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**Representations of Black Omen in Grace  
Nichols's Poetry:  
From Otherness to Empowerment**

Ana Bringas López

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## **Representations of Black Omen in Grace Nichols's Poetry: From Otherness to Empowerment**

ANA BRINGAS LÓPEZ  
University of Vigo  
abringas@uvigo.es

### **Abstract**

From the onset of colonialism, Western scientific and philosophical discourses produced constructions of blackness aimed at depriving black people from their subjectivity as well as at providing a moral justification for their enslavement and exploitation. These constructs were mainly based on the sexualisation of black women, whose bodies and sexuality were commodified to serve both the sexual and economic demands of white slave owners. After the abolition of slavery, the myths about black womanhood were perpetuated and are currently manifested through stereotyped representations that continue to situate black women in the field of an excessive sexuality. These images are central to the maintenance of a politics of domination, as

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they provide an ideological legitimisation of race, class and gender oppression. For this reason, black feminists have emphasised the need to find new representations that will provide black women with positive models of identification. This article analyses three poetry collections by Afro-Caribbean poet Grace Nichols, in order to explore the diverse strategies through which she represents black women as empowered subjects of their own her stories. Nichols's revaluation of black womanhood is mainly attained through the appropriation of black women's bodies and sexuality as a source of power and pleasure in the context of Afro-Caribbean culture.

For Black women as well as Black men, it is axiomatic that if we do not define ourselves for ourselves, we will be defined by others —for their use and to our detriment. (Lorde, 1984: 45)

**T**he issues of representation and self-definition are central to the preoccupations of black feminist theory. Black feminists have recurrently emphasised the need for black women to find new representations of themselves which can write back to the colonial legacy of oppression. If, as Kate Millet states in her influential *Sexual Politics*, under patriarchy (white) women could not develop the symbols with which they are described, black women find themselves doubly determined by the confluence of the colonial and patriarchal discourses, which developed a complex system of myths

and symbols at the service of the ideology of imperialist capitalism. These myths, which were forged from the first contacts of European nations with African peoples, have impacted Western ideology to such an extent that they continue to exert considerable influence both upon the representation of black women in contemporary cultural discourse and upon black women's own self-perception. In this context, black women's writing has undertaken the urgent task of creating new positive myths and images of black womanhood.

Grace 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 marginalising black women. The poem "Holding my beads", from Nichols's first poetry collection *i is a long memoried woman* (1983), constitutes an apt illustration of the spirit that underlies the whole poetic production of this Afro-Caribbean poet. The poem is a declaration of principles: the black woman, uprooted from her African homeland and enslaved in an alien land, demands her right to rule her own destiny and asserts her identity and her freedom drawing on her African cultural heritage, which is expressed through the image of the beads that African women use to decorate their bodies: "It isn't privi-



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lege or pity / that I seek / It isn't reverence or safety / quick happiness or purity / but / the power to be what I am/a woman / charting my own futures/a woman / holding my beads in my hand" (1983: 86). In this way, Nichols affirms black women's need for personal and collective reconstruction after long centuries of colonial and patriarchal oppression. (note 1)

Before analysing Nichols's poetry it is necessary to provide a brief contextualising account of the myths and stereotypes about black womanhood that her poems write back to. Therefore, the first part of this article will go through Western stereotyped constructions of black womanhood, analysing their genesis within the context of the slave system and their perpetuation in contemporary societies. The second section will offer a reading of the first three poetry collections by Grace Nichols as an example of subversive and political rewriting aiming at the reconstruction of black womanhood against traditional oppressive discourses.

## **1. Commodified otherness: Representations of black women in colonial patriarchal discourse**

European scientific and philosophical discourses constructed an image of Africa as Europe's Other by virtue of the dichotomies nature/culture, primitivism/progress, savagery/ civilisation, in which Africa was associated with the first element of

each pair of opposites. This ‘otherisation’ aimed to provide Europeans with a moral justification of the exploitation and enslavement of the colonised peoples, since ‘thingification’ —to use Césaire’s term in *Discourse on Colonialism*— is a pre-requisite for domination: by defining them as less human, animalistic or more ‘natural’, black people were deprived of their subjectivity and turned into objects without the capacity or the right to name and define themselves. As bell hooks states, “[a]s subjects, people have the right to define their own reality, establish their own identities, name their history. As objects, one’s reality is defined by others, one’s identity created by others, one’s history named only in ways that define one’s relationship to those who are subject” (1989: 42).

The objectification and otherisation of African peoples was fundamentally based on socio-cultural and phenotypical differences. However, racial difference soon acquired sexual overtones, as skin colour was associated with a non-Christian religion and with a libidinous sexuality. Even before the first slaves arrived in Europe, the perception of black people as sexually degenerate was firmly established amongst Europeans. (note 2)

Several aspects should be considered about the hypersexualised image of African slaves that was forged from the 16th

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century onwards. Firstly, their skin colour was negatively seen as a representation of evil and sin: in Euro-Christian discourse 'white' symbolises purity, virtue, beauty, good and virginity; therefore, by constructing 'black' as the antithesis to 'white', 'black' became charged with negative connotations in relation to ugliness, sin, dirtiness and evil. Secondly, African men and women were considered to be savage beasts, in particular beings similar to apes; moreover, black women were thought to have sexual intercourse with apes, their offspring being creatures of human shape and animal intelligence (Marshall, 1996: 8). Finally, this link with animals gave rise to the stereotype of the great sexual power of African people, and this sexual excess was interpreted as a manifestation of inferiority and social primitivism. For Marshall, this is important in the sense that Europeans used Africans as social mirrors, projecting upon them characteristics they discovered in themselves. This idea was already put forward by Fanon when he developed the concept of 'negrophobia' as the fear to the biological and animalistic represented by the black person: "The civilized white man retains an irrational longing for unusual eras of sexual license, of orgiastic scenes, of unpunished rapes, of unrepressed incest. In one way these fantasies respond to Freud's life instinct. Projecting his own desires onto the Ne-

gro, the white man behaves ‘as if’ the Negro really had them” (Fanon, 1967: 165).

In a similar line, Gilman points out that the Western identification of the black ‘race’ with a pathological sexuality allows white European men to confront their anxieties about their control over the world, as the lack of sexual control which is associated with decadence and social disorder is projected onto blacks: “the ‘white man’s burden’, his sexuality and its control, is displaced into the need to control the sexuality of the Other, the Other as sexualized female” (1985: 107). As Gilman’s words imply, the identification between blackness and sexuality is especially relevant in the case of black women. It should be pointed out that the construction of black men’s sexuality as an anomaly was only an extension of black women’s construction as hypersexual, since, it was thought, black men would have to be potent to satisfy black women’s lustful nature.

In the late 18th century, pseudoscientific theories proclaimed the abnormality and pathology of black women’s sexual organs. These thus became the site of the difference and inferiority of the whole black ‘race’ as well as the physical representation of their hypersexual condition. Female genitalia were defined as complete but defective, diseased but attrac-

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tive and poisonous but potent. In this way, they came to represent sexual pathology, corruption and death, provoking in the European population contradictory feelings of fear and fascination. A paradigmatic case is that of Saartje Baartmann, a black South African woman who, in the early 19th century, was taken to England and, caged and half-naked, was exhibited all over Europe in public spectacles and fairs under the name of 'the Hottentot Venus' until her death in 1816. Baartmann also attracted the attention of scientists like Cuvier, who, after her death, dissected her body and preserved her sexual organs, supposedly disproportionate in relation to the excessive visibility of the clitoris. The dissection report suggests that the size and shape of Baartmann's buttocks could be due to a hereditary disease or a contagion, and it compares other aspects of her anatomy with that of an orang-utan. [\(note 3\)](#)

The construction of black women's bodies and sexuality as both pathological and fascinating to the white man served the purpose of rationalising and justifying the rapes and other sexual abuses that white men perpetrated against black women during slavery, since it allowed white men to exonerate themselves by attributing the responsibility to black women's sexual aggressiveness. In her analysis of Caribbean slave society, Barbara Bush explains the multiple and interlocking associa-

tions between sexuality, femaleness, blackness and evil in Christian discourse, which propitiated the identification of the black woman with the pleasures of a forbidden sexuality and the establishment of her role as concubine, sexual temptress or procuress (1990: 17). In relation to this, bell hooks considers that black women's bodies during slavery constitute a discursive terrain in which the racist and patriarchal discourses eloquently converge to enforce the white man's domination over the other human groups in slave society: through the unpunished rape of black women, the white slaveowner asserted his racial domination over black people, in particular over the black man; at the same time, this sexual exploitation also served as an instrument for white women's humiliation and degradation. In this way, the white man affirmed his phallocentric domination within the Big House itself (hooks, 1990: 59).

However, the economic dimension of the slave woman's sexual degradation must not be overlooked, as the black woman's construction as libidinous also satisfied the slaveowner's economic demands. Slavery was, above all, a labour system, under which enslaved black women were valuable commodities. As well as controlling their productive potential through the commodification of their bodies as units of capital, the

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slaveowner made efforts to control their sexuality and fertility, as this meant direct profit to be derived from the natural increase of slave workforce that this fertility produced (Collins, 2000: 51). The control of slave women's sexuality and fertility became more important after the abolition of the slave trade, when the renewal and increase of the slave population came to depend entirely on natural reproduction. However, this did not mean in any way that the Victorian exaltation of white motherhood was extended to black women; on the contrary, slave women were considered to be mere 'reproducers', animals whose monetary value could be calculated precisely (Davis, 1981: 7), and this dichotomy persists in contemporary views of white and black motherhood (Zack, 1997: 151).

Therefore, the black woman's body was useful to the extent that it satisfied the production and reproduction demands of the system, as well as the sexual desires of those who controlled it. In order to maintain this situation, it was also necessary to deploy violence with the purpose of terrorising the slaves and demonstrating the incontestable power of slaveowners. As a consequence of this sustained violence, black women suffered a process of fragmentation and destabilisation: they ceased to be subjects and instead became what Foucault de-

nominates 'docile bodies', bodies which were easier to submit to work discipline.

The end of the slave system did not bring about a revaluation of the myths about black women's bodies and sexuality. On the contrary, these myths have been perpetuated and are currently manifested through stereotyped and reductionist representations that continue to situate black women in the field of an animalistic and uncontrolled sexuality. bell hooks observes that "the predominant image [of black women] is that of the 'fallen' woman, the whore, the slut, the prostitute" (hooks, 1981: 52). Although her analysis refers specifically to U.S. society, her considerations are equally applicable to other Western societies, where the presence of black people has increased dramatically in the last decades through the arrival of immigrants from diverse postcolonial countries. In this context, black women's —and black men's— conceptualisation through racist sexual images must be linked with issues of social control over an otherised collective which is perceived as a potential threat to white hegemony (Daniels, 1997: 91). The predominance of these negative images and, significantly, their internalisation by many black women themselves, has important repercussions in the socio-economic status of this collective and limits their opportunities for personal develop-



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ment and access to areas such as education, employment, health or housing (Marshall, 1996). Furthermore, black women continue to be frequent victims of rape and other forms of sexual aggression by white men, in a sinister perpetuation of the practices of slavery.

The stereotypes about black womanhood are, therefore, essential to the ideological justification of 'race', class and gender oppression. Stereotyping is a key strategy in the dichotomous system of thought which categorises people according to their differences and turns the Other into an object that can be manipulated and controlled: "Otherness exists to subjugate its objects and assign them to their 'natural' place at the behest of those who thereby reconstitute themselves as subjects" (Pickering, 2001: 71). Stereotypes are created and manipulated by the hegemonic groups exercising power and they become "controlling images" (Collins, 2000: 69) which make racism, sexism and poverty appear as natural, normal or inevitable, and are then central to the maintenance of a politics of domination.

The controlling images about black womanhood are omnipresent in contemporary Western cultural discourses and have contributed very effectively to the definition of black women's low social status (Marshall, 1996: 18), as they provide an

ideological legitimisation of racial discrimination, economic exploitation and gender subordination. More seriously, since those images are so firmly settled in the collective imaginary, they are extremely difficult to elude and therefore they have a key role in black women's definition of their own subjectivity (Mama, 1995). Drawing on Du Bois's concept of 'double consciousness', Pickering argues that "[t]he indelible effect of this recognition of yourself as Other creates a twoness of vision that allows you to see yourself only through the eyes of others" (2001: 77). This has important consequences for black women's self-perception and self-definition. Hence the urgent task to find out the meaning of the stereotyped images about black people and to question their 'natural' status in order to expose their mythological condition in the Barthesian sense, that is, their status of ideological constructs aimed at maintaining Western hegemony. As bell hooks claims (1992: 76), in order for black women to make new and different representations of themselves, they must be willing to transgress traditional boundaries without shying away from the critical project of openly interrogating and challenging dominant representations. This is indeed crucial to a politics of empowerment of black women.

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## 2. From otherness to empowerment: new female subjectivities in Grace Nichols's poetry

As a discursive practice that can both transmit and create ideology, literature has proved to be fertile ground for this critical project. In their works, black women writers have frequently tackled this issue with the aim of both challenging dominant representations and offering resisting and restoring visions, positive models of identification and viable identity alternatives. Grace Nichols has repeatedly expressed her interest in the poetic exploration of the psychological effects that European myths have had and continue to have on black people, and she claims that black women “have to come up with new myths and other images that please us” (Nichols, 1990: 287). Her poems thus fall into the genre that Chancy terms ‘poelitics’, which she defines as “a dynamic fusion of poetics and women-centered politics” (Chancy, 1997: xxi).

In this section I will analyse how Grace Nichols reconstructs black female subjectivity in her poetic work, specifically in her first three collections, which focus on female figures. [\(note 4\)](#) The first, *i is a long memoried woman*, published in 1983, was awarded the prestigious *Commonwealth Poetry Prize* and soon became a classic in the postcolonial literary canon. Later, Nichols published *The Fat Black Woman's Poems* (1984)

and *Lazy Thoughts of a Lazy Woman* (1989). While the first volume focuses on an African slave woman in a Caribbean plantation, the other two are located in the present and centre around a black woman of our time. In this way, Nichols maps out an ambitious poetic project, which spans both the genesis of the myths and their ramifications in the present historical moment.

### **2.1. Writing the herstory of slavery: *i is a long memoried woman***

Nichols's poetic exploration of slavery in *i is a long memoried woman* is a pioneer work in literature, and it parallels the current revision of this historical period in several research fields. Contemporary feminist historians and anthropologists have seen the need to recover a herstory that remained untold due to the androcentric bias of official historiography, for which gender did not constitute a category of historical analysis. Thus, male slaves were traditionally considered the real victims of slavery, since submission to the white man provoked the black man's emasculation, that is, the loss of his patriarchal authority over black women. Furthermore, slave women were conceptualised according to the reductionist stereotypes discussed above and they were denied any relevant participation both in the economic organisation of slave society and in

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the movements of resistance against the system. Studies like Barbara Bush's *Slave Women in Caribbean Society: 1650-1838* (1990) have demonstrated that women had a central role in both fields, as well as in the preservation of African family organisation and cultural and religious traditions.

This reappraisal of the role of slave women is anticipated in Grace Nichols's first poetry collection. The main aim of this poetic sequence is to reconstruct the African woman's sense of self, severely damaged by slavery, by means of two closely related strategies: on the one hand, through the recuperation of cultural connections with Africa, and, on the other hand, through the reappropriation of the female body as a source of power for women. The centrality of the body is already suggested in the formal characteristics of the sequence, specifically in its cyclical arrangement—which echoes the female cycle of menstruation—and in its oral nature: *i is a long memoried woman* belongs to an oral tradition of performance poetry which requires both movement and gesture to create meaning; the rhythm of the poem, the pauses and breaks are created “not by punctuation but by the need to draw breath, by how the body moves as it recites” (Griffin, 1993: 26).

The herstory Nichols recreates is not that of one particular slave woman. The lower-case ‘i’ of the title indicates a move-

ment beyond an individual subjectivity and, instead, attempts to comprise the collective herstory of African women's experience of exploitation and dispossession in the Caribbean plantation system. There is a multiplicity of voices to be heard in the poems, sometimes directly, sometimes mediated through the voice of a third-person storyteller. All of those voices together weave the full pattern of the different experiences of slavery, much in the same way as slave narratives functioned as collective tales rather than merely individual autobiographies. Significantly, the female bonding is a recurrent reference in the work, and it is established not only with the women of the African past—in poems like "Web of kin" or "Sacred flame"—but also with the women that share the new land, even transcending racial and cultural boundaries to forge a sense of sisterhood with the Amerindian women as fellow sufferers of the European exploitation: "your tongue is silent / your eyes speak of an / ancient weariness / I too have known" (62).

The sequence is divided into five sections framed between an epigraph and an epilogue. Each section explores a different aspect of slavery and a different stage in the slave woman's life; the specificity of each of these stages is suggested by the titles of both the sections and the poems they contain. The

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account is more or less chronological, moving from the moment of capture in Africa to the final emancipation after slave revolt, that is, from cultural uprooting to the (re)creation of a new individual and collective identity in the Caribbean.

The first two sections, “The Beginning” and “The Vicissitudes”, evoke the horrors of the Middle Passage and the first stages of the woman’s life in the Caribbean, which is from the start constructed as “another land” (Nichols, 1983: 6), whose paradisiacal exuberance hides the fact that the islands’ fertility is grounded on the reality of a brutal economic system (“islands / fertile / with brutality”, 31). A succession of scenes from plantation life show the slave woman working in the sugarcane fields—in the poem “Days that fell”—, receiving the newly arrived Africans—in “Each time they came”—, or being forced to witness the exemplary torture of a rebel woman who has killed her baby in order to free it from bonding, a frequent practice carried out as an extreme resistance strategy. This poem, “Ala”, one of the most moving in the collection, illustrates how the slave woman’s body is the site of oppression and suffers the devastating horrors of slavery. However, the body is also the site of resistance: the slave women use their bodies and their voices to maintain their dignity and to offer mutual support, invoking in their songs peace and rest for the

dead woman: “but while the ants feed / and the sun blind her with / his fury / we the women sing and weep / as we work / O Ala / Uzo is due to join you / to return to the pocket / of your womb” (24).

In other poems, the body masks the woman’s rage and hatred under a falsely contented smile and an apparent servility which allows her to act with impunity against the planter: “Know that I smile / know that I bend / only the better / to rise and strike / again” (“Skin Teeth”, 50). In the poem “Love act”, the title is an ironic euphemism for the degradation derived from forced sex with the planter. At the same time, however, this situation allows the slave to enter the Big House as the white planter’s mistress and then use the power of her African magic against the white family: “But time pass/es / Her sorcery cut them / like a whip / She hide her triumph / and slowly stir the hate / of poison in” (48-49). This and other poems deconstruct one of the most pernicious myths about slaves, that of their passive acceptance of their fate, showing instead their diverse resistance strategies, which, as in “Ala”, could include such painful acts as the sacrifice of their own offspring.

Cultural memories of Africa are also a source of spiritual healing and dignity. When the fourth section (“The Bloodling”) opens, the black woman, pregnant with the white man’s child



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and wishing “to retch / herself / empty” (52), calls in despair on the Ashanti goddess Yemanji for comfort and redemption: “for I’m tainted with guilt and / exile / I’m burden with child and maim / Heal me with the power of your blackness / Mother” (53). Yemanji utters her blessings to the rhythm of the drum and invokes the power of the natural elements and of motherhood, thus restoring the black woman’s African female identity and enabling her to accept her “bastard fruit” (56) once it is cleansed from the guilt of its conception. Then she can baptise her child in her own name and in her own blackness appropriating and subverting the symbolism of Christian baptismal liturgy: “For with my blood / I’ve cleansed you / and with my tears / I’ve pooled the river Niger / now my sweet one it is for you to swim” (57). The slave woman thus re-appropriates her own body, liberating it from the taint of guilt and shame produced by her forced contact with the white man. This spiritual cleansing was in some way announced in the determined rejection of self-victimisation that she manifested in an earlier poem, where the African symbol of the waterpot is used by the poet to vindicate the black woman’s dignity against the overseer’s sneering: “she tried hard to walk / like a woman / she tried very hard / pulling herself erect / with every three or four / steps / pulling herself together / holding herself like royal cane / ... / O but look / there’s a waterpot growing / from her

head” (13-14). The woman here uses her body to subvert the structures that oppress her: the image of the cane, used in a later poem (“Sugar cane”) as a metaphor of masculinity and the parasitism of the slavemaster, is here ironically appropriated as a symbol of the black woman’s dignity, as she walks with her body erect, refusing to bend to fatigue and humiliation.

The last section, “The Return”, opens with the invocation of an important Caribbean female legend, Nanny of the Maroons, a powerful symbol of resistance and freedom. She is evoked as a “Maroon woman / of courage” (72), but also as an “Ashanti Priestess / and giver of charms” (72), that is, in her two dimensions as a war leader and spiritual nurturer. The poetic voice leads us, through guerrilla and African magic, to the emancipation of Haiti, the first of the Caribbean nations to become free from colonialism and slavery, and the model for many later revolutions. In this hopeful context, the last poem, “Holding my beads”, proclaims the woman’s victory over uprooting and cultural loss. After emancipation, this poem, as I said at the beginning, represents a declaration of principles in which the woman affirms her sovereignty over her own self, her body and her fate: “It isn’t privilege or pity / that I seek / ... / but / the power to be what I am/a woman / charting my own

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futures/ a woman / holding my beads in my hand” (86). The beads, scattered at first and gathered at the end, then “form both a sequence (the move from Africa to the Caribbean) and a circle (from freedom to freedom)” (Griffin, 1993: 31), thus completing the cycle. The reference to “my own futures” and “all my lives” suggests that there is a multiplicity of voices operating here: the slave woman speaks for other women as well as for herself.

The famous epilogue to the sequence serves to close that circle. Furthermore, the black woman's newly acquired identity is closely related to her body and her power of speech (Griffin, 1993: 26): “I have crossed an ocean / I have lost my tongue / from the root of the old / one / a new one has sprung” (Nichols, 1983: 87).

As Bakare-Yusuf argues, “if ... the infliction of violence on the body is also an assault on language, similarly the insatiable and perpetual infliction of raw violence on the slaves is consolidated by the erasure of the human voice” (1999: 317). In fact, all verbal forms of communication were limited during slavery, African languages were forbidden and their use was punished with great violence, leaving the coloniser's language as the only linguistic form of expression. Thus, Nichols's epilogue sums up both the loss and the recovery. It celebrates

the potential of cultural regeneration to be found even in the midst of great hardship and pain: the Creole language, fused with English throughout the cycle as a reflection of West Indian experience, is ultimately reclaimed as an act of spiritual survival. Simultaneously, the epilogue also establishes the connection between the African female slave brought over to the West Indies and the contemporary Caribbean woman who has had to redefine herself in positive terms: in Nichols's own words, "I can't subscribe to the 'victim-mentality' ... which seems so like wallowing in 'Look what they've done to us'. It is true that black women have carried much more than their share of hardships along the way. But I reject the stereotype of the 'long-suffering black woman' who is so strong that she can carry whatever is heaped upon her. There is a danger of reducing the black woman's condition to that of 'sufferer,' whether at the hands of white society or at the hands of black men" (Nichols, 1990: 284). This personal and psychological journey from victimisation to consciousness raising is a recurrent topic in contemporary black women's literature (McDowell, 1995).

Amina Mama argues that the use of African references for the renewal of black womanhood is very frequent in black women's poetry and shows "a willingness to reach across the seas

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and centuries in their creative effort to forge positive identifications: new subjectivities which invoke subaltern images of female heroism, a heroism which can be used to combat and shake off the oppressive legacies of centuries" (Mama, 1995: 154). The project of *i is a long memoried woman* is, therefore, one of hopeful restoration and re/membering of black Caribbean herstories and identities, and it is carried out through memory as the link between the Caribbean and its African tradition, as is suggested both in the collection title and in the epigraph that opens the cycle.

### **2.2. *The body as pleasure: The Fat Black Woman's Poems and Lazy Thoughts of a Lazy Woman***

In her next two collections (*The Fat Black Woman's Poems*, 1984, and *Lazy Thoughts of a Lazy Woman*, 1989), Nichols leaves the historical past—although the past continues to be an unavoidable subtext—and moves on to the present time in order to introduce a black Caribbean immigrant in contemporary Britain, where the poet has lived since 1977. In these two collections, the poems acquire a playful tone, which may sometimes appear trivial but which is nonetheless equally political and combative. This 'comic vision' is a very common strategy in West Indian women's writing and, as O'Callaghan points out, it "entails subversion, which defies or challenges

the codes of rational, hierarchical ‘anticomic’ society in order to effect a transformation” (1993: 85). Nichols here uses humour as the main deconstructive strategy and irony turns out to be an efficient tool for subverting and exposing the myths that have oppressed black women. Furthermore, the woman’s body acquires even more relevance, as the poems focus on a black immigrant woman within a context of white supremacy:

As ‘Blackness’ operates as a marker of racial and/or color identification in a context of political consciousness and affiliation, representations of the black female body in these [diasporic Afro-Caribbean women writers’] works function as markers of the ways in which women of the African diaspora reconcile themselves to their exile by reclaiming their bodies and the images of those bodies which circulate in the societies which demonize what they have been made to stand for—in two words: perverse sexuality (Chancy, 1997: 23).

Thus, Nichols’s representations of the black female body constitute a challenge to black women’s objectification and denigration in the Western (British) society in which she is exiled.

*The Fat Black Woman’s Poems* effectively dismantles several of the stereotypes or controlling images about black women. The protagonist of the collection, who occasionally speaks in the first person, has no name, so the third-person poetic voice refers to her as ‘the fat black woman’. This expression

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alludes to two important deviations from the normative values conforming the received female body image in contemporary Western culture, but here it acquires the quality of a title, in its double appropriation of the terms 'fat' and 'black', which are freed from their pejorative connotations.

The first poem, titled "Beauty", highlights the woman's physical splendour by placing her in the context of her original tropical landscape. Images about the Caribbean vegetation and seascape appear frequently, drawn from the Afro-Caribbean heritage that the woman constantly vindicates as part of her identity in a context of exile: "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" (1984: 7).

The woman humorously celebrates the difference of her blackness and her fatness with respect to the standards of female beauty. She refuses to submit to the tyranny of fashion and the slimming industry, and, instead, she redefines the concept of beauty in her own terms, with laudatory images as surprising and unconventional as "heavy as a whale" ("The Assertion", 8). In "Invitation" she proudly exhibits her fatness and praises the magnificence and sensuality of her body through

erotic images that subvert the stereotype of fat women as lacking sexual appeal, as undesirable and even non-desiring: “My breasts are huge exciting / amnions of watermelon / your hands can’t cup / my thighs are twin seals / fat slick pups / ... / Come up and see me sometime” (13). In her essay “Uses of the Erotic: The Erotic as Power” (1984), Audre Lorde argues that eroticism is a source of power for women because it is vital force and creative energy and because it leads us to resist against oppression and dehumanisation. The protagonist of these poems is fully in control of her own eroticism and uses that power to reclaim her body and her herstory as subject.

The best known and most celebrated poem in *The Fat Black Woman’s Poems* is probably “Thoughts drifting through the fat black woman’s head while having a full bubble bath”. Here the fat black woman speaks in the first person and goes through the official discourses of science, history, religion and consumer capitalism, mocking them through the appropriation of a scientific term that was traditionally used to define and victimise people like her. The poem opens and closes with the following refrain: “Steatopygous sky / Steatopygous sea / Steatopygous waves / Steatopygous me” (Nichols, 1984: 15). As in “Beauty”, the refrain praises the fairness of the woman’s opulent and ‘excessive’ body, comparing it with the Caribbean



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landscape and seascape, only the tone here is comic. Humour derives from a noun-adjective combination which has no literal sense and which introduces a sharp contrast between two opposing registers: on the one hand, the high language of science, through the polysyllabic adjective 'steatopygous', and, on the other hand, the common everyday language, through the monosyllabic nouns 'sky', 'sea', 'waves' and the pronoun 'me', all referring to the reality surrounding the woman and to the woman herself.

There is considerable irony in the choice of the term 'steatopygous' to praise her own beauty and that of her whole 'race', if we bear in mind that this term has a long history of racism and sexism. Defined as a 'racial deformation', the term was used with the aim of animalising African women and categorising them as subhuman and hypersexual. The impossible juxtaposition of this denigrating term to the referents of Caribbean seascape and its wide horizons neutralises its negative load and effects its appropriation for the woman's purpose, which is no other than ridiculing and dismantling those scientific disciplines and cultural discourses that have oppressed her: anthropology, which defined African peoples according to racist criteria; historiography, which excluded Africa from history and relegated it to an anachronistic space (McClintock,

1995: 40); theology, which demonised women and black people, blaming them for all the evils of humankind; and, finally, the slimming industry, which tyrannises women for an economic profit. Notice how all these discourses are annihilated by the woman's body: "O how I long to place my foot / on the head of anthropology / to swing my breasts / in the face of history / to scrub my back / with the dogma of theology / to put my soap / in the slimming industry's / profitsome spoke" (Nichols, 1984: 15).

Nichols's fat black woman refuses to let her body be a 'docile body', which is subjected to external regulations dictating a homogeneous ideal of evanescent and anorexic (and white) femininity. In her classic *Fat is a Feminist Issue*, Orbach argued that "fat is a symbolic rejection of the limitations of women's role, an adaptation that many women use in the burdensome attempt to pursue their individual lives within the proscriptions of their social function" (1988: 36). This is how this idea comes up in the poem "Trap Evasions": "Refusing to be a model / of her own affliction / the fat black woman steers clear / of circles that lead nowhere / evades: / ... / Men who only see / a spring of children / in her thighs / when there are mountains / in her mites" (Nichols, 1984: 14).

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The fat black woman refuses to be a victim and, therefore, rejects all the traps laid by racist and sexist society by means of stereotypes that aim at constricting her into limiting roles. It is her that dictates the norms (“The Fat Black Woman’s Instructions to a Suitor”), and it is her that asks the questions (“Small Questions Asked by the Fat Black Woman”). She has left behind the time of the forced obedience of slavery and domestic servitude: “this fat black woman ain’t no Jemima” (9) (note 5). And in a consumer society that promulgates ‘compulsory slimness’ and considers excess weight as a sign of lack of hygiene and even of a deficient morality, she reminds us, defying and interpellative, that “Fat is a dream / in times of lean” (17). This larger-than-life woman illustrates the Kristevan notion of the female body as unruly, grotesque and resistant to categorisation: she is an agentive subject who insists on her right to define reality in her own terms. As Belén Martín Lucas points out, “one of the most effective strategies against the socio-cultural pressure forcing women to erase our bodies consists of vindicating female bodies which literally go beyond the narrow model created for the idyllic and unreal ‘modern woman’” (2000b: 219, my translation). In this way, texts like *The Fat Black Woman’s Poems* “participate in the feminist strategies of reintroduction of the female body and its categories in the political, showing the close relationship between

the symbolic and the cultural in the constructions of women and the female” (219).

In *Lazy Thoughts of a Lazy Woman*, the body continues to play a central role in the construction of woman as an empowered subject. These ‘lazy thoughts’ open with two apparently inconsequential poems, which then turn out to be not that simple. In “Dust” and “Grease”, the dust and grease invading the poet’s house are perceived as the natural decay of things which ought to be accepted without becoming obsessed with purity and cleanliness. In “Grease” the grease is even described by means of deeply erotic bodily images (caresses, kisses, love play); it is no surprise that the poet admits that “Grease is obviously having an affair with me” (Nichols, 1989: 3). The explanation comes in the third poem, “The Body Reclining”, the one that has a closer relationship with the generic title of the collection. In this poem, Nichols highlights the pleasure that can be derived from the body: “I sing the body reclining / I sing the throwing back of self / I sing the cushioned head / The fallen arm / The lolling breast / I sing the body reclining / As an indolent continent” (4).

Under the seeming triviality of these poems there lies an enormous subversive potential, since they are directly attacking the appropriation of black women’s productive force by

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capitalist imperialism from slavery onwards —notice the ironic reference to the “indolent continent”—, by means of controlling images linking black women to work: slaves, domestic servants, exploited employees. In another part of “The Body Reclining”, moreover, the poet seems to ridicule the maxim ‘Cleanliness is next to godliness’, one of the moral pillars of Empire: “Those who scrub and scrub / incessantly / corrupt the body / Those who dust and dust / incessantly / also corrupt the body” (4).

On the other hand, “My Black Triangle” is a love song for the black woman’s sexuality, which, though perfectly aware of the historical discourses that have shaped it, rejects the constrictions imposed by patriarchal imperialism and flows beyond history and its legacy of oppression: “my black triangle / has spread beyond his story / beyond the dry fears of parch-riarchy” (25). This emphasis on female sexuality has important political implications, as it serves to break the “politics of silence” (Hammonds, 1997) which has often characterised black feminist responses to the damaging representations of black women’s bodies and sexuality in (neo)colonial discourse. This politics was conceived by early black feminists as a strategy of resistance against the pathologising images of black female sexuality, and, more recently, Hammonds argues, it should be

seen as an effect of black women's status in the academy and other institutions engaged in the commodification of Otherness. The most problematic aspect of this politics of silence is that "in choosing silence, black women have also lost the ability to articulate any conception of their sexuality" (Hammonds, 1997: 175). Black women poets like Nichols, who are not bound by academic and institutional constrictions, may thus be in a better position to give visibility to black women's sexuality as an answer to the legacy of repression and silence.

In some poems, Nichols's description of the female body as source of power acquires certain essentialist overtones, as in "Ode to my Bleed", where the poet describes menstruation in deeply lyrical terms which would most probably be rejected by many women. However, this essentialism can be interpreted strategically as an attempt to subvert and undo the symbolic load of female bodily fluids —specifically menstruation— in relation to pollution and disorder, as used by patriarchy to reinforce men's power over women. On other occasions, the female body and sexuality is revealed as the force that boosts poetic creation. "On Poems and Crotches" is an irreverent poem which defies conventional notions about poetry and comes out as an example of writing with the body, the subversive and liberating *écriture féminine*: "For poems are

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born / in the bubbling soul of the crotch. / Poems rise to marry  
good old Consciousness. / Poems hug Visionary-Third-Eye.  
/ Kiss Intellect. / Before hurrying on down / to burst their way  
through the crotch” (Nichols, 1989: 16). Insofar as the female  
body is seen as a direct source of female writing, it seems  
possible to develop an alter/native discourse that will enable  
women to re-write history into herstory and to re-create the  
world: “Women who love their crotches / will rise / higher and  
higher / ... / Will create out of the vast silence” (16).

This poem —and, in general, the whole collection— defies  
limiting conceptions of poetry that attempt to impose a prede-  
termined poetic agenda on black women, in relation to their  
experience of suffering and oppression. On the contrary, Ni-  
chols embraces a constructive poetry that writes women no  
longer as objects but as powerful subjects of their self-defini-  
tion. One of the last poems in the collection deals with this  
issue explicitly: “Of Course When They Ask for Poems About  
the ‘Realities’ of Black Women”. Here Nichols expresses her  
refusal to write poems which perpetuate the stereotype of the  
black woman as victim, insisting on the multiplicity of experi-  
ences and identities that constitute black womanhood, which  
is impossible to contain in any single poem: “I say I can write /  
no poem big enough / to hold the essence / of a black woman”

(52). The poem suggests that, even though it may have been politically useful in the past to affirm a black female identity—Spivak’s notion of strategic essentialism (Landry and Maclean, 1996: 214)—, now it has become urgent to deconstruct the notion of a ‘black female subject’, in order to liberate the diversity within black experience and, simultaneously, to defy the unidimensional representations sustaining and enforcing white supremacy (hooks, 1990: 28). The final lines of this poem constitute a fine synthesis of this Caribbean writer’s poetics and politics—her ‘poelitics’—, so I will let them conclude this section: “Maybe this poem is to say, / that I like to see / we black women / full-of-we-selves walking / Crushing out / with each dancing step / the twisted self-negating / history / we’ve inherited / Crushing out / with each dancing step” (54).

### 3. Conclusion

As Audre Lorde points out, poetry is not a luxury for women but a vital need of our existence: through poetry we can name the unnameable so that it can first be thought and then translated into tangible action (Lorde, 1984: 37). Grace Nichols’s ‘poelitics’ is no doubt a great step towards the naming of what is probably the most unnameable and invisible: black women’s bodies and sexuality. Insofar as these have been the source of black women’s exploitation and commodifica-



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tion in hegemonic discourse, reclaiming body and sexuality should be the starting point for a more ambitious reconstruction of black female subjectivity. Thus, Nichols's poems are an important contribution to feminist reflection, to the writing of an alter/native herstory and to the joyful appropriation of the body so that this can cease to be a docile, exploited and suffering body and instead become a source of empowerment and agency.

Nichols's poetic project in the three collections analysed here is shared by other Afro-Caribbean authors, both regional and diasporic —Una Marson, Lorna Goodison, Velma Pollard or Jean Binta Breeze, to name but a few—, who have chosen to subvert the prevalent Western imaginary and to deconstruct the myths and metaphors with which black women have traditionally been described and inscribed in a racist and patriarchal history. Their writing opens up spaces for difference and offers black women the possibility of exercising their right to represent themselves with images and symbols of their choice.

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1. It should be noted that this vindication of African cultural heritage, which is central to Nichols's poetry, does not imply an idealisation or an uncritical acceptance of African tradition. On the contrary, Nichols is well aware of its negative traits, such as patriarchal oppression of women or the Africans' participation in the Atlantic slave trade. Both facts are present in the collections analysed here, whether in an elegiac tone—as in "Taint" (*i is a long memoried woman*)—or in a humorous and challenging fashion—as in "The Assertion" (*The Fat Black Woman's Poems*). However, as I argue in this article, within the context of a racist Western society which otherises racial and sexual difference, Nichols chooses to focus on those aspects of tradition which may be empowering for black women and help them counteract a long-standing tradition of denigration through the creation of new, self-defined subjectivities.

2. The sexual question is, in fact, on the basis of many thought structures conforming the colonial period. As Ania Loomba points out, "gender and sexuality are central to the conceptualisation, expression and enactment of colonial relations" (1998: 215). In patriarchal discourse, both woman and land are conceived as territories open to occupation, passive, awaiting, as only through man's action can they attain any worth at all. The colonial landscape was represented as a submissive female body, a virgin territory open to imperial penetration (Martín Lucas, 2000a: 163). Thus, in the Victorian period Africa and the Americas became what McClintock calls "a porno-tropics for European imagination", a space upon which Europe could project its forbidden (male) sexual desires and fears (1995: 22).

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3. A plaster reproduction of Baartmann and some parts of her body, including her genitalia and buttocks, were on exhibit at the Musée de l'Homme in Paris until 1974. On May 3rd 2002 Baartmann's remains were repatriated to South Africa, where they were received with state honours.

4. Grace Nichols has also published several poetry collections and short-story books for children, as well as a novel, *Whole of a Morning Sky* (1986), a childhood narrative set against the background of Guyana's struggle for independence. Her fourth adult poetry collection is *Sunris* (1996), a long poem on carnival.

5. *Aunt Jemima* (or *mammy*) is the faithful and obedient domestic servant who performs the role of surrogate mother for the children of the white family employing her. This image originally served to justify the economic exploitation of domestic slaves and, later, to explain the limitation of black women's work prospects to the field of domestic service.