of studies, presents a rich field of research in relation to Nichols's oeuvre. So does the relation with nature. Despite the ecocritical approach present in the first chapter, the ecocritical field has many other more specific lines of thought. With this respect, in this thesis I only meant to establish a connection between the domination of excluded groups and the domination of nature. Terry Gifford, for example, is a name of the ecocritical area who has already pointed to the approximation of Nichols's works with ecocritical studies in his chapter "Many Green Voices." Another possibility to further develop this theme with *The Fat Black Woman's Poems* is the association of gender violence with vegetarianism, a discussion whose exponent is the North-American writer Carol J. Adams. A final point I would like to highlight is the connection of the body with affection. The fat black woman's positioning and her actions have a strong appeal to other forms of perceptions.

Other aspects, different from the ones mentioned above, are not dealt with in this thesis and could be further developed. Undoubtedly, a theoretical framework cannot approach all the critical areas that could be related to a certain literary work. My aim in pointing these final aspects is not to list all the possibilities to analyze *The Fat Black Woman's Poems*. On the contrary, I only would like to highlight some points that are related to my topics of discussion, but could not be developed because of the dimension of this research.

The investigation of the economic system of capitalism and its connection with colonization and the current forms of social control is one of such topics. Capitalism is at the basis of these processes – from the colonial ambition to conquer new lands and wealth to the contemporary industry of beauty and the racial and class oppressions. Many black feminists and material feminists discuss the connection of the social and political systems with society's economic organization.

Another aspect which has not been addressed herein is the presence of myths and legends in the poems. Many references to Amerindian, African, and even European mythology can be found in Nichols's work. These connections constitute another approach through which the past and present are constantly rewritten and reconfigured.

These are only a few of the uncountable possibilities for analyzing *The Fat Black Woman's Poems*. The reason for this may be mainly because the fat black woman depicted in the poems does not attempt to reach a conclusion. Neither do I in these final considerations. The fat black woman is an endless construction and she does not attempt to control the changes entailed in such constructions. In fact, she embraces changes and the possibilities they bring. Accordingly, the considerations about the balance with nature, about self-love as the closure, and overcoming of a journey that begins in the violence of colonization, about home, identity, and the many categories discussed here are not final. In effect, they elicit more questions and inquiries. I do not attempt to claim that the analyses presented here are the ultimate meanings to be attributed to the fat black woman. She is more than we can encompass, and because of that, there is much to be explored in further critical analyses of Nichols's representation of the fat black woman. The purpose of this thesis is to present a feminist and postcolonial approach of *The Fat Black Woman's Poems*, having as theoretical background carnival theory by Mikhail Bakhtin and by Mary Russo. I have demonstrated how the fat black woman presents a postcolonial revision of the world through the creation of

her own carnivalesque world. This revision is carried out through the revision of the body and its comprehension. Therefore, I argue that *The Fat Black Woman's Poems* is a route to a better world. The poems depict a new form and possibility of existence as well as the necessary means to achieve it. The fat black woman, then, is a route to be followed.

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