

Otherness and the Body in Grace Nichols's

I Is a Long Memored Woman

and

The Fat Black Woman's Poems

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Tarkastelen Pro Gradu -tutkielmassani kehon roolia ja merkitystä karibialaislähtöisen brittiläisen kirjailijan, Grace Nicholsin runokokoelmassa. Runojen kautta pohdin kehon symbolista ja konkreettista suhdetta omistajansa yhteisöön sekä kehon suhdetta identiteetin muodostumiseen monikulttuurisessa yhteiskunnassa. Tutkielmani perusajatuksena on kehon poikkeavuudesta kumpuava toiseuden kokemus ja tämän kokemuksen jäljittäminen Nicholsin kokoelmien historiallisesta viitekehyksestä. Työhöni sisältyy ajatus karibialaisista siirtolaista diasporisena yhteisönä, joten myös karibialaiset naiskirjailijat joita se käsittelee, nähdään edustavan diasporista kokemusta. Nicholsin runoudessa tämän kokemuksen symboliksi ja edustajaksi nousee keho. Kehon käsite määritellään laajasti, sen piiriin kuuluvat varsinaisen fyysisen olemuksen lisäksi esimerkiksi kieli, ruokakulttuuri ja ilmiöt joita voidaan toteuttaa kehon kautta, kuten sen estetiikka ja musiikki.

Alkuperäinen hypoteesini oli, että käsittelemäni erilliset teokset voi halutessaan nähdä kokonaisuutena. *I Is a Long Memored Woman* ja *The Fat Black Woman's Poems* kuvaavat mustan naiskehon kokemuksia ja mahdollisuuksia eri aikakausina. Edellinen teos sijoittuu orjuuden aikaan, jälkimmäinen nykyajan Englantiin ja mielestäni niiden runot voi lukea kronologisena kertomuksena mustan naiskehon matkasta syrjivästä historiasta vähemmän syrjivään nykyaikaan. Siinä missä aiemman teoksen naisorjalla ei ole mahdollisuutta hallita ja määrätä omaa kehoaan, myöhemmän teoksen nainen korostaa ja juhlii sitä. Pro Gradussani tulinkin siihen lopputulokseen, että vaikka Nicholsin runot muodostavat mustan naiskehon kehityskertomuksen objektista vapaaksi subjektiksi, ne samalla myös kuvaavat syrjinnän muuttunutta muotoa. Vaikka runoissa toiseus nähdään loppujen lopuksi voimavarana, ne kuitenkin todistavat myös nykypäivän piilorasismin ja syrjinnän olemassaolosta.

Onkin huomattava, että tämän työn kohdalla keho tarkoittaa juuri mustaa naiskehoa, sen diasporaa ja paikkaa maailmassa, joka monien mielestä on ainoastaan näennäisen monimuotoinen, mutta piilomerkityksiltään yhä edelleen hyvin valkoinen. Nicholsin runoissa kehon toiseuden kokemus syntyy oman kehon ristiriitaisesta suhteesta sitä ympäröiviin normeihin, joista työssäni esimerkkinä toimivat pääasiallisesti kauneusihanteet ja niiden historiallinen suhde ihonväriin. Kehoa, toiseutta ja diasporaa pohtiessa tutkielmani teoreettisena pohjana on käytetty lähinnä mustan feminismin ja kulttuurintutkimuksen teoksia ja erinäisiä lähteitä liittyen mustaan (afrokaribialaiseen) naiskirjallisuuteen. Erityisen suurena apuna tutkielmani hahmottelussa toimi Heidi Safia Mirzan toimittama *Black British Feminism : A Reader* (1997).

Asiasanat: toiseus, keho, identiteetti, monikulttuurisuus, Iso-Britannia, Karibia, diaspora

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1. Introduction

We live in a world that – despite its apparent diversity – can still frequently be caught red-handed as being racist and discriminating, whether it is a question of a person’s ethnic background, gender or sexual orientation. I find it interesting and important to notice the phenomenon of otherness or “the other” in society since different forms of discrimination can hide in seemingly trivial matters, such as beauty ideals. Otherness as a phenomenon can be seen everywhere and othering as a process is something we all participate in since it is the basis for the identity formation of a person to define other people in order to specify what one is not. However, othering can reach a point after which it becomes discrimination as well as a tool for separation in society. Therefore, since people move around more and cultures both mix and clash, various different identities and realities need to be noticed and discussed.

The primary research material consists of two collections of poems by Grace Nichols, *I Is a Long Memored Woman* (1983) and *The Fat Black Woman’s Poems* (1984). Nichols was born in 1950, in Georgetown, Guyana. She left the Caribbean in 1977 and moved to England. During her life, she has worked as a teacher, author of fiction and a poet, producing literature for both children as well as for adults. Nichols’s bibliography includes such works as the novel *Whole of a Morning Sky* (1986) and *Lazy Thoughts of a Lazy Woman* (1989), a poetry collection (Stein 2004, 193-194). I will consider how the experience as the other is represented in Nichols’s poetry and how otherness can be manifested through the Black, female body – voluntarily or involuntarily. *I Is a Long Memored Woman* begins with a poem which depicts the Middle Passage and continues with descriptions of the life of a Black female slave on the “new continent”. Its follower, *The Fat Black Woman’s Poems* reveals something of the experience of a Black, immigrant woman living in Britain. It could also be argued that Nichols’s collections depict the experience of a Black female body in two different kinds of diaspora. The notion of the Caribbean peoples as a diasporic community will be considered more thoroughly in chapter 1.1.

I am making the assumption that when read together, there is an underlying connection between Nichols’s two collections and that the nameless, female slave of the previous book can be understood as the collective history of the Afro-Caribbean women of today’s Britain. My belief is that the reader is encouraged to see the connection between the two books since they actually share a couple of poems. The connecting factor between the two collections is the idea of the Black, female body emerging as a subject in charge of her own otherness after

a history of being treated as an object – a slave, a curiosity and the less worthy other of society. As bell hooks writes:

Moving from silence into speech is for the oppressed, the colonized, the exploited, and those who stand and struggle side by side a gesture of defiance that heals, that makes new life and new growth possible. It is that act of speech, of ‘talking back’, that is no mere gesture of empty words, that is the expression of our movement from object to subject – the liberated voice (hooks, 1989, 9).

To hooks, finding a voice functions as an act of resistance and voice becomes the symbol and proof for authentic subjectivity (hooks 1989, 12). Therefore, the interconnecting factor of Nichols’s collections is the experience of finding a voice, the factors behind the movement from object to subject. For Nichols, what becomes the symbol and the concrete form of manifestation for a voice, is the female body – its movement from abuse to freedom and subjectivity.

Earlier on in this introduction I noted that forms of discrimination can hide in seemingly trivial matters such as everyday beauty ideals. This is why I have chosen to include a chapter on beauty in my thesis, as an example of embedded values, but also because it is interesting to remember that the constructions and models of beauty have a long history and that they did not emerge from nowhere. The notion of body means more than just the visual image of a person – which will be clarified later on in this work – as it is also a means of reflecting both cultural as well as historical experiences of the female protagonists of Nichols’s poems. However, despite the complex meaning of the notion of body, there is still a strong, traditional relationship between body image and physical beauty. The visual aspect of a person’s body is seen as an integral part of one’s cultural identity as well as a way of – and to – social control. This applies both in the Caribbean at the time of slavery as well as in today’s Britain, although in a different manner. Likewise, ideals of beauty are often more intrinsically political – as well as othering – than they might seem.

According to Felly Nkweto Simmonds, the academic world in the West is a white world and the reason why it has maintained a problematic relationship with blackness is because the academic discourses of the social “have constructed blackness as the inferior other” and that even when blackness is named, it always contains the problem of relationality to whiteness (Simmonds 1997, 226). This is one of the reasons why I would like to point out that I acknowledge the problem of my own position as a white, Western person and the fact that there has been debates on who has got the right to study Black literature and concepts such as Black feminism. In this kind of context, my only justification for the subject of my thesis is

my interest in both Nichols's poetry as well as in the functioning of a multicultural society and its limits in general. Furthermore, I am also interested in the concept of normality in society and its relationship to minorities and counter-cultures. Lastly, the term Black can be, and often is, considered a controversial term, a generalization coined by the white, Western people and, indeed, othering. Therefore I want to specify that in this thesis it refers to the Caribbean peoples or African-Caribbean communities living in Britain, if not mentioned otherwise and I do not mean to offend anyone and generalize it to mean all the people of the world who are not considered white.

1.1. Caribbean Community in Diaspora

As Ruth Simms Hamilton writes in *Routes of Passage – Rethinking the African Diaspora* (Hamilton 2007, 4):

The concept of diaspora connotes people whose social relationships have been largely inscribed by their geographical displacement at historically significant moments.

In a multicultural society, as in society in general, hierarchies usually remain. Therefore, leaving behind the imposed position of an object and instead taking on the role of a subject, has everything to do with social relationships. I chose the quote above as I believe it covers both parts of my primary research material. However, I have to add that I would not call the experiences of a slave with the abusive culture around her 'a relationship', but although only one of Nichols's characters really has any possibilities to be a subject or a member of society in the way we understand it today, socially both books picture the clashing of subjectivities with the surrounding culture, both stories however situated in their own time and, just as Hamilton describes, created and restricted by it. Unfortunately, as everyone knows, one is more cruel than the other. From the concept of displacement, of leaving the homeland and having to fight for one's subjectivity in strange surroundings, we can get to the idea that both Nichols's women can be considered to have experienced a certain kind of a diaspora. This requires, however, an explanation of the broadening of an old term.

Historically, the term diaspora has been mostly used in reference to the dispersion of the Jewish people and their experiences and interpretations of exile. However, during the decades, the meaning of the term has shifted and broadened and the outcome of this is that diaspora

nowadays often refers to not only the Jews, but, as Joseph E. Harris puts it, also for studies of Chinese, East Indian and other groups of people who have been situated outside their native homelands (Hamilton 2007, 86). When it comes to this new, broadened meaning of diaspora, Khacha Tölöyan argues that diaspora is about the way in which nations are constructed, made and unmade in the culture as well as politics (Cohen 1997, 127). This means, then, that physical issues such as blackness become more of a political question than merely a physical or a cultural one as it through the global, diasporic movement becomes a tool for the deliberate construction of nations. However, when constructing society and its hierarchies, someone is always in charge and, most likely, it for the most part is the authoritative nation, not the diasporic minorities. Therefore, the notion of minority can and should be questioned. According to Claudia Jones, “distribution of the West Indian population in the United Kingdom indicates that, “by mid-1962, over three hundred thousand West Indians were settled in Britain”. By mid-1962, a population of 67,000 was located in Birmingham (note Nichols’s “Skanking Englishman between Trains”) and by mid-1961, a population of 135,000 in London. In London, the largest settlement of West Indians are located in Brixton (Jones 2000, 49), area which – alongside Kensington – John Mcleod calls a “diaspora neighbourhood” (Mcleod 2004, 95). Heidi Safia Mirza addresses the problematics of definition, as she writes that many Black people live and are born in Britain and still the population of three million (in 1997) is in official documents referred to as an “ethnic minority” (Mirza 1997, 3). The labeling as a minority can be seen as an example of officially constructed and, therefore, political othering. Likewise, whiteness then represents the majority only on a symbolic level. Different ethnic communities are seen as separate from their surroundings, as “today a number of London’s neighbourhoods are known primarily in terms of the ‘overseas’ populations they have nurtured” (Mcleod 2004, 4).

Migration issues as a concern became acute as, according to Ian R. Spencer (1997, 49-50), “during the period 1945 to 1955...legislative measures to restrict immigration were extensively discussed”. Furthermore, Spencer continues, that “by far the most important single element contributing to its intensity was undoubtedly the perception of increasing numbers of Asian and black people entering Britain” and that “it was the rapid build up of the numbers of Caribbean migrants that precipitated the ‘crisis’ of 1954-5”. Spencer (1997, 50) writes that “before the flow of Caribbean migration began to achieve even modest numbers the government expressed strongly its concern about the growth in the number of ‘coloured’ seamen settling in Britain... mainly from West Africa.” So, in other words, the defining and disturbing factor was skin colour, already before attention was paid to specific groupings of

people, such as “young blacks” mentioned below. According to John Mcleod, “London’s diasporic peoples, like many other new Londoners from countries with a history of colonialism, would be subjected to a series of attitudes which frequently objectified and demonized them, often in terms of race, while questioning their rights for citizenship and tenure in one of the world’s most historically cosmopolitan cities” (Mcleod 2004, 2).

What became the symbol of Caribbean migration into Britain, was Empire Windrush in 1944, although, as Ian R. Spencer notes, “the fact that this vessel was by no means the first in the post-war years to bring several hundred immigrants from the Caribbean escaped attention then as it does now” (Spencer 1997, 51:52). During the political conversations, the private and the public views of migrations have clashed and, according to Spencer, the private view of the migration was not as optimistic as the public one lead to believe. Spencer argues that “the dichotomy between the government’s publicly expressed tolerance of black migration and its private regret and hostility was established right at the start of the post-war debate (Spencer 1997, 53). Once again, British society by implication meant white society, which resulted in legal restrictive measures. According to Claudia Jones, in 1962, the Commonwealth Immigration Act became a “voucher system allowing entry only to those who have a job to come to” (Jones 2000, 52). John Solomos (2003, 174-175) agrees that through history, the Caribbean communities in Britain have been subject to racism – both direct as well as more subtle discrimination. Solomos writes, how “as in other areas of political life, from the 1980s the new right began to influence public debates on racial questions. They were particularly influential during the long period of Conservative domination from 1979 to 1997. In his work – *Race and Racism in Britain* – Solomos argues that the political jargon and deliberate discourses occurring in public at that time, were meant to present minorities as threats. In other words, without having to to make a direct comment on racial hierarchy, the politicians used the concept of the British society as something that needs protection against “the invaders”.

Solomos explains that “in practice the most resonant themes in racial discourses were not absolute notions of racial superiority, but the threats that black and minority communities presented to the cultural, political and religious homogeneity of white British society.” Due to this, the question of adapting to a new culture also meant that a successful migration would have meant a complete obedience to the white, British norm. Therefore, as such a hierarchy existed, the minorities were compared with it and any attempts to preserve their own culture were seen as a failure. Solomos adds that “the attempts by ethnic and minority groups to assert their rights and lay claim to social justice were often presented in the media as a sign of

the failure of immigrants to adapt to British society, and not as a sign that racial injustice was deeply embedded (Solomos 2003, 175). Furthermore, “as the racial discourses increasingly presented minority communities as ‘enemies within’ who were undermining the moral and social fabric of society” and when “particular groups such as young blacks” were depicted as a threat to society’s order, Caribbean born citizens were also placed under discussion. According to Solomon (2003, 174),

In the late 1970s the concern expressed about the social position of young African-Caribbeans signalled a new preoccupation with the danger that the political and social alienation of sections of the black and ethnic minority populations presented to the polity as a whole.

Among the debates on immigration, there was a need for establishing the norms of “a British way of life” and as the overarching concern was the supposed threat posed to the majority culture by the development of multiracial communities, young African-Caribbeans were one of the groups used as an example (Solomon 2003, 176). They “were at the centre of much political debate during the 1980s” as young Black people born in Britain became the symbol for all that threatened the British society (Solomon 2003, 176). Without making any further autobiographical assumptions, the period of time described by Solomon also coincides with, firstly Nichols’s own migration to Britain in the 1970’s and, secondly, the publication *The Fat Black Woman’s Poems* in the 1980’s.

As for Nichols, she depicts the diasporic experiences of her protagonist through seemingly simple poems describing everyday events like shopping (Nichols 1984, 11):

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 the pretty face salesgals
exchanging slimming glances
thinking she don’t notice

...

Nothing soft and bright and billowing
to flow like breezy sunlight
when she walking

The fat black woman curses in Swahili/Yoruba
and nation language under her breathing

...

The fat black woman could only conclude
that when it come to fashion
the choice is lean

Nothing much beyond size 14

Despite the trivial subject of this poem – simply called “The Fat Black Woman Goes Shopping” – it is in fact a versatile description of an immigrant woman’s daily experiences, as Nichols’s poem discusses contempt – second stanza –, cultural differences of taste in clothes – third stanza – as well as the balancing between two languages – fourth stanza. The poem functions as an example of how everyday life and seemingly neutral matters may in reality be a challenge for someone part of a diasporic group. In the end, trivial things often become the biggest challenges, since they are so deeply rooted in the culture of the “majority” that they become invisible to the public who are not part of the diasporic community. Likewise, it can be imagined how complicated matters can get if even buying clothes is a challenge unless you are willing to change and move closer to the expected norm that often goes unnoticed. Nichols’s poem comments on the ways the diasporic body does not fit into the culture around it. For this part, the message of the poem is not strictly tied to skin colour and Nichols is not speaking only for the women of ethnic minorities but also for women of various shapes and sizes in general, for those women whose bodies are seen as outsiders and unfitting to the silent norm, as “common differences can form the basis of deep solidarity...in the face of unequal power relations among feminists” (Mohanty 2003, 225). However, the emphasis is still on the Black, diasporic female body and one of ways to highlight this angle, is the inclusion of language – “Swahili/Yoruba”. Language is one of those matters which are considered to belong to the framework of the body and “Yoruba” here is also a reference to Africa and the shared history of the Fat Black Woman and the enslaved woman in *I Is a Long Memored Woman*. Therefore, although the subject of language is not directly linked to the subject of this thesis, I feel that due to its continuous appearance throughout Nichols’s collections it cannot be overlooked and I will get back to the subject shortly.

Besides the fields of study already mentioned, the notion of diaspora is also in use when studying the ‘Black Britain’ and the migration that has occurred from the Caribbean to various countries. International migration has had, according to Hamilton (2007, 18), a more deep and continuous effect on the Caribbean than it has had on any other region in the world.

With part of the area's beginnings located in the slave trade, the whole history of many peoples in the Caribbean is a history of diaspora. After a long period of slavery and then colonialism, the diasporic experience continued as a free-willed movement from the Caribbean to Europe and the United States. This idea of voluntariness seems to be one of the significant changes in the meaning of the term diaspora, as it no longer entails a situation where a person or a nation is forcefully and often violently made to leave their land, but also a situation in which "exile" is optional and, perhaps, more closer to the meaning of the term "migration". At this point it is valuable to notice that Grace Nichols, who moved to Britain in the 1970's, is an example of this kind of voluntary migration and when I mention the term diaspora in the context of migration from the Caribbean to the United Kingdom, I mean this kind of voluntary movement. This narrows the meaning down and perhaps simplifies it, but I believe that when it comes to the last four decades or so, it is enough for this thesis to concentrate on the aspects of voluntary migration. Likewise, Britain is not the only destination for those people who chose and choose to migrate, but since experiences in different countries have differed from each other, it is wise to concentrate only on the movement between the Caribbean and Britain. Although Grace Nichols in her poetry has a very emotional relationship to her Caribbean background, she also comments on the fact that sometimes memories and the actual reality do not meet, as she writes in "Two Old Black Men on a Leicester Square Park Bench" (Nichols 1984, 35):

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

...

do you dream revolutions
 you could have forged

...

O It's easy
 to rainbow the past
 after all the letters from
 home spoke of hardships

and the sun was traded long ago

Nichols seems to argue that although the connection with personal and cultural history without doubt remains, there is a difference between matters of the heart and rational thinking. In her other poems Nichols depicts her characters as emotional and in many occasions has created a poem the atmosphere of which heavily relies on warm recollections of, for instance, home (Nichols 1983, 8) and relating subjects such as childhood (Nichols 1984, 40) and mother (Nichols 1984, 44). However, the poem quoted above describing the two immigrant men suggests that despite all the nostalgia, firstly, the old home is not – if it ever has been – a paradise and, secondly, that life can also be good or even better where ever the new home might be. This viewpoint supports both the feeling of survival and strength that lingers in Nichols’s poetry, the responsibility of a subject as well as the belief in the possibilities of change. Despite its title, this poem leaves the reader with a feeling of a general description of all the old Black men found sitting on park benches, isolated in their physical appearance and lost in their surroundings, *ashy fingers trembling* (Nichols 1984, 35). Interestingly, this creates a strong contradiction with, for instance, the self-assertive female character in “The Fat Black Woman Goes Shopping” as well as, in fact, with every other Nichols’s female character. There are no poems in which the woman or women could be deemed weak or a failure and even if lost in society, never of their own accord. Strength – especially of the female body – as a characteristic of women is profoundly present in both collections of Nichols and its relation to the expression of subjectivity will be considered in chapter 3.3. So not only does this poem draw a line between two kinds of people and their opposite reactions but possibly between men and women as well. Lastly, it is also about facing reality, a theme which continues in “Price We Pay for the Sun” (Nichols 1984,42), in which the commercial image of the Caribbean overlooks the faults of history and according to which, it will be either poverty or leaving:

These islands
 not picture postcards
 for unravelling tourist
 you know
 these islands real
 more real
 than flesh and blood
 past stone
 past foam
 these islands split
 bone

...

Poverty is the price
we pay for the sun girl
run come

However, in spite of acknowledgements such as the ones above, the Caribbean heritage is strongly present in both collections of Nichols, often introduced to the reader in the form of language. In *I Is a Long Memored Woman*, the heritage of language is represented through passages such as in the poem “Drum-spell”: “Once again I am in the eyes of my sisters/they have not forgotten my name/*Osee yei yee yei/Osee yei yee yei*” (Nichols 1983, 29) or in “Among the Canes”: “O Like my Earth Mother/*Asaase Yaa*/I demand a day of rest” (Nichols 1983, 27). Likewise, the language of the slaves is represented in names and spiritual references found in the poems and in the use of non-standard English. An example can be found, among others, in “Eulogy” (Nichols, 1983, 17). Ketu H. Katrak writes about “pre-colonial traditions of resistance that use the female body – via voice, silence, reproductive abilities, and militancy – to counter domination” and continue how for enslaved Caribbean women, “resistance through strategic uses of their bodies...required enormous courage” (Katrak 2006, 56 ; 58). According to Katrak, for survival, these women made up covert resistances such as physical reprisals. The last two lines refer to a situation in which language and culture have been taken away and, therefore, the woman does not know how to perform a tradition in strange surroundings:

Dayadu, Ishiodu, Anamadi
plunging wildly to the waters
of your fate
Kobidja, Nwasobi, Okolie
swallowing your tongues
cold and still on your chains

How can I eulogise your names
What dance of mourning can I make?

Examples of non-standard English appear, for instance, in the already mentioned “Fat Black Woman Goes Shopping” (“and de weather so cold”) as well as in “I coming Back” (Nichols 1983, 42):

I coming back “Massa”
I coming back

...

hiss in yuh year
and prick in your skin
I coming back

...

Above, not only is non-standard English in use, but there is also a questioning of the vocabulary as the word “master” – demeaned in value – appears in apostrophes. These kinds of differing uses of language function as one of the factors of collectiveness and appear in both collections. As the characters and surroundings change, the playing with language evolves from being clearly different from the language of the slave traders and from taking place mostly in names and spiritual references, to the everyday use of the shopping – and cursing – Black woman. The use of non-standard English has prevailed through time and still today functions as a marker of belonging in a diasporic community, just as it did at the time of slavery. Ketu H. Katrak comments on the issue of non-standard languages in her *Politics of the Female Body : Postcolonial Female Writers of the Third World* (2006). Katrak explains how she, while studying the “bodily journey of exile and recuperation” present in the texts of post-colonial women writers, analyzes the representation of two main factors: “language (English and other indigenous languages...) and location (internal migrations from village to city, and external relocation from native lands to western metropolitan areas)”. She continues to explain that “the English language was imposed upon peoples with other languages in the colonized world; hence, in the postcolonial era, the ‘empire writes back’ in a variety of English-es (Katrak 2006, 7).

Besides the angle of voluntariness, there is another aspect which seems to be present in all the newer writings of diaspora I have encountered. The expanded meaning of the term seems to include the idea of a multicultural identity as a continuous, flexible construction that differs from understanding identity as a more or less solid entity. According to Naz Rassool, Black, diasporic identities in Britain are about ‘becoming’, they are being shaped in everyday interaction with the social – white – world. She also adds that in order to belong socially and to identify culturally and politically, Black people continually have to adapt and adjust and to change their cultures (Rassool 1997, 189). What this means, then, is that diaspora is no longer seen as strictly tied to the experience of physical migration, but the essence of diaspora lies in the formation and functioning of new cultural identities in situations where there is social

inequality. It is the person's cultural identity that matters in a diasporic – or migratory – situation and what I am interested in is how this cultural identity appears in relation to the body of the other and how the owner of the othered body experiences this.

It has already been seen that for Nichols's Black women, their diaspora is a personal struggle on an everyday-level, physically as well as mentally, and keeping in mind Rassool's idea of "becoming", the Black woman in *The Fat Black Woman's Poems* is simultaneously living her history, present and future. However, Nichols has made it clear that becoming and adaptation do not mean surrendering to the white world. At times, she almost seems to be saying that the process of becoming also takes place in the opposite direction and that the Caribbean culture, in fact, would offer something to the British people (Nichols 1984, 33):

Met him at Birmingham Station
 small yellow hair Englishman
 hi fi stereo swinging in one hand
 walking in rhythm to reggae sound/Man

he was alive
 he was full-o-jive
 said he had a lovely
 Jamaican wife

Said he couldn't remember
 the taste of English food
 I like mih drops
 me johnny cakes
 me peas and rice
 me soup/Man

Said, showing me her photo
 whenever we have a little quarrel
 you know/to sweeten her up
 I surprise her with a nice mango/Man

...

Behind the humour of this poem, "Skanking Englishman Between Trains", lies a couple of things which relate to the notion of diasporic experience as subjective, but which are depicted from the viewpoint of the non-migrant person involved in the process. Nichols presents an Englishman who, through his Caribbean wife, has encountered and partly adapted to a minority culture. This change is represented, firstly, in his speech which reflects the elements of non-standard English discussed earlier. Secondly, the man's behaviour has been influenced

by the Caribbean culture in the form of music and food, of which the latter one especially appears frequently in the poems of Grace Nichols. Food also appears here as a marker of a man aware of his wife's culture as he knows how to please her and, furthermore, food marks the difference between cultures as the English and the Caribbean food are contrasted with each other. Lastly, Caribbean music has given a whole new rhythm to the appearance of the man as he, "full of jive", is met dancing between the trains. In other words, his body has been freed and loosened up by the culture of his Caribbean wife. All this appears to be contradictory to the traditional image of the stiff, English behaviour and it is probably best to keep in mind that Nichols indeed is playing with stereotypes and using them to tell her stories. From these stereotypes she finds humour which turns out to say much more than it initially seemed to and ends up not being funny but poignant. The only problem seems to be that sometimes, as in the case of this poem, when using stereotypes, the line between innocent humour and sarcasm is a thin one. Therefore the reader is left with the feeling of uncertainty: is Nichols really saying that the Englishman has entered the Caribbean culture and community through his Caribbean wife, or is she making the point that a culture is never only about fruits and music, but something less tangible? Perhaps this poem is simultaneously delivering both messages while depicting an Englishman whose looks contradict with the physical – and mental – attributes of the other which he has gained. Pointing towards this kind of interaction, Henry Louis Gates Jr's article introduces a quotation from Stuart Hall (Gates 2000, 171):

Blacks become objects of desire in curious ways, with some secret umbilical connection to what's cool or exotic or sexy, or to the body or to music – all the things that Puritan English culture both reviled and desired. They've turned marginality into a very creative art form – life form, really – and they've done so at the level of youth culture, of music, of dress. They've styled their way into British culture. Which isn't hard, of course – it's one of the most unstylish places in the world."

Interestingly, Hall's view differs from that of, for example, Richard Dyer. It approaches the notion of the "exotic other" from a different angle, as it does not mention the negative associations that come along with this kind of commodification.

Lastly, there is a third angle of the expanded meaning of diaspora. The construction of these new identities and subjectivities mentioned, can be thought of through the notion of cultural diaspora which, according to Robin Cohen, would be fit to explain many migration experiences in the modern world (Cohen 1997, 128). The notion of cultural diaspora offers a way to explain the already mentioned idea of a new, mixed, cultural identity in the heart of

diasporic experience. In *Global Diasporas – An Introduction*, Cohen – like others – states that all scholars of the subject acknowledge that the Jewish tradition is at the centre of any definition of diaspora, but because of the various contexts in which the term is used today, it is useful to consider it in a broader sense and to “transcend the Jewish traditions” (Cohen 1997, 21). In order to do this, Cohen introduces (Cohen 1997, xii) the Caribbean peoples as an example of cultural diasporas, which is his attempt to give consideration to one of all the credible meanings of the term (Cohen 1997, x). First of all, when studying the possibility to see the Caribbean peoples forming a cultural diaspora, Cohen does not reach a final conclusion. I would still like to, however, use his idea of cultural diaspora as explaining these new identities and consider how it represents itself through Caribbean artists – like Grace Nichols – who have found home in Britain. Both Rassool and Cohen write about the mixing of cultures and how it is present and affects the making of Black British identities. These “new” identities caused by migration form the cultural diaspora, so that it is made by people who through their multicultural identities produce and maintain a culture that is also new. Here the reverse angle of “Skanking Englishman Between Trains” can also be noted. However, due to the structure of society and the ways the other is understood, this new cultural mixture – the cultural diaspora – lives in the margins. When talking about the Caribbean peoples as a cultural diaspora, Cohen’s main argument is that the Caribbean peoples form a cultural diaspora which is constructed and maintained as much by literature, political ideas, religious convictions, music and lifestyles as it is by permanent migration (Cohen 1997, xii). This relates, once again, to “Skanking Englishman Between Trains” discussed above as well as to some other poems which will be considered in chapter 1.2. For this thesis, I am mainly interested in the aspects of Caribbean women’s literature and lifestyles, mainly, how those lifestyles – issues such as food, clothes and music – are represented in Nichols’s depictions of everyday life and how they appear in relation to the concept of otherness and the body.

Cohen does, however, state that the initial problem of seeing the Caribbean peoples as diasporics lies in the fact that they are not native to the area and that almost everyone in the area originally came from somewhere else (Cohen 1997, 137). Although this is true, I would like to propose that at least the Black population in the Caribbean area – in spite of the lack of nativeness – are peoples of diaspora since they definitely were forced into the area as the result of the slave trade. According to Cohen, Stuart Hall has indeed stated that such a thing as a distinctive Caribbean diasporic identity can be found, and that African-Caribbean people already are peoples of diaspora since their diasporic experience is not measured by the will to

return, but by a life of diversity and an identity which lives through difference (Cohen 1997, 138). Hall believes – just as Mirza did earlier on in this chapter – that diaspora identities are those “which are constantly producing and reproducing themselves anew, through transformation and difference” (Cohen 1997, 138). However, Cohen himself writes (Cohen 1997, 138) that in the case of diaspora, Caribbean peoples share a double identity – the identity that the peoples created within the Caribbean itself and the identity in those places they subsequently moved, hence forming the Caribbean diaspora abroad. Grace Nichols’s poetry then can be seen as a representative of both of these historical situations, her universal female protagonists representing the development – from exploitation to emergence – of subjectivity and the female body as its vehicle. In postmodern thinking, all identities are formed “on the move”, when subjectivity meets history and, it has been argued, to be lost in a new land is just as typical of people in general as it is of those who had to go through forced migrations (Cohen 1997, 133). As Robin Cohen quotes Chambers, he to a great extent summarizes what seems to be the core idea of Nichols’s poetry: the most fitting metaphor for this new, diasporic condition is the migrant’s sense of being rootless and living between separate worlds, in a situation where not only the past is lost but the present is not integrated either (Cohen 1997, 133). In the end, then, it is the responsibility of the diasporic subject to find the ways to function and to form a community, a promising idea which I constantly see in Grace Nichols’s poetry.

1.2. Caribbean Women Writers in Britain

To a large extent, Caribbean writing can be considered historical writing with its emphasis on themes such as migration, politics of discrimination and the questions of diaspora and going – or not going – back home. According to Chandra Talpade Mohanty, “third world feminists have argued for the rewriting of history based on the specific locations and histories of struggle of people of colour and postcolonial peoples, and on the day-to-day strategies of survival utilized by such peoples” (Mohanty 2003, 52). Caribbean women writers in Britain have from the nineteenth century onwards told their stories of migration and, according to Meredith Gadsby, written down their history of survival (Gadsby 2006, 74). Gadsby writes that the obstacles and difficulties encountered and cleared by the different generations of these women writers, such as slavery, racism and sexism, are often in literature referred to as ‘sucking salt’ (Gadsby 2006, 73). By ‘sucking salt’ in hostile surroundings, they have

survived and by writing about it, the writers have created a space for those Black female writers in Britain that have come after them (Gadsby 2006, 74). Furthermore, perhaps, they have also created writings of identity and survival also for the women who identify themselves as Black and British and do not write, but reach this literature from the position of a reader. Gadsby also talks about the trope of mothering, which, according to her, has been used extensively when discussing Black women's writings and adds to it the importance of seeing the new Black women writers as the symbolic daughters of those women who were before (Gadsby 2006, 74). The trope of daughter represents the manner in which the collective memories are passed on from one generation to the other and, according to Consuelo López Springfield, Caribbean women writers constantly remind us that they are "daughters, reweaving our mothers' stories into our own as we challenge convention" (Gadsby 2006, 75).

There has been some controversy involving the notion of Black British, since some have felt that these two attributes are in reality exclusive. Likewise, as I already have mentioned, the generalization of the term Black has been judged as discriminating. However, in British literature, according to Carole Boyce Davies, it is exactly this notion of Blackness that brings women together across social and cultural differences – she continues to explain how many of these women writers may not refer to themselves as Black and British but define themselves as Black women writers (Gadsby 2006, 75). Black women are considered to have suffered a double-colonization as they are discriminated not only due to their ethnicity, but also to their gender. Isabel Hoving describes the profile of Caribbean women writers in her *In Praise of New Travelers : Reading Caribbean Migrant Women Writers* (2001). According to her (Hoving 2001, 3), these female writers not only emphasize hybridity and diasporic nature of Caribbean literature, but also suggest that besides being "linguistic, cultural and ethnic, the diversity of Caribbean literature is gender-specific". Just as the women were part of the oppression and the slave labour, they too have been writing from the start – it is just that the Caribbean literary circles tend to focus on male writers due to the masculine perspective, but with a different focus, a distinct female literary tradition can be distinguished (Hoving 2001, 3). Caribbean women writers began to appear as a recognizable group in the 1970's. Back then, they did not encounter a world of male writers, but a rambling network of different literatures in different languages all labelled as Caribbean literature (Hoving 2001, 2). Therefore, just like Stuart Hall argues that a distinct Caribbean diasporic identity can be distinguished, Caribbean literature can be seen as likewise inherently diasporic due to its background.

Coming from this gender-specific perspective, Grace Nichols is one of the Caribbean women writers in Britain who recognize the violent and horrible exile of slaves as collective memory and the importance of these roots, but who also has the ability to see the experience of voluntary exile – the expanded notion of diaspora – as a positive factor. According to John Mcleod, in the works of the three women writers of his study – Buchi Emecheta, Joan Riley and Grace Nichols – which reach from the 1960's to the 1980's, these women call into question “some of the utopian and optimistic visions of London...by male artists, as well as outlining some of the different ways in which black women have experienced and responded imaginatively to metropolitan life (Mcleod 2004, 20). Furthermore, as for the female point of view from which these women write, Mcleod finds another difference. According to him, as opposed to the numerous political organizations formed in the Black communities of London in the 60's, 70's and 80's, what brings these works together is the absence of “the advocacy of female solidarity, black consciousness or coordinated communities of resistance.” On the contrary – he continues on Nichols – “the poetry's tone is significantly and strategically light. The women who appear in Nichols's work refuse to be vanquished by the circumstances of city life, often by challenging their burden of oppression with small-scale yet far-reaching acts of transformative levity” (Mcleod 2004, 93; 120).

Isabel Hoving concludes that in the literature written by Caribbean women writers various depictions of the notion of journey are not only defined as a loss but “as a means to construct new identities and, therefore, as a trope for personal and social change” (Hoving 2006, 36). As Grace Nichols's predecessors, Hoving (2006, 77) takes up four women writers for discussion: Mary Prince, Beryl Gilroy, Joan Riley and Dorothea Smartt. From the 19th century of Prince, who was the first Caribbean woman to leave behind a – later edited – narrative, Hoving moves chronologically through time to Smartt, who is a poet. What these women have in common is the will to challenge discrimination and to find a way to subjectivity among in the midst of it (Hoving 2006, 77-78). Especially Smartt's work bears a resemblance to that of Nichols, tackling subjects such as emerging new subjectivities and identities migration enables, the problematic notion of home, beauty ideals and the importance of physical attributes as cultural symbols as well as in relation to otherness and being treated as the Other (Hoving 2006, 109,110; 111; 113). The Caribbean women have been active in the field of literature and besides the five mentioned, there are many others both in Britain as well as in the United States. For instance, Andrea Levý is one of the known British writers whose roots are located in the Caribbean and Jamaica Kincaid is a popular example of American Caribbean writing. One of the challenges encountered by these women writers, according to

bell hooks, is the capitalist structure which has the powers to make them into mere fashionable commodities, as in “black women writers are in right now” (hooks 1989, 14). The challenge is to reach a state in which they would not be in the role of the exotic other, existing only in comparison to the norm.

In her study, *Searching for Safe Spaces : Afro-Caribbean Women Writers in Exile* (1997), Myriam J.A. Chancy explains how her work focuses on “on the writing by Afro-Caribbean women writers in the context of their exile from home islands...specifically, the significant themes of race, sex, sexuality, and class, in addition to age and nationality as expressed in the works of Joan Riley, Beryl Gilroy, Makeda Silvera, M. Nourbese Philip, Dionne Brand, Audre Lorde, Michelle Cliff, Rosa Guy and Marie Chauvet (Chancy 1997, xxi). Chapter two in Chancy’s book focuses on two Afro-Caribbean writers located in Britain, Beryl Gilroy and Joan Riley, and how their “texts present working-class West Indian characters who must confront the history of British racism in order, literally, to survive” (Chancy 1997, 34). Furthermore, Chancy notes how Caribbean women writers have addressed various issues encountered in Western societies by the Black female body, such as “racial discrimination, abuse of the elderly, sexual abuse and incest” (Chancy 1997, 33). Judging by the subjects touched by these women writers, it is clear that this is also the framework in which Grace Nichols can be located.

Nichols writes:

From dih pout
of mih mouth
from the
treacherous
calm of mih
smile
you can tell
i is a long memoried woman
(Nichols 1983)

The “i” in this epilogue of Nichols’s collection is nameless. Nevertheless, as the collection advances, she stands out as the memory of all the female slaves and their experiences in “the new world”. The treacherous calm of the woman’s smile echoes hard experiences, a person who has been made strong by them, but through that has maintained the ability to still smile a crooked smile when thinking about the past. It is not only a sign of happiness, but a smile that hides something behind it and a smile which takes strength to produce. In fact, the notion of strength is encountered frequently in Nichols’s *I Is a Long Memoried Woman*, with emphasis

on, to be more precise, the strength of the female body and the female experience. According to Isabel Hoving, the Caribbean identity in Britain is a formation made by negotiating the different forms of displacement and, therefore, in the framework of Caribbean literature, the rewritings of the experiences of exile and displacement have been a constant theme (Hoving 2001, 36). Hoving continues to explain how women writers in the diaspora have been willing to produce their own rewritings of these journeys and to highlight this by concentrating on “the gender-specific aspects of travelling” (Hoving 2001, 36). In the texts of Postcolonial women writers, according to Ketu H. Katrak, resisting domination through the body by trying to take control over it sometime fails and results in either murder or suicide (Katrak 2006, 2).

In his *Black British Literature* (2004), Mark Stein makes a remark that Grace Nichols’s *I Is a Long Memored Woman* is a collection of poems which has an “organicist emphasis on roots” (Stein 2004, 68). Nichols’s poetry is on one hand highly collective and on the other, strictly personal. It develops from being the story of abused black masses to depicting subjectivity and the right to belong. In both collections used for this thesis, the poems are about migration – both voluntary and involuntary – and about the state of an identity and maintaining it during differing situations. *I Is a Long Memored Woman* is clearly a product of a poet’s imagination and rewriting of historical events since it has not happened directly to her, whereas in the case of *The Fat Black Woman’s Poems* it is really difficult for the reader to distinguish between the possibly autobiographical and the fictional. The collectiveness – the collective memories – that is present in *I Is a Long Memored Woman*, is in fact the history and the roots of the Fat Black woman. This does not mean that there is no subjective viewpoint in the previous collection or no collective one in the latter, more likely, collective memories and subjective experiences seem to melt into each other. Therefore, getting back to the idea of the value of heritage, Gadsby’s writing about symbolic mothers and daughters, the newness that is being born from this “generation gap” resembles the trope of diasporic identity which was discussed in chapter 1.1. In fact, Gadsby notes that these collective memories are, within the framework of migration and identity, a basis for creativity and reproduction of newness (Gadsby 2006, 75).

The wave of Caribbean migration to Britain occurred in the 1950’s and after the second World War the diasporic writing in Britain has addressed the themes of cultural identity and migration and the texts have often been treated in realist or almost a documentary fashion (Parker 1998, 9). Grace Nichols’s collections could easily be seen to fall into this kind of categorization. A person’s cultural identity is more than a personal one and just as the notion of memory can be understood as a shared one, the notion of cultural identity can be

understood as national (Parker, 7). This also brings to it a political undercurrent which includes things such as collective dress codes and aesthetic values which I will take a look at later on in the thesis. According to Kenneth Parker, diasporic writings in Britain often touch subjects such as identity and belonging and a dominant theme of Black British writing has indeed been the notion of a national identity (Parker 1998, 7). It seems that national identity appears to be treated as the other in British literary circles, or at least Parker thinks that there is a fundamental problem in categorizing Black British literature since no matter what this branch of literature is called, it is anyhow referred to as somehow not purely British – this distinction, as Parker puts it, “offers an insight into how these others are seen by the makers of the dominant traditions” (Parker 1998, 8).

As he is speaking about “the splendid body of poetry that has emanated from the experience of dis-location and trans-formation”, Parker (1998, 19) finishes his article by quoting Grace Nichols’s poem “Epilogue”:

I have crossed an ocean
I have lost my tongue
from the roots of the old one
a new one has sprung

This poem about survival and seeing the possibility of creating new in things that first appear to be negative, in fact seems to be exactly the very poem which is quoted when mentioning Grace Nichols. This might be because it captures one of the main points of Nichols’s poetry, the belief in the ability to change and evolve and through that, to cope. Furthermore, Nichols’s poetry is also strongly tied to the concepts of migration and movement, perhaps even the question of home and, as Mark Stein puts it (Stein 2004, 59), this poem is not, when read alone, related to any specific moment in time and it is free of the attributes of place and gender. Stein continues (Stein 2004, 59) by calling it a poem which speaks of migration and its consequences generally and in a “universalist fashion” and according to him, the notions of migration and journeying are the “prime motif in Nichols’s poetry and in Black British literature more generally”. As it is, in “We New World Blacks” the universalist viewpoint occurs once more (Nichols 1984, 30):

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 know the way
 back to

the river stone

the little decayed
 spirit
 of the navel string
 hiding in our back garden

These kind of observations enable the classification of Grace Nichols as an exemplary of Black British literature. This particular poem is not only written in a universalist fashion, it is notable that it is also very general in its nature. Therefore, as a poem made by a female poet, it resigns itself from the statements made by Black Feminism about blackness not being a solid attribute. However, as I have mentioned before, simplicity for Grace Nichols seems to be a means to an end, a way of telling intricate stories hidden in a simple form. Furthermore, when it comes to Nichols's poetry, her Caribbean heritage is made clear and depicted to the reader in a delicate manner and, after all, a text can also be general enough to become personal for everyone who has been involved in situations described by the poem. Therefore, in the context of *The Fat Black Woman's Poems*, I will make the assumption that Black refers to those Black citizens in Britain who share a Caribbean background and Nichols's own personal experience gives her the right to generalize. After all, in a text meant to be read as universal, generalizations cannot be avoided. Contradictions aside, "We New World Blacks" functions as a collective story of migration, free of specific time and place as well as attributes such as gender. In the same kind of way as skin colour in "Fear" functioned as an imagined marker of displacement, the manner of speaking reveals a possible history of migration or at least an ethnic background in "We New World Blacks".

I also believe that the notion of language also has a more abstract function, it is more than just a concrete manner of speaking. The poem is pretty much saying that it is not about the

language or the nationality, it is about a shared experience as being treated as the other, as something that is always implicitly compared with the general norm. The timbre of the voice stands for all that is different, those moments in everyday conversations which can make other people make assumptions and presuppositions, those moments when we draw conclusions based solely on appearances. Interestingly, when Nichols writes about a betraying voice, she almost brings the notion of passing to the poem as the voice betrays its owner by hinting about different, the voice of the other. In other words, the voice blows the cover of its owner. This is why, as a reader, I find this poem very difficult to interpret, since it simultaneously opens up to two opposite readings. It could be the story of collective experiences as migrants and others, about being treated as the minority. However, at the same time Nichols seems to be putting the blame on ‘the new world Blacks’. After she has written about the betrayal and the history as an *old ghost* – ghost in itself carrying a negative implication – , the fourth stanza changes the mood of the poem. It is no longer a collective story, but a more sullen depiction of fighting against and giving up one’s heritage. “And in spite of ourselves/we know the way back to/the river stone” seems to be hinting that ‘no matter how hard some of us try to change, they cannot kill the past that is them’. Therefore, it also seems to some extent comment on the issue that Chandra Talpade Mohanty calls “the notion of, ‘I am, therefore I resist’”. By this she questions the idea that womanhood or blackness alone are enough to provoke a political consciousness, that ethnic group can be seen as always having shared political agendas (Mohanty 2003, 76-77)

This issue of the past Nichols associates with driftwood; unbound, on the move, its traces, well, untraceable. Driftwood can be hidden for long periods of time and only sometimes remind the world of its existence. However, no matter how free it is, it did come from somewhere. Lastly, Nichols combines the depiction of universal aspects of migration with a statement about how the heritage should be treated. The river stone functioning as a reference to the Caribbean – one of the nature bound references mentioned before –, Nichols is making the assumption that even though tried, roots cannot be completely denied. In “We New World Blacks”, the spirit of the past has been tried to be buried in the back garden, it has been tried to neglect, due to which it has decayed and shrunk. Nevertheless, it is still there and the way to it because the acknowledgement of its existence – even if it a secret one – cannot be avoided. The spirit of the past Nichols is talking about fights back, it cannot be killed by pretending to be something you are not or trying to actively forget your history. Here, of course, it is not only a subjective history, but a nation’s history, universal and free of strict definitions. However, I have to mention the small detail of the navel string, which gives even

to this genderless poem its faint, feminine undercurrent and ties it once again to the subject of motherhood and mother as the feminine source figure.

From these thoughts we can once more return to the previous chapter's idea of the diasporic identity as a new construction and as a contributor to the cultural diaspora. The genderless – if the reader decides not to make any autobiographical assumptions – and timeless poem about moving can be seen as a tale of the formation of something new, although, when read in the context of the rest of her poetry collection, Nichols is not saying that it would be easy. However, it is possible since the power to grow new things lies in roots, in their hidden existence. Shared roots give personal power to this universal person of the poem and if they did not exist, there would be nothing to rely on after the diasporic movement. Moreover, roots represent survival in the way they do not destruct – anything that grows above the ground is vulnerable, but roots can nourish and grow and you might not even know about it. The problems that arise, depicted also by Nichols, then, have to do with the contradictions between the rights to culturally – visibly and otherwise – maintain this heritage and the clashes between it and the seemingly multicultural but in reality still very white (British) society. These problems and their representation in Nichols's poetry will be discussed later on, keeping in mind the core idea of diasporic identities as new creations, as a possibility and perhaps a way to real multiculturalism. Lastly, no “sucking salt” takes place in her poetry. Instead, Nichols has chosen sugar. Sugar cane is made human, as she writes:

1.
There is something
about sugarcane

He isn't what
he seem –
...

2.
His colour
is the aura
of jaundice
when he ripe
he shiver
like ague
when it rain

...
3.
Growing up
is an art

he don't have
any control of

it is us
who groom and weed him

...

4.

...

slowly

pain-

fully

he

comes

to learn

the

truth

about

himself

the

crimes

committed

in

his

name

“Sugar Cane” (Nichols 1983, 32-35), dedicated to sugar, functions, firstly, as a marker of location. Sugar has the same role in “Without Song”, in which Nichols writes about a “little sugar island”. I will return to that particular poem as well as to the issue of location later on in the thesis. Secondly, I believe that Nichols’s decision to humanize the sugar cane relates to sugar’s importance as a product. Clearly, on Nichols’s part, this is sarcasm: sugar is getting more attention and care than the enslaved people. Sugar – still one of the biggest products on the world market – would have been nothing had there been no slaves, but no one paid any attention to what was behind the survival and appearance of the plant. This is why the poem’s protagonist hopes that some day the crimes committed because of sugar cane, will be made public as sugar was not just a product, it was the reason for the enslavement and death of masses of people. Lastly, I am also wondering whether Nichols does not participate on writing about “sucking salt”, because as a metaphor, it refers to bitterness, a feeling on which Nichols does not concentrate in her poetry.

1.3. Theoretical Framework & Research Questions

It cannot be denied that our Western culture values physical beauty and it could be argued that it is more often the female body which is displayed, photoshopped and judged. Our contemporary culture is to a great extent a highly visual one as it gives great value to the representation of bodies and to the various ways of controlling those representations. Issues such as advertising and media culture revolve around the physical, but besides the basic issue of appearances, what do we mean when we speak of bodies? The management and worship of the physical can be considered almost a phenomenon of today, and when it comes to female bodies, Susan R. Bordo argues that studies have shown how women spend more time on the discipline of their bodies than they have in a long time. Bordo adds that all the way through history, the normalization of the female body has to be understood as an effective strategy of social control (Bordo 1989, 14). Although Bordo's comment is almost twenty years old, it is still applicable, perhaps even more than at the time of its writing. The social control is not only applied to women, it is also applied to the Black population by the societies which consider ethnic citizens as the other. The cultural aspect of disorders such as anorexia, as it is acknowledged that these conditions are largely both class as well as race specific, mostly encountered among the white, middle-class women (Bordo 1989, 15). Is it because of the history of beauty ideals that this is so? Or can it be seen as a statement, an unwillingness to live by the white – often mainstream – norm which specifies and maintains what the right kind of body is or should be like? This would make the Black body an effective way of resisting the more or less silent, white social control. In both books, this is what Nichols's character is doing. However, the Black body's struggle for independence is tied to its time and the slave woman and the woman in today's London have different strategies and possibilities to go on. Nevertheless, in the centre of the experience are the female bodies and their strength. In my opinion this is definitely one possible reading for Nichols's poetry.

While at the same time being personal, body is the one aspect of self that cannot be hidden and, therefore, it is the link between the public and the personal, as well as between sharing and the want of intimacy. This contradiction between the hidden and the public is inscribed on our bodies whether we want it or not and, therefore, as Susan R. Bordo defines, body is a medium of culture (Bordo 1989, 13). She specifies how this role as a medium stretches from what we eat, to how we dress, and to the daily rituals through which people attend to their bodies. Furthermore, Bordo continues by quoting Mary Douglas and her argument that the body can act as a surface on which the rules and hierarchies of culture are inscribed, and that

these values are displayed and reinforced through the language of the body (Bordo 1989, 13). To this, Katrak adds that “in terms of location, women exiled from their body are looking for a space to re-belong to their bodies. And the communities in which they are placed, or to which they relocate provide sustaining or un-nurturing environments for their bodies to inhabit” (Katrak 2006, 7). The terms of location also relate to the notion of multiculturalism, to the relationship between the community and the body – the body’s strangeness in its surroundings, in its location. Although David Bennett (1998, 1) argues that “multiculturalism is fast following ‘postmodernism’...into the graveyard of unusable, because overused, jargon”, in the lack of a better one, I still wish to refer to the term. The term’s meaning, according to Bennett, depends on the context and objective of its use and varies according to the country in which it is used. For instance, in multicultural Britain, the term “became an all but dead letter during the decades of Thatcherite Conservatism” (Bennett 1998, 3). In this thesis, multiculturalism is used merely in reference to Britain as a nation which provides a home for various ethnic minorities. In other words, when used, it refers to a situation in which different cultures come into contact, situations in which hierarchy or otherness is inscribed – and how this affects the understanding and treatment of the othered body.

My work settles in between Cultural Studies and Gender Studies. To be more precise, it is a branch of Black (British) Cultural Studies and the theories of Black feminism which will offer the basis for my writing. Furthermore, among the list of secondary references, there is one book which I consider to be the cornerstone of this work. *Black British Feminism* (1997), edited by Heidi Safia Mirza, provides with good information on the lives and experiences of Black immigrants in Britain and the possibility to understand the Caribbean migration as a kind of diaspora. Both Black feminism and Black cultural studies also provide an interesting angle on the question of beauty and on the role of the Black body in the history of beauty and art. In fact, Richard Dyer comments on this exact issue as he writes in *White* (1997, 4) how “postmodern multi-culturalism may have genuinely opened up a space for the voices of the other, but it may also simultaneously function as a side-show for white people who look on with delight at all the differences that surround them”. Kobena Mercer also recalls this kind of a situation with the Afro and dashiki as her examples, as she writes how they “once commercialized...lost their specific signification as a ‘black’ cultural-political statement” and became “reframed by dominant definitions of ethnic otherness as ‘exotica’” and “just another item of freakish exoticism for mass consumption” (Mercer 2005, 304).

Furthermore, considering Britain’s Black Communities I will shortly get back to the statements that involve the use of the visual – issues of style and clothing – later on in this

thesis and how the looks can be intentionally played with as a cultural statement in order to gain subjectivity. In *The Subcultures – Reader*, the editor Ken Gelder credits Dick Hebdige's *Subculture: The Meaning of Style* (1979) for making style “a key subcultural identifier” (Gelder 2005, 271). Gelder goes on to explain how the evolution of these subcultures is based on looks and behaviour, linguistic, musical and, assumably, issues such as culinary culture. “These all produce social identity for the participants themselves and distinguish those people from others. Fashion provides perhaps the most immediately recognizable example of subcultural style” (Gelder 2005, 271).

Hebdige himself writes that subcultures always function as an opposition to the “normal” and the norm from which they gain the power to provoke by manifesting forbidden contexts and forms (Hebdige 2005, 125). Although the issue of Black communities and their understanding as a minority is not purely a question of subcultures, there are, however, some basic ideas which still seem to apply. The basic conflict between conventional and unconventional style which subcultures depend on, is a fight between the invisible nature of normality and deviance and, therefore, subcultures are always constructed in their nature (Hebdige 2005, 125). One thing that does not quite match, however, is Hebdige's emphasis on subcultures' intentional will to create disorder (Hebdige 2005, 124). If ethnic groupings can even be thought of as having things in common with subcultures, they still cannot be thought of as a deliberate subculture as their “deviance” is in the first place invented by other people, not by themselves and not on purpose. Therefore, the purposeful use of “style as intentional communication” (Hebdige 2005, 124) that took place from the 1950's onwards, is more about belonging and gaining authority than about disturbance.

As Sarah Thornton puts it, “distinctions are never just assertions of equal difference; they usually entail some claim to authority and presume the inferiority of *others*” (Thornton 2005, 185). Although Thornton is writing in the framework of subcultural ideologies, her idea is still applicable: by adopting a style that had been deemed as “exotic” and deviant, Black culture claimed authority over their otherness and inferiority. Racism is often, if not always, materially grounded and the notion of cultural pluralism actually has its roots in historical – unequal – power-relations (Rassool 1997, 189). A material issue and strictly related to the notion of the body are the ideals of visual beauty. I am interested in how the beauty ideals of society become political when the racial implications are made visible and how ethnic minorities have taken action in order to challenge and change the acknowledged idea of beauty. The history of beauty in general is interesting as it is also a racist history and I would like to study what the relationship between the old and the contemporary is and – as I wrote

before – ask whether the differences in the sphere of certain disorders to some extent have their roots in the classic depictions of the body.

However, although I will be concentrating on the texts of Black (British) Feminism, I also wish to include some of the ideas of Susan Bordo, whose writings are not located in the field of Black Feminism. Nevertheless, her ideas about the female body as a medium of culture seem to fit well with my work and, furthermore, they form an interesting counterpart to the writings of Black feminism. Instead of trying to find differences between these two fields, I would like to consider how the writings of Bordo can be seen in relation to the notion of the Black female body as the other. According to Bordo, “the rules of femininity have come to be culturally transmitted more and more through the deployment of standardized visual images” and as a result, femininity has come to be a matter of constructing an appropriate surface presentation of the self. She adds that we learn the rules of what femininity is through bodily discourse: images tell us which clothes, body shapes, facial expressions, movements and behaviour is required (Bordo 1989, 17). All of this is applicable to my thesis, since it has to do with the concept of body and the visual values a society produces and maintains and is in this respect also heavily connected to the ideas and theories of Black feminism. Lastly, Bordo’s writings about anorexia as a contemporary beauty ideal among women give a different kind of perspective on the role of the Black female body in Nichols’s poetry. Not being white and skinny, but instead of being Black and fat, as Nichols puts it, becomes a strong statement since it is not only a personal one, but a cultural one and one way of expressing the will to be the other as a strong subject instead of being the object of a culture that others you.

Black citizens in Britain are a heterogeneous gathering of various nations and different backgrounds and there is no justice in putting them all under the same, unifying label, Black. Therefore, also Black British diasporas represent the different realities of various different people as well as nations. Naz Rassool reminds the reader not to forget that the reality of Britain is not as simple as the oppositioning of Black and white. According to her (Rassool 1997, 187), the Black experience in Britain is a complex mass of different people, exactly because their historical experiences are grounded in different diasporas. When considering the expanded meaning of the old term, she continues that the origins of Black British diasporas lie in the voluntary as well as in the involuntary migration of people from various parts of the world (Rassool 1997, 187). The expanded meaning of diasporic experience implies that diaspora is in the end as much of a personal struggle of belonging as it is a cultural one. This is because diaspora in itself comes down to one’s own cultural identity and the problems of

subjectivity in situations in which the diasporic person belongs to a minority. As Nichols's poetry to a large extent questions and depicts the notions of identity and identity formation, the idea of this new, diasporic subjectivity conveniently suits it.

All in all, although the basis of the thesis is in Black Cultural studies and Black British Feminism, I will to some extent try to combine both white and Black feminism, because they both offer interesting viewpoints on the notions of femininity and on the question of how identity and body are connected. With this framework in mind, my research questions would then concentrate on the following issues:

1. How is otherness depicted in Nichols's poetry and how does she use the images of the body to create this sense of otherness?
2. What is the role of the body in contemporary society and how does Grace Nichols draw links between the historical and the contemporary with the use of body images?
3. How are the body and identity connected in a multicultural society and how do the poems treat this relationship? How can the identities of Nichols's women be characterized?
4. To what extent does Nichols's poetry discuss the historical stereotypes of Black women and what is the relationship between multiculturalism and the issue of beauty?

According to Richard Dyer, "as long as race is something only applied to non-white peoples, as long as white people are not racially seen and named, they/we function as a human norm (Dyer 1997, 1). In other words, as the Black body as a medium of culture is considered to be a deviation from the unspoken norm, it makes the Black person the object and, furthermore, generalizes the meaning of the word Black in ways that can be considered offending. Furthermore, Dyer adds that both the cause and effect can be traced back to the fact that "we don't mention the whiteness of the white people we know" (Dyer 1997, 2) which to a great extent is probably true, although even whiteness has its nuances and – in the context of the United State's domestic, social order – it is possible to implicate a hierarchy by using terms such as "white trash" and "rednecks". Of course, this is not a racial issue and, after all, despite the implicated value, rednecks and white trash are still undisputedly white and therefore, according to authors such as Dyer, still closer to the norm. However, if we

listen to Dyer it might, in fact, become a question of race. Dyer mentions the invisible nature of whiteness due to which white people are not “represented to themselves *as* whites but as people who are variously gendered, classed, sexualized and abled” (Dyer 1997, 3). Therefore, words such as “hillbillies”, “rednecks” and “white trash” do not actually represent whiteness in opposition to blackness but a class hierarchy within the category of white. Despite the hierarchy, it is still the invisible norm and in racial positioning since, as Dyer argues, “at the level of racial representation, whites are not of a certain race, they’re just the human race” (Dyer 1997, 3). As Heidi Safia Mirza puts it, this is a time when a person’s belonging and who he or she is, is judged by the colour of the skin and by the shape of the body – by visible differences (Mirza 1997, 3). She also adds that “the construction of a national British identity is built upon a notion of a racial belonging, upon a hegemonic white ethnicity that never speaks its presence” (Mirza 1997, 3).

According to John Gabriel, Black womanhood is a construction of powerful “controlling images” – the four that have been identified are the mammy, the welfare mother, the matriarch and the Jezebel (Gabriel 1994, 49). Originally found within the United States, they can also be found among British culture. Gabriel (1994, 57) adds that although, for instance in the case of families of South Asian origin, the dominant images in Britain differ, “there are also some important continuities. The images of mammy, welfare mother, matriarch and Jezebel have found their way into British discourse via popular film, education debates...and applied social science”. Within society’s power structures these controlling images, stereotypes, are one of the things that maintain the hierarchy and white normativity that Nichols’s protagonist is fighting against.

2. Formulating The Body

Experiencing the female body, its limits and possibilities is inarguably tied to the issues of surrounding culture and the moment in time. Therefore, “a search for home and belonging involves the politics of location” (Katrak 2006, 7). Here, Katrak might be referring to the writings of Adrienne Rich, known for emphasizing the subject of location. With location, Rich begins, “not with a continent or a country or a house, but with the geography closest in – the body” (Rich 1986, 212). According to her, the different aspects of an identity are created by location – a place on the map simultaneously being a place in history and in order to gain the authority over the location closest – one’s own body – there is a need “for locating the grounds from which to speak with authority *as* women. Not to transcend this body, but to reclaim it” (Rich 1986, 212-213). In “Shopping” (1984, 31), Nichols continues her depictions of ordinary things suddenly turned strange, caused by the contradiction between a cultural identity and the actual location of the body:

I’m guilty of buying too little food

...

Still blank as a zombie
I wander supermarket aisles

The chunky red odours
behind the cellophane
cannot revive
the spritely apples
the lady reluctantly urging samples

Between the bulge of the shelf
and the cast of my eye
between the nerve of my trolley
and the will of my mind
I’m always paralysed

In the same manner as in “The Fat Black Woman Goes Shopping”, the female protagonist’s diasporic body is lost in the culture surrounding it. However, this time it is not about clothes or the size of the body, but about the differences in habits and consumption. Due to the feeling that she shops “wrong” and to her, the products sold seem faulty – there are poems dedicated to the fruits “Mango”, “Star-apple” and “Guenips” to contribute to this divide

between the Caribbean and the UK (Nichols 1984, 47) – , she describes her body and her mind being paralysed by the contradictions.

It is a well-known fact that in order to participate in counter-cultures as well as sub-cultures, the person is required to have a certain kind of a visual style. However, if a person's body is always seen as a medium of culture or a display – a surface – of values, then it is also the everyday life that requires particular behaviour from our bodies and, therefore, our behaviour is believed to directly reflect the culture we represent. If it does not, it can be seen as a deviation from the believed norm. In a way, Nichols could be seen as depicting how the Black body has been treated as a medium of culture throughout the history of slavery and how, although now freed, it still has to fight for its rights and its recognition – its physical space in the everyday society of white Britain. Because of the fact that blackness has historically not been an attribute associated with Britishness and it has, in fact, been the concept that has acted as the opposite to the idea of a British Nation (Rassool 1997, 187), the term Black has become a unified term to mean all those people who are not considered white, and therefore at the same time, outsiders. By the same token, the term Black has also gained political implications besides being merely a depiction of the realistic state of things.

For the purpose of this thesis, the main question deals with the situation which occurs when the body does not fit the mainstream culture around it, or more specifically, what happens to the body as a medium of culture in a situation where various cultures clash? In a multicultural society, then, there remains the question of whose culture is the mainstream culture and what it is like to be, for example, Black in a more or less white society. Besides the fact that different British cultural identities are much more complicated than the divide into “Black and white” implies, the notion of Britishness in itself is not free from racial connotations. Elizabeth Kowaleski Wallace quotes Stuart Hall's comment on how Englishness as well as Britishness can be seen as racially coded terminology. According to Hall, whiteness, although not a condition of being British, is encoded in its meaning. In practice this would mean that everyday experiences such as a basic conversation can be inadvertently discriminating (Kowaleski Wallace 2006, 15). The citizens who are not considered white, have problems with relating and belonging, although they by official definition are British. In fact, Kowaleski Wallace continues explaining Hall's writing and adds that Hall does not simply mean that the term Britishness is “coded racist” but that certain people in Britain have felt excluded from the idea of Englishness by means of persistent racism (Kowaleski Wallace 2006, 15). This is important because I believe that in Nichols's *Fat Black Woman's Poems*, there is the implication of wanting to be British but not to be obliged to let go of one's own

cultural heritage. In fact, through this, the poem is questioning the nature of the assumed, “real” Britishness. I will get back to this on chapter 3.3. However, when whiteness is considered the unspoken norm, it is no wonder that Black people living in Britain have felt the need to write for themselves and to make studies that do take into account the fact that their identity is every day defined as the other.

All in all, although the media imagery is more varied than it has been during the previous decades and the idea of beauty moves over ethnic boundaries, I believe that the general ideals still consist of white and skinny women, or girls, since old age is often not considered beautiful in the same way. If you happen to be, as Nichols puts it, an obese Black woman, you are hardly in the mainstream of beauty ideals. The fact that Nichols’s woman represents an ethnic minority makes her the object for not only men but also to the white population. Not only under the male gaze, but also the white gaze, she has to define her body and her beauty by writing about it and that way owning it in a world where the social world around it is white. This social “world” and its values is what the Fat Black Woman challenges and a world where, according to Naz Rassool, “black people continually have to adapt, adjust and change their cultures, customs, behaviours, expectations, aspirations and cultural consciousness in order to ‘belong’ socially as well as to identify culturally and politically with the dominant culture” (Rassool 1997, 189). In *The Fat Black Woman’s Poems* the core of this is, I think, the idea that you can and should be able to belong without having to change and give up your visibility. However, when colour becomes the defining factor it quickly makes the issue of identity a political matter. In a situation like that, as the culture around teaches us how to produce appropriate (fair-skinned) femininity through the practices of the body, it is not only a matter of gender domination, but racial domination as well. According to Hazel V. Carby, the problem is, in fact, in the way the Black female body has been made visible, when this kind of acknowledgement has taken place. Carby writes how Black women have not only been angry for the treatment of their bodies as “invisible” throughout history, but have been “outraged by the ways in which it (history) has made us visible, when it has chosen to see us. History has constructed our sexuality and our femininity as deviating from those qualities with which white women, as the prize objects of the Western world, have been endowed” (Carby 2000, 82). In a complex manner, the Black female body is simultaneously both invisible and on display.

2.1. Constructions of Beauty

The depictions of the Black women's bodies have become a long way from the "Hottentot Venus" to the point where they now are. Janell Hobson introduces the "Hottentot Venus" as perhaps the most known Black woman in history, "studied" and exploited while both alive and dead (Hobson 2005, 1). When still alive, she was displayed at freakshows and after her death, the "scientific" studies of her brain were conducted to explain the racial differences, which helped to maintain scientific racism in Europe (Hobson 2005, 1-2). The goal of Hobson is "to explore how the 'Hottentot Venus' figure has shaped representations of blackness and beauty" (Hobson 2005, 2). Through her choice of words, Nichols makes a direct reference to the Hottentot Venus-figure and the history of "science" in "Thoughts Drifting through the Fat Black Woman's Head while Having a Full Bubble Bath" (Nichols 1984, 15):

Steatopygous sky
 steatopygous sea
 steatopygous waves
 steatopygous me

Oh 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

to put my soap
 in the slimming industry's
 profitsome spoke

...

According to John McLeod, steatopygous is a "term coined in the nineteenth century to describe the buttocks of 'Hottentot' women (McLeod 2004,123). By using of the term in reference to fortuitous things, Nichols is emptying it from meaning, eliminating the term's "scientific authority" over her body. It becomes just a word. Furthermore, her now strengthened body is attacking those institutions that once authorized its discrimination in the name of science and religion – and, still do, through the "slimming industries". To the Fat Black Woman, these industries represent white beauty ideals – light skin tone, slimness and

feminine, “girlish” behavior –, embedded norms that she too should be reaching for. Hobson argues that the idea of Black female body being somehow departing from the norm is still present in today’s society and its popular culture (Hobson 2005, 3). The idea of beauty as a construction was considered in the previous chapter as well as the fact that the norms of beauty can be not only restricting and discriminating but also a possibility for resistance and political activeness. As was already noted in 2.1., beauty has played a big, political role in the Black women’s battle for subjectivity. During the decades, it has been an issue for Black feminists to study and deconstruct the ideals of beauty which have been and still often are, quite white. In the same vein, Janell Hobson asks whether the Black body is beautiful? (Hobson 2005, 7).

Clearly, the Hottentot Venus was treated as a freak. Hobson’s more modern example of the representation of Black female beauty includes a 1990’s Sudanese supermodel Alek Wek who caused discussion in the modeling scene (Hobson 2005, 9). According to Hobson, Wek’s emergence can be considered from various political and racial angles. Firstly, the fact that the model’s beauty ever became an issue proves whiteness as the norm of beauty and secondly, and because of the invisible norm, her beauty was considered a different, exotic beauty of “the other” (Hobson 2005, 9). However, as was the case with the beauty contests and the possibilities they can be seen to offer, Hobson adds that despite the welcoming as the exotic other, Wek still became an example of Black female beauty with “the ability to convey that black female bodies are sensual and desirable” (Hobson 2005, 9). Furthermore, the contrasting images of women such as Grace Jones and Naomi Campbell also contribute to the discussion of Black female beauty – the previous a representative of this “different, exotic beauty of the other” and the latter an example of the more, so-called, classic beauty. Campbell’s classic beauty, however, has caused controversy, as its classic form derives from white imagery: there is even a webpage concentrating on the fact that she straightens her hair.

I wanted to present six pictures as appendixes, as I found these precise pictures as adding up to the discussion of both the presentation of the Black, female body and – most importantly – presentation of beauty. These pictures of the three women discussed here represent distinctive opposites. Both Alek Wek – Janell Hobson’s example – and Grace Jones are representatives of Hobson’s “exotic others”. In many pictures found online – including the ones I chose for this work – their dark skin is emphasized by lighting, settings or accessories (appendixes 2 and 3). Contrary to this, Naomi Campbell is contrasted with a chocolate Playboy-bunny lighter than her skin tone, which then makes Campbell’s body partly look almost Caucasian (appendix 6). As Playboy in itself is essentially a very white institution,

Campbell's appearance is playing with the normative ideals of beauty, those often accused of being intrinsically white. As noted above, Hobson agrees that models such as Alek Wek become positive examples of Black beauty, with "the ability to convey that black female bodies are sensual and desirable" (Hobson 2005, 9). However, it ends up being not a question of beauty – all these women are noted as style and beauty icons – but a question of normativity. Again, the fact that the looks of Wek or Jones are considered "different" or "exotic" implies that there is a norm of beauty they do not quite reach, something understood as the counterpart of the other, labeled as normal and viewed as neutral. Furthermore, besides the cultural references to Africa in the pictures of both Wek (appendix 1) and Jones (Yoruba-woman and the overtly stereotypical posing as an animalistic panther – appendixes 4 and 5), and the absence of those details in the picture of Campbell, both Wek and Jones challenge the traditional limits of femininity and, therefore, the manner in which female beauty takes place and is presented. If considered on the traditional, Western scale, the gap between their masculine beauty (Jones's especially) and the feminine appearance of Campbell is clear. It is worth specifying that in this case, by masculine, I refer to issues such as posture, clothing, facial expressions and hair style which can be considered manly when contrasted with the traditional features of femininity such as long hair. Of course, six pictures is a small take and I do not consider my analysis to be waterproof, but in the framework of Janell Hobson's writings, the distinctions and underlying beauty ideals seem unmistakable.

Besides of being in the eye of the beholder, the idea and experience of physical beauty is always a construction of both personal as well as shared, public values and representations. Public representations of beauty give birth to and sustain ideals and values and can therefore be considered as political in their nature. Furthermore, the differences between the representations of various ethnic groups in the media imagery often seem to offer whiteness as the norm and blackness, for example, as a curiosity or an intentional sign of acknowledging the increasingly plural society. Méshell NdegeOcello writes that "Her blackness is fine. The blackness of her skin, the blackness of her mind. Her beauty cannot be measured with standards of a colonised mind" (NdegeOcello 1997, 113). So then, am I without choice one of these colonised minds and a victim of the mainly white, European culture I have grown up in, or is the writer coming from a wider, more historical angle? Again, I have take into account the fact that in somebody's opinion, it might be that my own position as white could be restricting in relation to this question. Nevertheless, it is these differing beauty values I wish to take a look at, first historically and secondly, in the practical phenomena of our contemporary society, how the Black body has been and is represented and referred to in

relation to the question of beauty. I wish to make an attempt to interpret Nichols's poetry and try to see how this value-filled "colonised mind" has changed and whether it still can, according to the experience of the Fat Black Woman, be found operating in today's British society.

According to Paula Black, Black women's beauty culture is deeply embedded into everyday culture (Black 2004, 30). First of all, this seems logical since in human interaction encountering differences between subjects is likewise part of everyday experience and the understanding of phenomena such as beauty lies somewhere within these differences. Secondly – although I understand that for Black women the relationship of beauty with the everyday experience becomes more political due to their experiences as the other – I would argue that all women's beauty culture is nowadays strictly tied to everyday culture, because in our everyday lives we are constantly "attacked" by the visual media and the values it carries within it. Moreover, this perhaps applies to both men and women but because of the subject of my thesis I will concentrate on the experiences of women. In the case of bodies and their visual aspects, they – to a sad extent – carry with them values and hierarchies. These values and ideals are created and maintained for the most part by a market-oriented beauty industry which functions like an invisible authority figure. Quoting Peiss, Paula Black writes that once upon a time beauty culture was an expression for personal exercising of beauty, but as beauty became another field of commercialized values, beauty culture became "a culture of shared meanings and rituals" motivated by money (Black 2004, 29). The discussion, then, can be turned into a question of whose values and exactly whose everyday life?

Because of their discussed positions as victims of double marginalization, under both the gaze of whiteness as well the male one, Black women have a challenging position among the ideals of beauty. In relation to this, Debbie Weekes notes (Weekes 1997, 115) that the idea of whiteness as the norm of beauty has been approved by not only Black women but men as well. As the "entire concept of feminine attractiveness" relies on the white standards of beauty (Weekes 1997, 114) this has, Weekes continues, had an effect on many Black women when it comes to their own understanding of their own physical appearance and attractiveness (Weekes 1997, 115). It can often be seen in magazines and photographs that a dark skin has been airbrushed less dark or to look like something in between so that it is hard to tell what the complexion is in fact like. This has been sometimes discussed publicly. Furthermore, there are more than one – especially female – artists who have suddenly appeared more light-skinned and more blonde. This has often followed their big breakthrough. In this kind of framework, it is not difficult to understand what Nichols's Fat Black Woman is objecting to

and why she is using her body in order to achieve her goal. According to Paula Black, Black women have found themselves situated against both whiteness as well as Black men, since after the beauty industry developed and grew, it became a male-owned field of business (Black 2004, 29-30) and while both white and Black men sold skin-lighteners and bleaching equipment to Black women, the Black women themselves chose a different path and refused to sell these products (Black 2004, 29). One interesting angle of the beauty industry which Black continues to explain is the way capitalism run by men became understood as an abuser as well (2004, 38). This I will look at later on, in the analysis part of Nichols poetry, although not directly tied to the notion of beauty but clearly linked to this idea of white, more or less abusive market forces.

Therefore, the notion of beauty has for decades carried with it political implications, such as racial discrimination but also the possibility of resistance and the (white) norm. In her poetry, Grace Nichols writes about beauty both directly as well as in a more subtle manner, about those physical aspects of our bodies which are in silence considered as the standards of beauty. She writes in “Beauty” (Nichols 1984, 7):

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

According to Kobena Mercer, “classical ideologies of race established a classificatory symbolic system of colour, with white and black as signifiers of a fundamental polarization of human worth – superiority / inferiority” – the same idea that Richard Dyer emphasizes in *White*. She continues by explaining how “distinctions of aesthetic value, ‘beautiful / ugly’, have always been central to the way racism divides the world into binary oppositions in its adjudication of human worth” (Mercer 2005, 298). The beauty of this woman seems to lie in the freedom of the body and in the way it is surrounded by nature. It is not in the facial

photograph or in the pounds of the body. Why is fat important, then, and why does the writer keep reminding the reader that this really is a fat woman? Obesity becomes the one visible cultural feature which sets Nichols's female narrator apart from the society around her. Could it be that being fat in today's society is also a statement of being free? Then fatness would become a statement of not wanting to change as well as a symbol of resistance. Furthermore, when read together with Nichols's previous collection including violent depictions of the treatment of Black slave bodies, the resistance of the Fat Black Woman becomes a way of resisting through her body, once made weak and abused. The inability of the white society to touch or mould the Black body is a metaphor for what happened in history but which is not going to happen again – the Black woman's body cannot be owned. Or could it be a way to move away from the myth of the overtly sexual, erotic Black woman by not being true to the standards of it, because the white, mainstream standards are quite different? Moreover, I also sense a trail of sarcasm, a backward way of using essentialism almost, for the purposes of the othered and not those who other. Interestingly, Mercer also reminds how neither the Afro or the Dreadlocks are as 'natural' as they claimed to be and that they are in fact specifically a diasporic phenomenon since they would not function as African in Africa. Mercer adds that "in their rejection of artifice, both styles embraced a 'naturalism' that owed much more to Europe than it did to Africa..." (Mercer 2005, 305).

The question of these essentialist features mentioned – and of stereotypes such as the "Black superwoman" – have in fact been a problem among the academy, since, according to Debbie Weekes (Weekes 1997, 114) there is a gap between those who believe in theory and those who prefer to study the more practical side of the matter. More precisely, Weekes explains, it is a differing understanding of conceiving blackness and the Black (diasporic) identity as a cultural formation (Weekes 1997, 114), which will take us back to the already mentioned postmodern conceptions of identity as a heterogeneous formation. Weekes continues that it appears to be that the academy, especially the postmodern theorists, wish to neglect the idea that there might be possible limits for what it is to be acceptably Black and neglect the idea of Blackness as an "essentialist construction" (Weekes 1997, 114). However, among the Black British population and popular culture, traces of this sort of essentialism can be detected and in reality, as Weekes puts it, a Black woman's racial identity is often related to physical appearance, so that criticism is placed upon those who, for example, straighten their hair or lighten their skin (Weekes 1997, 114). This is considered as not staying true to one's ethnic background and has in history been fought with by exaggerating exactly those physical features that are considered "black" in society.

One of the famous instances is the “Black is Beautiful” slogan developed in the 1960’s as a part of the emerging Black cultural movement. The style created which celebrated ‘the natural’ and ‘traditional’ African clothing – tunics, dashikis, beads and head-wraps, for instance – along with the slogan “Black is Beautiful” used its role as an element of everyday life to draw attention to the Black struggles (Mercer 2005, 302-303). “By inverting the symbolic order of racial polarity, the aesthetic of ‘nature’ underpinning the Afro and the Dreadlocks could negate the negation” which also gave a possibility to challenge the role of “the categories of *Africa* and *Nature* as equally other to Europe’s deluded self-image which sought to monopolize claims to human beauty” (Mercer 2005, 303). Nichols does not directly approach the issue of dreadlocks or Rastafarianism, which in the framework of her poetry seems fitting – she is writing about equality and women’s subjectivity and Jamaica’s religion has often been accused of maintaining a homophobic and sexist culture. For her, this “naturalism” is related to direct depictions of nature. However, she introduces this cultural issue in a wider scale, through references to reggae: “Met him at Birmingham Station.../walking in rhythm to reggae sound/Man” and “Black as the spraying/of a reggae sunsplash” (Nichols 1984, 33;16). According to Dick Hebdige, “...it was largely through reggae, that the Rastafarian ethos, the ‘dreadlocks’ and ‘ethnicity’ were communicated to members of the West Indian community in Great Britain” (Hebdige 1979, 36). Therefore, although Nichols does not link the reggae aesthetics with beauty, she does connect them to the notion of Caribbean community and to the framework of the cultural diaspora that takes place, for instance, through music.

In Grace Nichols’s poetry, Black is not only beautiful. It is the norm of beauty. Unfortunately, in real life the standards and ideals of beauty still echo the old, racist hierarchy as it is still the white, female bodies that make up the most of the mainstream beauty industry. In “Looking at Miss World”, Nichols writes (Nichols 1984, 20):

Tonight the fat black woman
is all agaze
will some Miss (plump at least
if not fat and black) uphold her name

The fat black woman awaits in vain
slim after slim aspirant appears
baring her treasures in hopeful despair
this the fat black woman can hardly bear

And in the last stanza of the poem:

The fat black woman gets up
and pours some gin
toasting herself as a likely win

As far as the female body is concerned – and beauty contests such as Miss World – the Fat Black Woman’s body is depicted here as an outsider. It is not the object, rather, it does not exist. However, the outsider does not seem to be the Fat Black Woman herself, rather, it is her body – overweight and Black – that is excluded. The Fat Black Woman as a subject stands strong, beautiful to herself, engaged in a less miss-like-act, drinking gin and toasting to her own beauty. The tragedy is in the way the fat body is excluded by forces independent from the subject itself – by the forces of society, the ideals and values, by the politics of beauty industry. This is one of Nichols’s more generally feminist poems since it depicts the experience of the overweight female body, without commenting directly on the colour of its skin. Its Black experience is still, implicitly, behind the story since and, as has been mentioned earlier in this chapter, the Black female body is objectified twice – by men as well by white society. Basically, some might argue, a fat white body would still be one important attribute closer to participating in a beauty contest than a fat, Black body. The fact that these poems are so seemingly simplistic almost seems to highlight the fact that it is in simplicity where the most dangerous generalizations and invisible values hide. They are accepted and internalized exactly because they are so simple they go unnoticed and become the norm. According to Gary Clarke, “the symbolic power of style in Hebdige’s analysis” is showing that “the power of subcultures is their capacity to symbolize Otherness among an undifferentiated, untheorized and contemptible ‘general public’” (Clarke 2005, 171). Therefore, by doing this they simultaneously make invisible norms more visible and give credit to those people who are deviant from the norm.

Paula Black comments on the relationship of ethnicity and beauty contests and according to her, after its emergence and development, it was in the 60’s and 70’s when the beauty industry became a target for critique (Black 2004, 38). To feminists, not only was it a sexist industry but it also carried on racist implications and, Black explains, a part of this critique was tied to the emerging Black and counter-cultural politics (Black 2004, 38). Although public criticism took place from the 1960’s onwards and simultaneously with the popular feminist movement of the 70’s, the Black citizens of the United States linked their political activism to beauty culture already, according to Black, in the late 1950’s (2004, 37). The

symbolism that is inscribed into female bodies, found its safe haven in beauty salons (Black 1994, 10). Aspects like hair texture and skin colour became the factors that brought women together as the symbols of appropriate femininity as well as tore them apart – both within and outside ethnic groups. Although Black is talking about African-Americans, the emerging Black politics was a global phenomenon and the acknowledged power of dress-codes and shared hairstyles did reach Britain’s Black communities as well. With a headtie as her example of accessories which “supply a narrative of cultural and social issues” (Tulloch 2000, 207), Carol Tulloch states that during the politically active 1970’s, “the diaspora identities created by Black British women as part of a feminist-cultural discourse were based on and celebrated the diaspora experience. This resulted in a ‘diaspora aesthetic’” (Tulloch 2000, 211). Although not directly concerning the issue of the headtie, Nichols’s poetry does touch the notion of the diaspora aesthetic mentioned. She approaches the issue of clothes and accessories as having a relationship to the question of Black identity, as we will see later on. As the beauty industry started to be criticized, the critique also involved, in particular – according to Black – advertising (Black, 2004, 38). As Black summarizes it (2004, 38), “the modification and commodification of women’s bodies had become both a personal, a public and a political issue”. When it comes to the Black female bodies, then, the political side – both public and personal, if they even can be divided – of identities and belonging reaches altogether a new level, as has been noted here.

2.2. Black Female Body – The Body That Produces?

Nichols’s writing definitely can be seen to have the gender-specific characteristics common of Caribbean women writers. Her women are hybrid in their nature, they are workers, mothers, Black, women and much more. In “Trap Evasions” (Nichols 1984, 14), the Fat Black Woman is described like this:

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

Instead of dwelling in the sad role that might easily be handed out to her, the Fat Black Woman of the poem stands for development and moving on. She is the one to make her own destiny and *treadmills*, *quicksands*, *lies* and *bride ties*, among other things, are equally restricting to her. Nichols is drawing a parallel between these subjects to reflect situations that prevent from movement and freedom. Some of these are more literally restrictive than others, but what brings them all together is the manner in which they restrict bodily experiences, physical movement and personal freedom in all of its forms. In quicksand, the body is trapped and immobile, in marriage, the limits of the body have traditionally been determined. Likewise, treadmills can be destructive as they limit experiences and cut back from one's personal space and freedom. I believe that the message of the poem is that these are the traps the woman wants to go around, traps that might limit her physically or mentally. "Trap Evasions" definitely appears as gender-specific and all in all, it carries an accusatory message since to the narrator, as a woman, men's attitudes are restricting as they not only see her as merely a body, but the way they conceive her body is wrong, which is expressed in the last stanza of the poem. *Spring of children* as a metaphor seems to offer two possibilities for interpretation and it clearly shows mothering as "m-othering"...leading to "experiences of outsidersness and alienation" (Katrak 2006, 212).

Firstly, it might be a reference to the general fact that most women are left with some extra pounds and other physical marks after they have given birth. This reading offers a direct link to the idea of the Fat Black Woman's body as secondary, but this time not to white women but young women, women who have not lost their appeal due to giving birth. In other words, the Fat Black Woman's body is once again secondary to contemporary ideals and values, but this time the criminal is not the capitalist beauty industry or white women, but men and women who mistreat her body on the level of values and attitudes. To her, the men of this poem are part of the network of presuppositions and traditions that metaphorically tie her down. After a history of actual chaining up, Nichols's protagonist now resists the more

symbolical loss of her freedom. Secondly, this could be the woman's protest against seeing a female body only as a possible mother and a 'baby machine' and her body merely as a gateway for offspring. Nichols's traps are those more or less silent traditions people live by without questioning why they exist in the first place. In fact, Ketu H. Katrak defines this subject as an exemplary of women writer's such as Nichols, as she writes that "postcolonial women's texts offer a variety of demystifications of traditional female roles, for instance, wifehood, not as it is traditionally expected to be fulfilling and nurturing but as enslaving" (Katrak 2006, 159). In the context of these poems, the choice of words is interesting since Nichols's *Fat Black Woman* can be seen as avoiding the modern manifestations of enslaving the Black, female body. As her history is a history of mistreatment and exploitation, she now resists the traditions which she sees as possibly enslaving, restricting by means of classification and stereotyping which would limit her authority over her own body and its definitions.

All in all, the poem's simple main point is that there is much more than what meets the eye, the *Fat Black Woman*, a woman, is always more than her thighs – her body – and she aims to avoid occasions which other her body by giving it a narrow classification of what a woman is, a classification that would ruin her body's freedom. A mother or not, Nichols's *Fat Black Woman* preserves a part of herself that is always free of given attributes, giving her the space to be just a woman and to define her self only by herself. The traps to evade are situations in which these are forcefully tried to place upon her and her body. Katrak discusses the idea of the flexibility of the female body, as she notes that both "the elevation of woman as 'heroine' and her pitiable state as 'victim' end up precluding the possibility of a complex female subjectivity" (Katrak 2006, 158). According to her, "a struggle over what is tradition is a battle over the female body – how to control it and keep it familiar within recognizable and legitimized patriarchal codes" (Katrak 2006, 159).

Although the timeframe and the cultural situation differ from "Trap Evasions", the main point remains the same as Nichols writes in "Taint" (Nichols 1983, 18):

But I was stolen by men
the colour of my own skin
borne away by men whose
heels had become hoofs
whose hands had turned talons

...

But I was traded by men
 the colour of my own skin
 traded like a fowl like a goat
 like a sack of kernels I was
 traded

...

Daily I rinse the taint
 of treachery from my mouth

Both poems discuss the ill-treatment of the female body and its different forms of manifestation through the centuries. By once again using religious symbolism, Nichols makes a downright satanic reference to men. These men are depicted as traitors, treating women like animals and making them feel like merchandise to be traded and sold for worthless things. Nichols depicts a situation completely lacking of human dignity and subjectivity, a situation in which a person is of the same value as trivial goods. What I find important is that these two poems seem to complete each other and “Trap Evasions” can be understood as a continuation of “Taint” and as a story of progress of women’s rights over their own bodies since the time of slavery. In “Taint”, the only way possible for rebellion to take place is inside the woman’s head, she has no actual means or possibilities to resist the manner her body is being treated. However, “Trap Evasions” depicts the concrete resistance of the forced ideals of everyday life which is highlighted by Nichols with the concrete metaphors such as quicksand. Both women are depicted as strong – resisting daily discrimination and abuse – but only one of them really has a voice, a possibility to determine her own body, its limits and how it should be treated.

In differing ways, both poems relate to the phenomenon of double-colonization as they make a comment on the objectification of the female body. Whereas “Taint” is written from the angle of an enslaved woman, “Trap Evasions” takes place within a more contemporary framework. Since this is so, “Taint” takes the notion of objectification a step further as it depicts the female body not only as a object but as a commodity to be traded and purchased. Nevertheless, their basic message is the same: skin colour does not equal unity and despite the shared ethnic background, the women of these poems feel that Black men are neither treating them or understanding them correctly and, furthermore, the men in these two poems are obstacles on the way to freedom of the othered body. “Trap Evasions” also relates to the subject of motherhood and the narrow view that considers motherhood and womanhood to be somehow dependent on each other. Lastly, it seems that when using images of the body to create this sense of otherness of women in relation to men, Nichols includes all men, not

Black men solely. In “Taint”, the evil of the men is born from their loyalty to the white supremacists and therefore it does rely on the question of skin colour. However, “Trap Evasions” tackles men in general and in “Afterword”, Nichols mentions “male white blindness” (Nichols 1984, 24).

I do not believe that Nichols has meant to depict men as the enemy, but perhaps she is including them to, firstly, emphasize the gender-specific aspects of Caribbean literature and, secondly, to discuss the myth of loyalty that is based on a shared, ethnic background. When Nichols in “Taint” writes “No it isn’t easy to forget/what we refuse to remember”, it gives off the feeling that she is talking about a shared secret, something well-known but never mentioned (Nichols 1983, 18). The fact that Black people participated in the slave trade is the unspoken truth, the taint of the poem. In the framework of their contemporary societies, values and ideals, everyone is capable of othering. With her poems, Nichols makes a comment in this and at the same time emphasizes the female experience. As her poetry often celebrates survival and development, she is also reminding the reader that in order to deal with the present, the past has to be seen realistically. Only after that anything good can grow from it, even out of the bad things. For as long as we pretend that something never happened, it will be the taint Nichols is writing about. Interestingly, however, Silviane A. Diouf wants to emphasize exactly the unrealistic nature of this poem and notes how “although she expressively exposes a wound that aches in contemporary African Diaspora, the sentiments she describes are anachronistic because they could not have reflected the deported Africans’ point of view. Their autobiographies and interviews clearly evidence that they did not think they had been sold by” or “betrayed by people ‘the colour of their own skin’ because “the concepts of Africa, Africans, blackness and whiteness and race did not exist in Africa and they cannot be utilized today to assess people’s actions at a time when they were not operative.” Therefore, according to Diouf, this “black betrayal model” is an invention of the later generations (Diouf 2003, xiii-xiv). However, people are always shaped by their culture and time frame and it is not difficult to understand why this sort of model would have been created after “racial” questions got politicized. As for the examples of these autobiographies and slave narratives mentioned by Diouf, Helen Thomas – in her *Romanticism & the Slave Narratives : Transatlantic Testimonies* – lists at least Jupiter Hammon, John Marrant, Ottobah Gronniosaw and Olaudah Equiano (Thomas 2000, 201;167;226).

On the backcover of Janell Hobson’s *Venus in the Dark* (2005) Mark Anthony Neal reviews Hobson’s book and notes how after a very long period of being “the object of ridicule, loathing, fascination and desire”, Janell Hobson is now explaining how the Black,

female body has become to function as a “site of resistance and intellectual production”. The divide between Black and white female bodies has its roots deep in history; in fact, the basis for the definitions of womanhood go back to the time of slavery: “during the period of American slavery, constructions of white womanhood as chaste, domesticated, and morally pure had everything to do with corresponding constructions of black slave women as promiscuous, available plantation workers. It is the intersectionality of the various systemic networks of class, race, (hetero)sexuality, and nation, then, that position us as ‘women’” (Mohanty 2003, 55). With this in mind, my hypothesis that this notion of resistance can be found in Grace Nichols’s poetry, in her depictions of the physical and the body. In those depictions she clearly has wanted to paint a picture of survival, through the strong, female body which has been the victim of both physical and mental violence during the previous centuries. First, however, I will take a look at how the Black, female body has been historically depicted and then try to see whether Nichols’s poetry can be considered as bearing a relationship to these previous representations of the Black, female body.

In Nichols’s poetry, the journey of Black women and the change of viewpoint from that of an abused object to an independent subject, the change that I have told I assume the two collections to form and depict together, begins with a poem about the experience of birth. Keeping in mind Hoving’s “gender-specific aspects of travelling”, the poem which starts the journey, called “One continent/to another” (Nichols 1983, 5), seems to carry a double-meaning. Nichols writes:

Child of the middle passage womb
 push
 daughter of a vengeful Chi
 she came
 into the new world
 birth aching her pain
 from one continent/to another

This depiction of a birth could be read as a symbolic depiction of arriving, of coming to a new land. However, I believe that on another level, this really is a depiction of giving birth, of a situation in which giving birth to a child is not a happy, beautiful event, but a cruel, appalling and bloody experience. If asked, many mothers would perhaps say that giving birth is a truly feminine thing and something that goes hand in hand with experiencing womanhood. Here, it is not. The body of the female slave and the feminine event of birth are events of disrespect:

after fifty years
 she hasn't forgotten
 hasn't forgotten
 how she had lain there
 in her own blood
 lain there in her own shit

bleeding memories in the darkness

No matter whether the poem is read as a symbolic birth or a depiction of a real event of giving birth, the memory which remains cannot be accounted for as beautiful. Either way, it depicts a human being in a state of hurt and humiliation. However, if it also depicts a child being born, it adds to the discussion of deprived femininity. According to Lacy Ford, the slaves were treated as objects, which was further maintained by what was known as “the chattel principle’ – the right to buy and sell human beings as property” and “the existence of property rights in human beings” (Ford 2005, 147-149). Therefore, as the slaves were deprived of identity, in the case of female slaves and their experiences which can be considered gender-specific, the slaves were also stripped down of femininity. The notion of femininity and its relationship to the Black female body is a historical and complicated one, as was noted in the previous chapter. Having to give birth in a situation described in the poem above has nothing to do with being respected as a woman or a subject. Your pain is not recognised and neither is your child. Nevertheless, in this context, the female body giving birth is also presented as a vehicle of revenge. The daughter is born of a “vengeful Chi”, revengeful energy (or life force). The child represents the get-back-at-you - attitude of the woman in a couple of ways. Firstly, it symbolizes all the strength in the mother the slave traders have not been able to destroy and, secondly, it is a girl – perhaps already an “unwanted product” for the part of the colonizers as the fact that it is a girl makes the child even more useless as most women are not as physically strong as men or at least were no thought of as such. However, the child is being born and from this poem on, Nichols’s women characters stand for subjectivity and female strength throughout the two collections as she recalls the journey of Black women from the days of slavery up until the 20th century and eighties Britain.

As a matter of fact, throughout Nichols’s collection, this question of children remains and, according to the poems, motherhood – despite its high value – is also a heavy load. In a poem called “Ala”, Nichols writes (1983, 23):

Face up
 they hold her naked body
 to the ground
 arms and legs spread-eagle
 each tie with rope to stake

then they coat her in sweet
 molasses and call us out
 to see.....the rebel woman

who with a pin
 stick the soft mould
 of her own child's head

sending the little-new-born
 soul winging its way back
 to Africa – free

Being a depiction of abortion – assumingly – the poem is in a strange sense simultaneously motherly and cruel. To be dead is to be more free than to be born into slavery and in the same vein, to be a good mother is not to let the child to be born (it might be useful to note here that Toni Morrison's *Beloved* (1987) also introduces a same kind of contradiction). However, as a consequence of taking the control over her own body, the slave woman is finally tortured to death. To “rebel” means making decisions over one's own body and, gender-specifically, over one's own womanhood.). This is the sort of poem in which rebellion results in murder, although the tortured woman's strength still does linger in her resistance, her belief in that she had done the right thing. If we consider the gender-specific aspects of Caribbean women's writing mentioned earlier on in this chapter, the notion of motherhood could well function as its example in Nichols's poetry. It clearly changes in the course of the timeline that can be detected in the two collections, but the undercurrent stays the same – in Nichols's poetry mother is a positive figure, it is the root of survival and even when she writes that *mother is supreme burden* (Nichols 1983,8) the feeling of burden is born from the worry that love causes as happens in the two last stanzas of “Fear” (Nichols 1984, 28):

Our culture rub skin
 against your own
 bruising awkward as plums

black music enrich
 food spice up

You say you're civilised
 A kind of pride
 ask, 'are you goind back sometime?'

but of course
 home is where the heart lies

...

sometimes I grow afraid
 too many young blacks
 reaping seconds
 indignant cities full of jail

I think my child's too loving
 for this fear

“Fear” is about the collision of cultures but it is also one of Nichols’s poems discussing the trope of motherhood: the worry of a mother that her child will have difficulties adapting to his or her cultural surroundings. The fear of the mother springs from her acknowledgement of the fear of the strange and the different which she thinks forms a challenge for the Black children and due to which they might have difficulties with adapting to society. Nichols here describes fear through the image of the body, skin functioning both as a political metaphor as well as a more concrete, almost tangible element describing the clash between ethnic groups and the ones who consider themselves to be “purely” British. Therefore, British here once again stands for white. Cultures rub skin metaphorically and in a more concrete manner during everyday life, as skin colour becomes the marker of otherness and the bruises caused by discrimination are both physical and mental. Lastly, “Fear” is built upon the thought that skin colour implies the whereabouts of home and Nichols hints that some people actually do not even consider that despite the “ethnic looks”, the present location might actually be home. In the same vein, ethnic music as well as food are then understood as intriguing bonuses, but not as standard and daily in their nature. Furthermore, Nichols also implies that this kind of thinking evolves from the feeling of superiority due to an imagined educational hierarchy. All in all, Nichols depicts a society in which different cultures still “rub” against each other instead of merging smoothly. Being a Black mother, the woman of the poem worries that the pervasive nature of fear will become an obstacle for her child, because in the end, fear breeds fear and is one of the obstacles on the way to real multiculturalism.

As for Nichols, when challenging convention, the trope of motherhood follows. The heritage of the mother figure is the constant flow of energy needed for the survival through the decades. Therefore, the trope of daughter as symbol of continuation does exist in the way described by Springfield, and in Nichols's poetry, the emphasis is on the circulation as she describes Black motherhood first as a daughter and later on, as a mother. Likewise, on a larger scale, "One Continent/to Another" (Nichols 1983, 5) not only starts *I Is a Long Memoried Woman*, but it is also the starting point, the birth of the diasporic, Caribbean woman. In "Praise Song for My Mother" (Nichols 1984, 44), the woman thinks back to her youth in the Caribbean:

You were
water to me
deep and bold and fathoming

You were
moon's eye to me
pull and grained and mantling

You were
sunrise to me
rise and warm and streaming

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 your wide futures, you said

Water is one of the elements frequently referred to in Nichols's poems. In the case of this poem it functions as the symbol for something that is positively overwhelming, a surrounding element. Water is one of the basic elements so when drawing a parallel between it and the figure of the mother, the latter is considered to be of high importance – one of the enablers of existence. Moreover, water also links the trope of mother with the Caribbean surroundings. This cultural aspect is included also in the fourth stanza, with the references to the Caribbean nature and, therefore, the figure of the mother does not only symbolize energy but also a link to personal history and cultural roots. As I wrote earlier, the depiction of birth in "One continent/to another" (Nichols 1983, 5) can also be understood as a symbolic depiction of arriving. Therefore, I cannot help but feel that somehow the figure of the mother is both the

actual mother of the female person speaking, but at the same time it is also a praise for the universal figure of the mother as a female entity, the strength of the female body as the source of life force for both itself and its children. Although Ketu H. Katrak (2006, 211) argues that postcolonial women writers – in spite of acknowledging the essential role of the mother – “challenge the romanticization of motherhood as motherland, mother earth, woman as earth-goddess possessing mysterious powers of fertility”, Nichols seems to be approaching the trope of mother from both directions. In “Among the Canes” (Nichols 1983, 27), she writes: “O like my Earth Mother/*Asaase Yaa*/I demand a day of rest” with reference to the story of creation and Earth Mother, then, as a spiritual entity. Likewise, in “.....Your Blessing” (Nichols 1983, 52-55), Nichols writes:

...

Mother I need I crave your blessing

Cover me with the leaves of your
blackness Mother

shed tears

for I'm tainted with guilt and
exile

I'm burden with child and maim

Heal me with the power of your blackness
Mother

shed tears

for I'm severed by ocean and
longing

I'm mocked I'm torn I fear

Cover me
Heal me
Shield me

...

Mother I hear your voice
I hear it far away

...

Heal, my daughter, heal

...

Here as well, although not in such a direct manner, the Mother seems to refer to a spirit, an entity with which the daughter is engaged in a sort of “enchanting” which at the end, heals the daughter: “Mother I need I have your blessing”. The spirit of the mother is also, through the reference to nature (“leaves of your blackness”), tied to the subject of nature, which, in fact, ends up linking it to the notion of Mother Earth. Ketu H. Katrak, when describing the ways in which to resist argues that “covert resistances are couched in folktales, mythology, religious scripture, popular culture, uses of magic and obeah (indigenous ritual practices” (Katrak 2006, 58). Obeah, a term that Katrak brings up, is classified as a “ritual-based healing and harming tradition...located in the French-speaking West Indies” (Chireau 2006, 705). Therefore, if the poem is interpreted as a description of spiritual healing, it ties both the figure of the mother as well as the healing process to a wider, cultural framework, to religion and cultural tradition.

When it comes to the trope of mother, the most important aspect in Nichols’s poems seems to be that the emphasis lies on the mother as a source, but roots are never meant to be a restricting element. Nichols moves from describing brutal childbirth and motherhood in a situation in which the mother sees the killing of her own child as a better option to a more modern description of the worrying mother in contemporary Britain. However, all the different mother figures encountered in the poems have one thing in common. They all want their children to have freedom although their means differ. In “Ala”, the depiction of the slave woman’s decision now seems desperate, but it was her way to seek freedom for her child, perhaps seen as the only way. Perhaps the mother did not feel that she has the right to give such a life to the child and had to let go. In Nichols’s poems, the mother always lets go, not because she does not care but because the child is to have freedom as a subject. *Go to your wide futures, you said* (Nichols 1984, 44) reflects this attitude and the theme continues in “Hey There Now!” (Nichols 1984, 45):

(for Lesley)

Hey there now
 my brownwater flower
 my sunchild branching
 from my mountain river

hey there now!
 my young stream
 headlong
 rushing

...

The poem is once again full of references to nature and, furthermore, water, which continues to appear as a feminine element. Both nature and the appearance of water tie the poem to the others and give it its cultural framework. The mother is once again symbolized by water and the fact that water is seen here as the precondition for the existence of the child, confirms the parallel between mother figure and water and their importance when it comes to creating new life. However, if we return to the notion of freedom of the subject, it can be noticed that the child is referred to as a branching flower and a “stream headlong rushing”, elements which can be seen as symbolizing freedom and free development. They are meant to move forward from their “maker”, just as in the two other poems discussed here. Lastly, Nichols does not only depict motherhood in a symbolic manner, she also tackles more concrete subjects. In “Why Shouldn’t She?”, Nichols writes (1984, 44):

My mother loved cooking
 but hated washing up
 Why shouldn’t she?
 cooking was an art
 she could move her lips to
 the the pleasure
 feeding the proverbial
 multitude (us)
 on less than a loaf
 and two fishes

The poem is in praise of a mother who manages to feed her children although there is not much food to offer. Basically, then, it is also about a mother providing her children with a start in life and continues to introduce the mother as the enabler. Ketu H. Katrak notes how “motherhood is a key tradition venerated and glorified often outside of its realistic parameters in terms of mothers’ actual struggles of feeding and rearing children” (Katrak 2006, 209). This particular poem emphasizes the female strength precisely in the framework of everyday life, as distinct from any kind of mystification. Furthermore, the notion of mothering as hard labour is reinforced by the fact that men have almost no room in Nichols’s poetry and when it comes to raising children, they have none. This is perhaps not the realist view, but Nichols

has chosen to represent only the female and the feminine. Since this poem is about the mother's charity and about everyday "miracles" such as managing to feed a family when there is not much to offer, it is also an interesting point that in Christian mythology, Christ also managed to feed a multitude of people with two fishes (and in that case, bread). The story is quite well-known, due to which it is hard to believe that this would be a coincidence. So, is Nichols comparing two kinds of miracles, the concrete ones taking place in everyday life and the abstract ones? Furthermore, this could also be a retake on the traditional divide between good and evil, the imagery according to which whiteness represents good and darkness – blackness – its opposite. If this is so, Nichols is reforming this opposition by telling a story of a Black mother's charity but using white, Christian imagery to manifest her point and to depict genuine goodness. Lastly, the poem also seems to make a practical comment on the resistance of the "mammy figure" by questioning the idea that resisting this stereotypical image, should automatically mean that – due to the history of Black women as housekeepers – her mother should have hated cooking. Nichols is arguing that if the cooking is based on free will, why should her mother not like cooking for her children.

Despite the appreciated and highlighted role of the mother, Grace Nichols's women are not only mothers. Just like for their offspring, they want to experience freedom also for themselves. In these poems, the freedom of a subject is often represented through the notions of the free body. Emphasizing the female body's biological abilities as the markers of womanhood does have its opposers and it does have its risks, when it comes to the understanding of femininity and what it means to be a woman. Nichols does not leave this subject untouched and I will look at one of its aspects shortly. Caribbean writing in general tackles the notion of gender also outside the framework of mothers and daughters.

Here it seems that we encounter again the problem of whether essentialism is always a negative thing and whether it can be eliminated from the practices of real life. This problem of essentialism was discussed previously in relation to the postmodernist idea of blackness as a social construction and the question of the possible "right kind of blackness". The fact that it is not appreciated in the academy is understandable, but if it continues to exist in everyday life, should it not be valued as a possible means of resistance and, furthermore, multiculturalism? After all, the problem is not in the fact that people as persons and ethnic groups are different but in the attitudes towards this heterogeneity and the possible lack of it. Essentialist thinking clearly has its risks as it for its own part maintains racist othering, objectification and, in the same vein, commodification of cultures. However, who in the end has the right to argue against ethnic minorities' use of essentialism when it for centuries was

the “white man’s right” to classify and put labels on people according to, for instance, their skin tone? In her work, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak has coined and used a concept known as “strategic essentialism” which introduces the intentional usage of essentialist features. Stephen Morton explains (Morton 2003, 75) how the term accepts the critique of essentialist categories, but how it simultaneously acknowledges the fact that those categories cannot always be avoided. Morton adds that strategic essentialism is at its best as a context-specific strategy, so that when applied in an appropriate context, “for minority groups, in particular, the use of essentialism as a short-term strategy to affirm a political identity can be effective.” However, to maintain its effectiveness, the important part is that this identity should not “get fixed as an essential category by a dominant group” (Morton 2003, 75). Moreover, as it seems to be written between the lines that the academic circles all over the world are still predominantly white, why should not Black people, for example, celebrate their ethnic differences if their own experience in life proves that they do matter? Despite the risks of this complicated nature of the phenomenon, claiming the rights to essentialism can also be power, for instance in the framework of beauty. Moreover, it is power in the framework of humor. It is often the case that with authority over something comes the right for humor and vice versa and I believe that Grace Nichols has chosen to use this possibility to convey difference and multiculturalism in her poetry.

It has now been acknowledged various times that even in today’s society, the Black body is differing from the norm of whiteness, although the tools used in order to maintain whiteness as the normative state of things are more subtle than freakshows and public humiliation. Hobson argues that constructions of beauty not only “reflect racial hierarchies” but, likewise, as the “discourses of racial difference shape concepts of beauty...transatlantic black women writers and artists utilize the site of the black female body to contest white supremacy in representations of their beauty and character (Hobson 2005, 10). This idea of Hobson’s basically includes the agenda that I see Nichols writing through her women characters. She writes their bodies always to be subjects, although not always treated as such. After the abuse of slave women, sexual and otherwise, her Fat Black Woman refuses to give her body to society by not giving in to its norms and values. The Fat Black Woman’s body is free from any kind of owning, just like the female slave as her predecessor was not. However, it is the body as a site of struggle that lasted through slavery and now resists more modern difficulties. Nevertheless, I have to add, the question of body strength has its problems, as Hobson goes on to explain – a strong body is not traditionally understood as a feminine characteristic

which adds to the problem of trying to show the Black, female body as a feminine subject (Hobson 2005, 12-13).

According to Sander L. Gilman, when reaching the eighteenth century, “the sexuality of the black, both male and female, becomes an icon for deviant sexuality in general...the black figure appears almost always paired with a white figure of the opposite sex” (Gilman 1992, 175). Furthermore, Gilman continues that when depicting the core of blackness in the nineteenth century, the Hottentot figure remained. Gilman specifies that this was so especially in the case of Black women (Gilman 1992, 173). In the words of Gilman, “The physical appearance of the Hottentot is, indeed, the central nineteenth-century icon for sexual difference between the European and the black”. So, in other words, by the nineteenth century, the Black (female) body had become the other and the opposite of the normal state of affairs. In the fight against this sort of classification and discrimination, Carol Tulloch argues, that “the clothed body” and “accessories which dress the head, hands and feet can...supply a narrative of cultural and social issues” (Tulloch 2000, 207). Tulloch’s example of this kind of political use of clothing and other accessories concentrates on the issue of the headtie which was introduced among Black British women in the 1970’s. The headtie functioned as a symbol for group identity and as a tool in the development of the African diaspora and Black identity which flourished in the 70’s (Tulloch 2000, 207; 214). The result that has been called “diaspora aesthetics” is to some extent encountered also in Grace Nichols’s poetry, although not in the form of a headtie but as beads, as in the beginning of the *I Is a Long Memoried Woman* (Nichols 1983, 5-7):

...
 how she stumbled onto the shore
 how the metals dragged her down
 how she thirsted.....

...
 But O she grieved for them
 walking beadless
 in another land

...

and at the end of both collections, in “Holding my Beads” (Nichols 1983, 86 ; 1984, 63):

...

the power to be what I am/a woman
charting my own futures/a woman
holding my beads in my hand

According to Tulloch, matters such as the headtie, clothes and beads went through a transformation into “characteristic symbols of respective countercultures” and by fighting the general depiction of Black women as either slaves, servants or mammies – which was due to Hollywood’s stereotyping – resulted in diasporic identities and dress became an empowering tool and gave the possibilities “to take responsibility for and claim some level of control over my identity, by choosing to amplify my ‘Otherness’” (Tulloch 2000, 211; 214). For Nichols, beads are clearly more than just an accessory, they make a comment on the the cultural issues by symbolizing the development between what is encountered in *I Is A Long Memored Woman* and *The Fat Black Woman’s Poems*. Beads as a cultural reference end up symbolizing an emerging subjectivity, which will be considered later in the chapter 3.2.

3. The Concept of Otherness

Firstly, both this chapter as well as the next one are meant to be read together. They will offer a consideration of whether it is possible to assume that there is a common thread in the two poetry collections of Grace Nichols. My assumption is that Nichols has with her two collections created a two-piece story when read together, so that it offers a depiction of Black women's journey from the times of slavery until this day (or to be precise, 1980's Britain). More specifically, with her poems, Nichols depicts the collective memory of Black women and shows how they have fought through brutal objectification to reach subjectivity and a voice. To me, the main vehicle in Nichols's poetry is the female body and with keeping in mind everything previously written in this work, I will take a look at how Nichols, by using the aspects and notion of the body, moves from mere objectification to the development of the other as a subject.

It is defined in *Key-Concepts in Post-Colonial Studies* that Othering as a phenomenon is found everywhere, not least because "in general terms, the 'other' is anyone who is separate from one's self" (Ashcroft, Griffiths, Tiffin 1998, 169). Therefore, we all function simultaneously as the other and the othering counterpart and, in other words, no subject position is ever safe from being also the object. In the same book – in which 'other' is located among the key terms of post-colonial studies – it is argued that in the role the term is used when considering the colonized subject, it is constructed on the basis of "the Freudian analysis of the formation of subjectivity" (Ashcroft, Griffiths, Tiffin 1998, 169). However, the fact that although everyone gets to play both roles does not guarantee equality nor does it give everyone the same opportunities to face society as subjects. This is because sociopolitical consequences of othering touch matters much wider than merely the sole experiences of one person. Phenomena such as racism, sexism and homophobia all in their own ways come back to othering, as the other as a term carries within it the invisible implications of normality and, therefore, power. This thesis is interested in the balance between subjectivity and objectivity and in the numerous ways othering is linked to the understanding and the norms of 'normality'. As is mentioned in *Key Concepts in Post-Colonial Studies* (1998), "the existence of others is crucial in defining what is 'normal' and in locating one's own place in the world" (Ashcroft, Griffiths, Tiffin 1998, 169). For the chapter three of this thesis, all these aspects will be considered in the framework of body: skin colour, visible cultural differences and other aesthetic differences present in multicultural societies. In wider political circumstances,

it becomes essential to understand that the ways the rights to other are divided and the manner in which ‘normality’ is constructed and exists are no coincidences.

The Black woman of Grace Nichols’s poetry is othered in two ways – as Black but also as a woman. The struggles encountered by the female slave and those by the immigrant woman in today’s Britain, although fundamentally different, are deep down rooted in the common manner in which the human mind functions through understanding its surroundings as oppositions rather than as a flexible construction. Othering as a phenomenon exists partly because of the need to label and organize. Just like the concept of essentialism mentioned earlier, othering as a phenomenon is based on ‘binary separation’ of what is around us. Furthermore, according to *Key Concepts in Post-Colonial Studies* (Ashcroft, Griffiths, Tiffin 1998, 169), “the colonized subject is characterized as ‘other’ through discourses...as a means of establishing the binary separation of the colonizer and colonized and asserting the naturalness and primacy of the colonizing culture and world view”. On its own, othering would perhaps do no harm and, furthermore, it is essential in the process of developing an identity.

From the viewpoint of a historian, Ludmilla Jordanova writes in her article *History, ‘otherness’ and display* how the term could be applied outside the fields of, for example, literature and art-history, and used for understanding history (Jordanova 2000, 245). This would seem to apply to the cultural studies viewpoint I am taking as cultural studies can hardly be seen as separate from the field of history. Moreover, Jordanova comments on the constructive nature of othering and according to her, “notions of ‘otherness’ can...be more widely applied, since the dynamic between self and other, at individual and at collective levels, is constitutive of all human relationships. Otherness serves as a constant reminder of difference (Jordanova 2000, 245). However, the problems arise from the fact that othering is not free from hierarchies, discrimination and racism and, although innocent and natural in the first place, the right to other implies power relations and it is argued in many references used for this thesis that this right often lies in white, (often male) hands. After all, the term in itself is an implication of there being something that is not other, something that has not been initially seen as an object for othering.

3.1. Objectification of the Other

In our contemporary society, othering hides in everyday subjects which could easily be considered seemingly trivial or which in the sphere of our modern societies should already be exactly that. Ideologies and values hide behind everyday matters, ready to be absorbed by us as citizens. These invisible values concerning matters such as clothes and body weight are part of the world views of all the time younger children as they are fed with fashion from the day they for the first time are clothed. The paradox seems to lie in the fact that at a time which is often considered to be the height of civilization and technological development we simultaneously regress to value bodies and everything that comes with them as a measurement of value. Admiring the mental and the physical do not seem to meet. Perhaps it is the animal left in us that is causing this kind of biological behavior, as the body has through centuries been of interest to human beings. It has been admired, tortured and killed as well as studied and put on a pedestal and even in our advanced contemporary world it still often seems to be that we tend to put matter over mind.

The capability of doing to another person's body what has been done to slaves in the past, I believe, would not be possible unless there has been some kind of belief or justification to see the victims as objects, as something so Other that their pain could not be felt. I am aware that this idea can lead to all kinds of horrifying explanations about how "it just was like that back then", but I do think that the phenomenon of othering as it is discussed and understood today could have functioned this way in past societies. When it comes to the abuse and treatment of slaves, it also comes down to a complete deprivation of basic human rights and existence as a human being. As Nichols's collection *I is a Long Memored Woman* begins with a poem which describes the physical torture, her poems go on depicting not only that but mental abuse as well. However, among the bundle of physical and mental – never independent from each other – abuse, there still lives hope and the belief that things can change for the better. I believe that this feeling of hope is connected to the idea and existence of roots and it is those same roots that finally save the woman in this collection, but likewise offer the energy to the woman in *The Fat Black Woman's Poems* to function as an equal subject in surroundings that constantly imply otherwise. When the discriminated people unite, being the other can also be an empowering experience (although as was already noted, it is not as simple as that since Black and white people clearly cannot be considered homogenous units). Nevertheless, in Nichols's poetry this idea of roots as a connecting power supply does exist. I believe that in these poems the notion of beads functions as a link to the past and as a

concrete representative of a different culture. First the beads are taken away but they will return, in a time when it is possible to manifest one's own culture. History is symbolized through dress in the manner Carol Tulloch describes in her writing. Tulloch quotes Stuart Hall:

The production of a cultural identity is based on retelling of the past, the imaginative rediscovery based on a shared culture, a 'Oneness' which underpins all other superficial differences. The 'significance of difference', results in 'what we really are and become' owing to the intervention of history are concepts focal to the empowerment and creativity of essentially marginalized and invisible people.

(Tulloch 1999, 218)

First of all, the poem that starts off the collection, "One Continent/To Another", describes how *she stumbled onto the shore/how the metals dragged her down* (Nichols 1983, 5) which resembles the well-known image of the slaveships, the animalistic manner in which the slaves were tied down with metal chains. This is the beginning, the starting point after which the slave's body becomes an object in the "new world" for both mental and physical abuse and discrimination in the very strong meaning of the word. Furthermore, not only does the body become an object, but a commodity as the body of the woman slave in the eyes of the slave owners is valued as a tool. In a way, this poem which describes the beginning also summarizes the experience as a whole, not only for the female perspective but also for that of the male slaves (although from a woman's perspective) before letting the rest of the poems go into detail. In one poem, Nichols moves on from describing the initial shock to the moment on the fields, the feeling of which people such as I can only imagine (Nichols 1983, 6-7):

No she wasn't prepared
for the sea that lashed
fire that seared
solid earth that delivered
her up
birds that flew
not wanting to see the utter
rawness of life everywhere

and the men who seed the children
she wasn't prepared for that look
in their eye

that loss of deep man pride

Now she stoops
in green canefields
piecing the life she would lead

How does one piece a life together when there is nothing to hold on to and everything that has once been has been taken away? Even though Robin Cohen argued that being lost in an unknown land and place is normal for every human being, I would have to say that I do not see this kind of situation as ever having the ability to be or feel natural. In this poem the person is stooping exactly because she is lost, standing on a strange ground. Furthermore, stooping hardly sounds graceful, more likely, degrading and awkward. However, in Nichols's poetry the thing that provides the answer to the emptiness of the situation is heritage and roots which can clearly be read from the rest of the poems. When there is nothing else, two things remain: the power of collective otherness and heritage, roots being one part and base for this collective otherness. Nichols describes the women's inner strength in "One Continent/To Another" (Nichols 1983, 6):

But being born a woman
she moved again
Knew it was the Black Beginning
though everything said it was
the end

...

From the darkness within her
from the dimness of previous incarnations
the Congo surfaced
so did Sierra Leone and the
Gold Coast which she used to tread

Besides telling the story of female strength, Nichols also ties the poem to the notion of roots, as she depicts Africa as the source of the woman's strength. Perhaps it is not Africa as such, but as the symbol of heritage, the woman's own culture which seemingly has been stolen from her. In "Web of Kin" (Nichols 1983, 9), the same theme continues as Nichols writes:

and at evenings I will recline
hair full of sun
hands full of earth
I will recline on my bed of leaves
bid the young ones enter sit them

all around me

feed them sweet tales of Dahomey

The poem represents the manner in which the idea of cultural heritage was passed on in midst of slavery. Therefore, in the context of the rest of the poem, *feed* stands for, not only education, but concrete feeding – feeding the children the knowledge in order for it to function as a breeding ground for them. Nichols compares the need for information with actual food, both of which are needed in the process of growing up. Here, this information also functions as the base for resistance and pride. Furthermore, the reference to the kingdom of Dahomey links the story to a distinctively female history and to legends of female strength. Dahomey, located on the West-African coast, has been known for its Dahomey women, generally referred to as amazons. The stories of these women depicted their tallness and strength as well as the fact that they were known to be soldiers. In fact, “Dahomey seemed a place where women prior to the colonial period had enjoyed extraordinary liberties and power” (Bay 1998, xi; 40). As this shared history contrasts with slavery, the acknowledgement of heritage is the constant undercurrent in both of Nichols’s poetry collections which offers the strength needed for the continuation of survival and the fight for subjectivity. However, *I Is A Long Memored Woman* first offers a view into the life of enslaved women and to how their extreme othering took place. Due to the angle from which I am looking at Nichols’s poetry, this thesis will concentrate on the bodily experiences.

Before reaching the freedom the Fat Black Woman celebrates, Nichols goes through the opposite:

The daily going out
and coming in
always being hurried
along
like like...cattle

...

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

...

And the overseer sneering
 them along in the quickening
 darkness

sneered at the pathetic –
 the pathetic display
 of dignity

The poem, “Waterpot” (Nichols 1983, 13-14), at first seems to be a poem about the complete loss of dignity. However, I would like to think that it is really about the spark of self-respect and dignity that remains through moments which could have completely destroyed it. From the viewpoint of the exploiter this might well be a story of the lack of dignity, but once again, it is about the inner strength invisible to the outside eye and therefore to some extent indestructible. This self-pride carries on in the background as the treatment of the slaves lacks respect:

We the women who toil
 unadorn
 heads tie with cheap
 cotton

...

We the women making
 something from this
 ache-and-pain-a-me
 back-o-hardness

Yet we the women
 whose praises go unsung
 whose voices go unheard
 whose deaths they sweep
 aside
 as easy as dead leaves

In “We the Women” (Nichols 1983, 12), Nichols continues drawing parallels between human beings and objects such as cattle and dead leaves, which symbolizes the objectification of the enslaved women, as well as the lack of human dignity. Depicting the treatment of slaves as objects, as tradeable goods continues in “Each Time They Came” (Nichols 1983, 15), in which the slaves are referred to as persons but arrivals, as merchandise:

Igbo/Yoruba
Ashanti/Fanti
Mane

each time they came
she went out to see
them
the new arrivals

...

calves grooved from
shackles
ankles swollen
from the pain

...

To tie a human body down means a loss of freedom, of subjectivity. For the woman character of the poem, these new slaves have names but for the slave traders, they are just like the cattle Nichols was referring to in “Waterpot”. In fact, nowadays people argue about the transportation of animals and its cruel nature and even the treatment of cattle is under constant discussion. Nevertheless, the utter objectification of the slaves and their treatment as objects free of human dignity is depicted in “Sunshine” (Nichols 1983, 21):

...

but where're our shrines?
where're our stools?
How shall I worship
How shall I walk
from now on?

the truth is
my life has slipped out
of my possession

These last two stanzas of Nichols's poem refer to a situation in which a person has been ripped from their ordinary life, which again leads to estrangement even from the most trivial aspects of life, such as walking. Likewise, *stools* refer to a loss of normal, everyday functioning whereas the loss of *shrines* might refer to a loss of history and own religion, which leads to both loss of a culture as well as the personal. Furthermore, here it also connects with the loss of freedom – how to walk with chained feet instead, how to walk when

you are expected to walk like the cattle you are treated as? When the woman in the poem mentions *possession*, she is not only referring to ownership as a symbolic entity, but concrete possession as well. She is the possession due to which she has lost the control – ownership – over herself and her own life. Interestingly, the references to nature as a solid entity once again are a part of the poem. It begins with a pretty depiction of the surroundings which precedes the desperate ending:

Sun shine
with as bright a flame
here
there is red and gold
profusions
in the green
of foliage

there is bird song

The ironically named “Sunshine” at first look does not reveal the hopelessness it depicts. In the poems, nature gives hope and is the link to home. Therefore, the sadness of the poem comes from the fact that no matter how important and familiar nature is, it is not the same and not enough. It is the familiar suddenly turned strange as it does not provide the same kind of life anymore. This creates sadness and uncertainty and is part of the woman’s observation that she is not in control of her own life – and body – anymore. After these thoughts begins the most desperate part of *I Is a Long Memoried Woman*, named “The Vicissitudes”. However, after the low-point comes the counterblow and new hope. In fact, there is a counterpart for this particular poem in *The Fat Black Woman’s Poems* called “The Assertion” (Nichols 1984, 8) which will be analysed in the next chapter. At the end of “Sunshine”, the reader sees a hopeless woman who nearly starts to believe in giving in and reflecting the same kind of despair as the woman in “Without Song” (Nichols 1983, 25):

The faces of the children
are small and stricken and black
They have fallen
into exile
moving without song
or prayer

The fact that there is no song opens up to two different interpretations. First of all, it could be a description of an abnormally grave childhood or, secondly, it could mean that the children

are working in silence, without song. The loss of prayer refers to the loss of one's own religion – and therefore a large part of culture as well – or even loss of faith. The despair of the children is described as overwhelming, the children as almost zombie-like characters. This clearly contradicts with the behaviour of children which would occur under so-called normal circumstances. Playfulness of childhood contradicts with apathy and the bodies of the children have been reduced to unfeeling, non-reacting items:

They have fallen
into silence
uttering no cry
laying no blame

Perhaps the children do not even know who to blame or if they do, they feel that their judgement would make no difference. As they are described as *stricken*, perhaps they just are in such a state of shock that they are not capable of reacting. Nichols describes what they have left, which is mainly a death wish:

They have fallen
into mourning
moving to the shrouds
of tares

This stanza, the second one of the poem, enables a very brutal reading of the text. *Shroud* stands for both the clothing of the dead or a shelter of some sort. So when I assume that in the context of the poem, *tares* refers to a plant, a sort of weed that grows among the actual crop, *the shrouds of tares* could mean a few things. In a practical sense, it can be a reference to the size of the children, so that when they are working in the fields – in itself a crime – they, due to their smaller size, work among the weeds. However, in the framework of these poems, understanding *tares* as having the meaning of a shelter is a reminder of another poem. In “Ala” (Nichols 1983, 23-24), Nichols tells the story of a mother rather killing her child than letting it live in the coming circumstances. In “Ala”, death becomes a shelter and I find the same kind of reference here. The children are moving to the shrouds to die, which becomes their silent bodies' get-away. It is also worth noting that animals tend to have the habit of hiding when they sense they are dying and, as the writer has referred to the enslaved people as being treated like cattle, this might be a justified reading as well. The *tares* become the children's grave and their *shrouds*. Furthermore, Nichols might also be referring to her own

depiction of people having the value of dead leaves, encountered in “Waterpot” already discussed above. Dead leaves rot away among other weeds, the bodies of the dying children rot away among the *tares* which then literally becomes the clothes for the dead. Either way, the children the woman is inspecting, have been born into slavery, into utter objectification of the deemed other and their hopelessness and already-dead-like posture begins to catch hold of the woman watching them:

...

Maybe the thing is to forget
to forget and be blind
on this little sugar island

to forget the Kingdom of Ancestors
the washing of throats with palm wine

to not see that woman, female flesh
feast coated in molasses

Maybe the thing is to forget
to forget and be blind
on this little sugar island

Human beings have the habit of believing that if we pretend not to see, the problems will disappear or at least be more easily dealt with. We adapt to situations we should not by trying not to remember what could be. The poem above introduces Grace Nichols’s strong female character at her weakest and on the verge of giving up. In “Among the Canes” Nichols continues to depict her desperation (Nichols 1983, 27):

Like the cyclic blood
that snaps within her
so too her faith
flowing
in darkness across the fields
now she’s over-run
by the mice of despair

O who will remember me?
Who will remember me? she wails
holding her belly
stumbling blindly
among the canes

...

The parallel between a human being and mere flesh found in “Sunshine” above – “to not see that woman/female flesh/feast coated in molasses” – is still far away from the self-celebrating Fat Black Woman Nichols presents in her poetry later on. Here, a woman’s body is depicted as merely a piece of meat, a meal for the animals. “Among the Canes”, then, is almost like a continuation to the poem preceding it, presenting the same woman after her moment of giving up – when treated as an object, as mere flesh instead of something more human, a person ceases to exist because, in fact, there is no person. Just masses of people treated like animals, like meat. Even mice run over her. Therefore, there have been many who no one remembers, because in a way they did not exist. As it is, the woman worries over her own legacy. She is holding her ‘belly’ which might refer to her being pregnant and the contradiction she is feeling as she has just been struck by the condition of the children around her. If that is going to be the future of her own child, she will have no legacy. However, it could also be that the woman is depicted holding her stomach to draw attention to the exact opposite, to the fact that she is not pregnant. Both her *cyclic blood* and *faith* are *flowing across the fields*, in other words, both are going to waste. I understand the notion of *cyclic blood* as a reference to the woman’s menstruation which here perhaps comes to symbolize more than just the physical phenomenon. I believe that what is also going to waste is the woman’s femininity and, in connection to that, her subjectivity. Furthermore, when considering the attitude towards motherhood in Nichols’s poetry, what is also going to waste with femininity is motherhood. Respect for the trope of the mother has been depicted as strong, but here it is wasting away. Both having and not having children have their downsides, which triggers the woman’s fear that there will be no one to remember her.

In a way, I argue that what Grace Nichols has wanted to do with her poetry collection, is to remember all the women like the one in these poems. Places such as *little sugar island* in “Without Song” above are difficult to locate, the poems are detailed but simultaneously generalizations. According to Herbert S. Klein, Nichols’s native Guyana was a major sugar producer relying on slavery, but since Guyana is not an island, Klein’s other example – Jamaica – might be a better guess (Klein 1988, 132;136). However, in “.....and Toussaint” (Nichols 1983, 83-84), Nichols locates the poem in Haiti and as she writes “and Toussaint in/the Fort de Jour/dying with cold”, a reference to a Haitian slave, Toussaint L’Ouverture, the leader of the Haitian revolution in 1791 (Prince 2001, 44). In fact, according to Arthur L. Stichcombe, Haiti is listed among the main Caribbean sugar islands of the 18th century and (Stichcombe 1995, 34). Furthermore, in “Blow Winds Blow”, Nichols writes (Nichols 1983, 74):

Yes ancestral winds blow
 O ancestral winds blow
 stirring the dust of discontent

...

drumprayers to Vaudoux
 in darkforest clearing
 Toussaint!

Here, *Vaudoux* (voodoo) could also be a reference to Haiti, known for its Voodoo religion. And, if not Haiti, some other French-speaking location in the West-Indies, brought up by Katrak earlier, on page 53. Katrak classified Obeah as a tradition used for both healing and harming. In “.....Your Blessing”, the tradition was used for healing whereas in “Blow Winds Blow” it is practiced in order to rebel, to harm the enemy and help the slave rebellion. Even if the poems could vaguely be situated to Haiti, Nichols’s *long memoried woman* is universal exactly in this respect, she both functions as an example of all the forgotten enslaved women as well as the collective memory for these women, a memory which has no timelines, but which reaches through history so that it would not be respected and not forgotten. In these poems that hint at the location, Nichols is also playing with her own, personal history and the general, universal memory. As it is, memory is also important when it comes to the healing process of the woman of these poems. After the grim section, Nichols starts to depict a healing process – drumspell once again referring to healing as a part of a spiritual tradition, a religious concept – that initiates from heritage and history as she writes in “Drum-spell” (Nichols 1983, 28-30):

Suddenly, for no reason
 though there is reason
 plenty
 I feel the dizzying
 mid-day
 drum-spell
 come over me

...

Now I’m child
 again

...

And I am between
 in the very heart
 of the days
 of blood and sacrificial

slaughter

the sunset offerings
 the feasts
 and gatherings
 the feeding of the
 hungry dead
 the ritual yam sprinkling

O once again
 I am walking
 roots
 that are easy

Once again
 I am in the eyes
 of my sisters
 they have not
 forgotten my name

...

Mother behold
 your wilful daughter

Yes the one who ventured
 beyond our village is back

In the process of developing from the role of an object to subjectivity, I find this poem important. It depicts a vision, a vivid memory of habits and atmosphere of another culture which can be understood as belonging to the framework of the notion of the body. In fact, this could be what Katrak refers to as “a liminal state of consciousness” to which the female protagonist are brought by “the process of the body being exiled”. Katrak interprets liminality as “a space for the female protagonist to cope with, and at times, to transcend exile” (Katrak 2006, 2). This culture is the woman’s heritage, her roots that start to function as the basis of her personal uprising as she begins to find a new start for her life. The vision of the poem not only introduces habits from the woman’s past to the reader but also to the woman herself and breaks her state of apathy. As she starts to collect the pieces of her roots, she in her vision returns to the home village. In Nichols’s poetry, the idea of bodily movement constantly reappears. Here once again, from venturing, walking and returning, better things start to develop. The woman moves in time and her ability to return and remember gives her power:

I must construct myself a dream
 one dream is all I need to keep
 me from the borders of this darkness

I must construct myself a dream
 one dream is all I need to keep
 me from these blades of hardness

from this plague of sadness

This Dream Must Not Be Tarnished

“One Dream” (Nichols 1983, 38), functions as a turning point of some sort. From this poem on – although not easily or right away – the enslaved women begin to find their hope and their voice. The characters start to show inner arrogance and attitude previously unseen and the poems begin to include the previously missing sexual imagery of the body which takes place for the first time in “Loveact” (Nichols 1983, 48-49):

She enter into his Great House

...

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

...

But time pass/es

Her sorcery cut them
 like a whip

She hide her triumph
 and slowly stir the hate
 of poison in

However, the undercurrent here is not at all positive. This is, apparently, a story of a Black maid as well as a depiction of abuse and it to some extent brings the objectification of the female body to a closure as now there is nothing left – physically – that Nichols has not depicted as used. Through the references to sex and breast feeding, Nichols depicts how utterly the body is used. Physically, anything that can be gained from it, is. The family the woman is working for are described as *leeches*, they all take advantage of her in their own way. However, there is a strange tone of revenge to the poem and why I am bringing it up here is the fact that in this poem, the female character for the first time uses her body as a means to an end and she, for the first time, is depicted as a sexual being. Now she is not chained and able to use her body. However, this is exactly – combined with the ironic title – where the contradictions and wrongness of the poem evolve from. In order to be able to get her revenge, to use her “sorcery”, she has to let her body to be utterly exploited and sexually abused. It is a dark angle to understand this poem as an introduction to what love and sexuality can mean, or have meant in the past.

When thinking back to the poem “Sunshine”, one possible interpretation that would conveniently tie these poems together is once again the strength found in the understanding of heritage. Nichols’s female character still had her past, she had the possibility to return to memories that are good. If we think of the children depicted in “Sunshine” as possibly having been born on the “new continent”, they do not have those memories to hang on to. Although it has been seen earlier that Nichols’s poetry to some extent refuses to fall victim to melodramatization of memories, she still seems to be saying that a person needs something good in their past in order to be able to evolve. However, she is not saying that people should cling on to these things but, in fact, to use them to reach change. Throughout Nichols’s both collections, the idea of memory and its relationship to heritage is the backbone of survival and development. As it has been seen here, it also has an essential role as the objectified other becomes a subject with a will and power over her own life and body.

3.2. The Other as a Subject

In her *Blood, Bread, and Poetry* (1986), Adrienne Rich poses a question: “where, when and under what conditions have women acted and been acted on, as women?” and goes on to state how “wherever people are struggling against subjection, the specific subjection of women, through our location in a female body, from now on has to be addressed” (Rich 1986, 214).

Locating one's own body, to Rich means understanding all the parts of identity, all those attributes by which her body is classified and judged – “I was located by color and sex as surely as a Black child was located by color and sex – though the implications of white identity were mystified by the presumption that white people are the center of the universe.” (Rich 1986, 215).

After the what has already been written here, it can be noted that the manner in which Grace Nichols's women approach and reach their subjectivity, is for the most part through their bodies. With them, they emphasize beauty, freedom and breaking free of metaphorical as well as actual chains. If the two poetry collections are seen as presenting a continuous, centuries long story of Black female history, the protagonist of “One Continent/To Another” (Nichols 1983, 5-7) has come a long way to reach the position of the woman in “Alone” (Nichols 1984, 10):

The fat black woman
sits alone
gathering
gathering
into herself
onto herself
soft stone
woman moan

...

drift dome
river foam

...

the fat black woman
sits alone
gathering
gathering
into herself
onto herself

gathering gathering
gathering gathering
gathering gathering

silence

Recalling the depiction of the birth at the beginning of *I Is a Long Memored Woman*, I find this, in fact, to be its counterpart. Moreover, once again the movement is associated with water – the Middle Passage or the instances such as the Empire Windrush can be thought of in relation drifting. The woman’s solitude exaggerated, she is depicted as something that just happened to, like *drift dome*, appear on the shore. Dome is a very Nichols-like, humorous reference to the woman’s size and shape. However, dome is also a matter related to things holy and appreciated. If the woman’s moaning is meant to be a reference to the act of giving birth – and through that to “One Continent/To Another” – this time its significantly different in its nature. Although in both poems the woman is depicted as suddenly appearing, confused by her sudden new surroundings, there are some notable differences to interpret. What also ties the poems together, is the role of water as a transporter, the sea as something that has led to development and change by moving around. After the arrival in the new land – depicted as a symbolical birth – the female protagonist of “Alone” is referred to as *soft stone*. Assumingly, soft is a reference to her physical appearance (the further meaning of which I will explain shortly) whereas stone is something that is durable and which by its weight maintains its place as it might be difficult to transport. This protagonist’s situation, therefore, differs from the state of the woman in “One Continent/To Another” who had lost all authority over her over body – she functioned because she was forced to, whereas the character here decides not to move until she is ready. She gathers herself – grows both, I believe, mentally and physically – before she goes any further. I assume that the repetition of the word *gathering* at the end of the poem, is meant to represent quite a long period of time, so that it goes on and on and on and then – silence. Silence symbolizes the moment when the woman is done, she is no longer preparing herself but decides to go on. Both protagonists felt disconnected from themselves, but the difference is that the one in “Alone”, despite being lonely, is alone as a subject. She can decide for the direction of her future.

The *gathering* not only refers to pulling oneself together mentally, I believe it is also a reference to actual physical growth. The female character’s emerging subjectivity is symbolized by an “emerging”, growing body. Obesity becomes once again the feature which sets Nichols’s female narrator’s body apart from the society around her, it becomes a statement of being free, a means for resistance. According to “Invitation” (Nichols 1984, 12):

If my fat
was too much for me
I would have told you
I would have lost a stone

or two

...

But as it is
I'm feeling fine
feel no need
to change my lines
when I move I'm target light

Come up and see me sometime

The woman's body is depicted in the poem as a curiosity, who invites people to come up and get to know her. Therefore, the poem not only celebrates the woman's confidence over her own body, but also presents the body as a strange entity worth knowing. She is the authority over her own exoticism, her treatment as a the modern "Hottentot venus" and invites people to "the show". Her body now has the power to define its limits. Brutal descriptions have changed into descriptions of control over her body, beauty and self-worth, as Nichols in "Invitation" writes that "My breasts are huge exciting/amnions of watermelon/your hands can't cup". She describes the woman's body as being too much to handle. Moreover, the woman's rights to her body's limits are present in lines such as "Black as the intrusion/of a rude wet tongue", where invitation contrasts with forced approach (Nichols 1984, 16). Likewise, in "Loveact" discussed earlier, body and sex were used merely as a means to an end, with the title having an ironic feel to it. As contrast to that, Nichols writes in "Like a Flame" (Nichols 1984, 60):

my eyes
make four
with this man

there ain't
no reason
to laugh

but
I laughing
in confusion

...

I nod

I like this man

Tonight
I go to meet him
like a flame

Interestingly, “Like a Flame” is in fact from *I Is a Long Memored Woman*, it is the middle part of a poem called “I Go to Meet Him” (Nichols 1983, 36-37). However, Nichols has decided to omit the parts that refer to slavery, such as “bleeding and raging to death inside yourself” or “broken and twisted...watching your blood run/thin and saltless to the earth/as you grip the throat of cane/kin of my skin you are” (1983, 37). Together, the three poems are depicting the body’s relationship to sex, the way it changes and finds new possibilities to manifest itself. Whereas in *I Is a Long Memored Woman* sex is depicted either as abuse or as shadowed by the loss of subjectivity of both men and women, in *The Fat Black Woman’s Poems* – due to the body’s freedom and authority – , it is depicted as having unconditional value. There is nothing forced – the decisive “I nod” referring to an independent decision – and nothing is gained from the meeting, except for authentic feelings.

In “...And a Fat Poem”, Nichols’s protagonist states (Nichols 1984, 17):

Fat is
as fat is
as fat is

Fat does
as fat thinks

Fat feels
as fat please

...

and fat speaks for itself

Nichols’s Fat Black Woman’s body symbolizes a constantly on-going, cultural statement about the strength of her body, and through her resistance, of her will power and subjectivity. However, Nichols takes this further as the celebration of the fat, Black body is also depicted against the history of slavery when Nichols writes in “The Fat Black Woman’s Motto on Her Bedroom Door” (Nichols 1984, 18):

IT'S BETTER TO DIE IN THE FLESH OF HOPE
THAN TO LIVE IN THE SLIMNESS OF DESPAIR

It could be argued that in our contemporary society, a person's body – let alone a female one – can never exist without being under the gaze of others. A body as an entity is always visible and always on display and as these four poems of Nichols depict the emergence of the Black female subject, its role in society as well as its strength, they hide among the depiction of resistance a more historical angle. The motto on the bedroom door can be understood as a statement against the ideals that value slimness, basically, that it is better be overweight and lead a happy life than to value being skinny over everything else and live in despair. However, “to die in the flesh of hope” could also be a depiction of possibilities of the contemporary England as contrasted with “the slimness of despair” as symbolizing the history of slavery. Then the idea of fatness would again be a reference to the body's freedom which leads back to Bordo's notion of anorexia as a “white illness”. Just like disorder such as anorexia can be considered to be a personal reaction partly to outside pressure, in Nichols's poetry, obesity becomes a cultural statement against this pressure. Furthermore, it concentrates on the whiteness of this pressure and the norms of beauty behind it and as a protest, celebrates the Black, fat body in an essentialist manner.

According to Ketu H. Katrak, “despite tragic and negative conclusions..., in women's texts, it is important to recognize the strategic use of those same female bodies, often the only available avenue for resistance” (Katrak 2006, 3). Katrak writes that “female protagonists undergo... 'internalized exile' where the body feels disconnected from itself, as though it does not belong to it and has no agency” (Katrak 2006, 2). Katrak also described – which was noted earlier – that in the texts she studied, the female protagonists' efforts to resist sometimes had negative results such as murder and suicide. Although Nichols's characters leave behind the slavery and are depicted as developing a strong subject position, the results of their resistance of the norm remain. These negative consequences evolve from the death incidents presented in *I Is a Long Memored Woman* to the isolation felt by the female character of *The Fat Black Woman's Poems*. Although the kind of loss of agency over her own body as was depicted in “Sunshine” (Nichols 1983, 21) no longer takes place, internalized exile now exists in the way encountered in “Looking at Miss World” (Nichols 1984,20). The outsider does not seem to be the Fat Black Woman herself, rather, it is her body – overweight and Black – that is excluded. The Fat Black Woman as a subject stands strong, the tragedy is in the way the obese body is excluded by forces independent from the

subject itself – by the forces of society, the ideals and values, by the politics of beauty industry.

Chandra Mohanty writes about a multiple consciousness found in the writings of, for instance, Black women also known as “mestiza consciousness”: a consciousness of the borderlands...born of the historical collusion of (Anglo and Mexican) cultures and frames of reference. Mestiza consciousness is a term originally coined by Gloria Anzaldúa in her *Borderlands* (1987) (Keating 2005, 4). According to Mohanty, Anzaldúa’s term refers to a plural consciousness in that it requires understanding multiple, often opposing ideas and knowledges, and negotiating these knowledges, not just taking a simple counterstance” (Mohanty 2003, 80). In the previous chapter I mentioned collective otherness in connection with the discussion of roots. Although the concept of othering implicitly carries with it all the makings of hierarchical thinking and understanding of the world – and originally is based on it – it does not rule out the possibility for the othered objects to stand out and define themselves as subjects. Instances such as the composing of the slogan ‘Black is Beautiful’ is an example of taking a negative image and turning its meaning into a positive statement. A simple sentence like the one above is a good and well-known example of being the other, but also simultaneously – by using the negativity of the images used for the discrimination – being independent and strong. Subjectivity emerges from the ability to define one’s self. Even the name of Nichols’s poetry collection echoes this kind of usage of language. Named *The Fat Black Woman’s Poems*, it plays with the stereotype of Black women being physically bigger than their white counterparts but instead of being stereotypical or a tasteless joke, it is actually just a glimpse of everyday life: being a fat and Black woman is not a stereotype for someone to define, it is an experience equal to being, for example, white and skinny. As Nichols writes in a poem called “The Assertion” (Nichols 1984, 8), it is a birthright:

This is my birthright
says the fat black woman
giving a fat black chuckle
showing her fat black toes.

All in all, the poem is about the Fat Black woman taking pride in herself:

Heavy as a whale
...the fat black woman sits
on the golden stool
and refuses to move

The white robed chiefs
are resigned
in their postures of resignation

This has not always been a matter of choice and the subject's pride in herself differs considerably from the possibilities offered to the woman in *I Is a Long Memored Woman*. In "Sunshine" discussed in the previous chapter not even stools existed whereas the woman now sits on a golden one. Considering the opposition of freedom and slavery which occurs in Nichols's poetry, this is clearly a depiction of a situation in which "the tables have turned" – the woman whose ancestors lost their lives in slavery now sits on the ruler's golden stool, something which would have been impossible during the earlier centuries. The body functions as a symbol for the woman's overwhelming existence – her *body ringed in folds and heavy as a whale* (Nichols 1984, 8) is, due to its size, impossible to move from its ascendancy. Her physical otherness provides her with strength and visible subjectivity. In fact, this link between the strength of body and that of a subject occurs throughout Nichols's two poetry collections dealt with in this thesis and, as I have already noted before, fat is not only excess weight but the symbol for resistance and the strength of a subject:

The fat black woman
could see through politicians
like snake sees through rat

...

she knows the game
the lame race for fame

...

But if you were to ask her
What's your greatest political ambition?
she'll be sure to answer

To feed powercrazy politicians a manifesto of lard
To place my X against a bowl of custard

The problems arise from the fact that even in today's society, her subjectivity clashes with that of the mainstream and, however multicultural Britain is claimed to be, it still considers the overweight, Black women as objects, as the other. There was, and according to Nichols's poems still is, a long way to go before Black really is equally beautiful. Furthermore, Nichols is not only claiming Black as a beautiful, she is also drawing attention to the fact that there is

a complicated relationship between the notions of Black, fat and beautiful because the understanding of beauty is implicitly still white and white beauty is implicitly skinny. According to Nichols's poetry, not only Black but also fat is beautiful. My belief is, however, that this is not merely an advertisement for the XL-size but the idea of being fat has a deeper meaning of power and a role in the formation of subjectivity. The female slave of *I Is a Long Memored Woman* kept her mental subjectivity but had no possibility to physically resist the objectification. The Fat Black Woman of the other collection is doing exactly what her ancestor could not do – she is resisting through and celebrating her othered body and in the process defining the limits of beauty. Once again, Nichols's tactics for addressing problems consist of depicting the everyday life. As Chandra Talpade Mohanty argues, issues such as subjectivity, identity and political consciousness, besides organized movements, have to be addressed also “at the level of everyday life” (Mohanty 2003, 77).

However, instead of only depicting the experience of self-exile, not belonging to herself and her female body (Katrak 2006, 158), *The Fat Black Woman's Poems* concentrates on presenting the emergence and maintenance of self and subjectivity. According to Carol Tulloch,

Cultural identity, an evolutionary force with a soul, exists engaging the politics of identity into the cultural discourse. The formulation of a cultural identity by Black British females ...and Caribbean women, is not an unbroken line from some fixed origin but framed by the cultural exchange within host societies, and between members of the African diaspora based on a shared experience, to legitimize the dual dynamic of the cultural identification of 'Black British'.
(Tulloch 1999, 218)

The Fat Black Woman's subjectivity can be seen as this kind of construction, although tenacious in the face of white normativity. Both collections end with belief in change, in the fact that the world is never static (Nichols 1983, 75 ; 1984, 61):

This Kingdom will not reign
Forever
...

Soft winds can turn
volatile
can merge with rains
can turn hurricane

Mountains can erupt
 sulphur springs
 bubbling quick
 and hot

and that change may entail survival (Nichols 1983, 87 ; 1984, 64):

I have crossed an ocean
 I have lost my tongue
 from the root of the old one
 a new one has sprung

In “Epilogue” above, Nichols represents her female protagonists’ as subject to possible change, she leaves the ending open for the women – beads symbolizing both a culture as well as the once scattered history in comparison to the present state of self-assurance – and writes in “Holding my Beads” (Nichols 1984, 63):

Unforgiving as the course of justice
 Inerasable as my scars and faith
 I am here
 a woman...with all my lives
 strung out like beads
 before me

It isn't privilege 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

4. Conclusion

When I first read the poems of Grace Nichols, I did not see the large, historical scale on which they can be placed and which they deal with. However, when I turned to *I Is a Long Memored Woman* after reading *The Fat Black Woman's Poems*, the poetry collections seemed to form an integrated whole, a continuous story that spans from the centuries of slavery, up to the contemporary British society. The way these two books together form a connection, is also confirmed by the fact that they share eight poems, taken from *I Is a Long Memored Woman* and added to the end of *The Fat Black Woman's Poems*. Assumingly, this is done in order to remind the reader about the past of the contemporary protagonist, to open up moments in her history that perhaps do not stand out if reading only the latter collection. Therefore, the underlying hypothesis for my thesis was that Nichols is recalling the journey of Black women, their emergence from the position of an object to that of a subject, to freedom. This is done through the notion of the Black, female body and its journey, firstly, in the form of the Middle Passage and, secondly, as a voluntary migration to Europe. In the former collection, Nichols uses the images of the female body to depict literal physical abuse and discrimination. The female slaves are treated as property, the women have no agency over their own bodies, its functions or appearance. Furthermore, they are not only deprived of the freedom of their bodies, but in connection to them, of their femininity, their womanhood. In contrast to this kind of extreme subjection of the body (referred to in this thesis as chattel slavery), Nichols's *Fat Black Woman* celebrates her body, its freedom and its otherness in relation to the white, British society.

The notion of journey is depicted both as a literal as well as a mental one. For this thesis, I used the idea of the Caribbean peoples as peoples of diaspora. As their history is tied to slavery and forced migration, they can be seen as having diasporic origins. This idea is based on the expanded meaning of the term diaspora, traditionally understood in relation to the Jewish dispersion and cultural history. However, diaspora as a term has reached the studies of Chinese, East Indian and Black Britain, among others. Its meaning has changed so that it can now be used in reference to various groups of people living outside their original homeland. Furthermore, diaspora no longer refers solely to exile and forced migration, but also to voluntary migration and, therefore, it can also be seen as a possibility not as a loss. As the new, multicultural identities are being formed through the process of optional movement, they become the founders of cultural diaspora which spreads and evolves among literature, music, food and other aspects of cultural life. Grace Nichols as an example of this voluntary kind of

migration is a representative of the Caribbean cultural diaspora and in her writings, she presents the multicultural experience of her protagonists. Nichols depicts the identity of her Fat Black Woman as a construction, an evolving combination of roots, history and change brought by new experiences. Nevertheless, Nichols is not arguing that voluntariness automatically brings freedom and equal subjectivity, but she is presenting the ways the othering of the Black, female body has changed, how it still continues to exist. In a society such as Britain which has for a long time been considered multicultural, Nichols's Black women still are others. The discriminating process behind this just has changed from direct violence into the form of silent and invisible hierarchies that still label the Black body as an outsider. The journey of the Black woman's body, as depicted by Nichols, continues as a mental struggle against the society's pressure. From the first depiction of the Middle Passage, to the everyday depictions of life in London, movement of the body is in the centre of the experience.

Just as the trope of the body follows throughout Grace Nichols's two poetry, so does the concept of otherness. In fact, they go more or less hand in hand, as both collections present a feeling of otherness and experience of being treated as the other. These feelings and experiences of otherness are born from the strangeness of the body, from the way the Black, female body are seen as deviating from the norm. The nature of this othering changes, however, as Nichols takes her female protagonists through history. The body of the female slave was othered in ways nowadays impossible to comprehend, her body was treated as a mere object and, according to Nichols, in the manner more likely associated with animals. Nevertheless, the process of othering follows Nichols's women, although the manner in which it occurs evolves from the direct, physical abuse to subtle manifestations. Nichols challenges the invisible norms and values that still echo the white experience, the invisible norms of white supremacy. Various images of the Black, female body are used in comparison as well as in opposition to these norms. As the body becomes the symbol and representation of otherness, however, it also becomes the symbol for female strength and resistance. In the historical framework of Nichols's poetry, the notion of the body represents freedom and strength and it is possible to trace the development of this strength in the poems. By strength Nichols is not referring only to physical endurance but also to the strength that is will-power. Becoming a subject, in Nichols's poetry, means development that takes place through adapting to change and situations which are initially strange and unpredictable. Therefore, even if at times melancholy and desperate, her poetry is never bitter. Both poetry collections represent a woman who encounters shockingly strange situations and has to live under the

imposed role of the other, but by finding power in their heritage and their roots, body and mind, turn the negative factors into positive outcomes – and survive.

Furthermore, othering is a normal practise encountered in everyday life and something we all participate in while processing our identity. However, Nichols comments on othering that takes place within society's structure, its invisible norms, beliefs and the ways issues that are seemingly neutral actually maintain systematic discrimination. For this thesis, I chose beauty ideals and values as the example of embedded values that take place in society. In her poetry, Grace Nichols juxtaposes Black and white female bodies in their multicultural surroundings. In the process, she redefines beauty and by doing that, uncovers those transparent values that keep dominating the media imagery and society in general. After the past full of discrimination, Nichols's *Fat Black Woman* highlights her blackness – of both her body and her everyday experiences – and celebrates her othered body. In the framework of beauty ideals, Nichols also deals with the sphere of stereotypes and how the history of racism can still be tracked down as she contrasts the terms such as “steatopygous” with the slim and white contestant of Miss World. The poems introduce the Black female body as the opposite to the unspoken norm, but they do not submit to it.

What also relates to the issue of physical beauty, is the idea of the “exotic other” and in the pictures added as appendixes, the representations of blackness and beauty cover a wide scale. The juxtaposition of “exoticism” and “the norm” is present in these examples of media imagery, as the pictures of the three women all play with normativity and stereotypes and, through conscious choices, reach for different stereotypes and images. Campbell's picture is loyal to the white imagery, whereas Wek's and Jones's images highlight their “blackness” – also in an essentialist manner. While these women are all examples of beauty, the norms to which the pictures rely on in order to convey it, are different. In other words, both Wek and Jones could be seen as “exotic others”, whereas Campbell is very close to “the white norm”. As for the exotic others, a great deal has been written on the subject, discussing the manner in which other cultures – such as those of immigrants – are turned into commodities: clothes, music or food are seen as exotic bonuses, not as a neutral issue. In Nichols's poetry, this takes place in comparison with the white, Western culture. In fact, if our contemporary world were truly multicultural, exotic others would not exist. However, Nichols is hinting that some people still want to be able to choose from this “exoticism”. She describes how exotic goods – such as food and music – are welcomed while the Black woman's identity is constantly under the gaze of the majority as her identity and belonging are determined by the colour of her

skin. In other words, issues such as homeland are still judged by the colour of the skin, although it might be in complete disagreement with what the subject feels inside.

I believe that this silent nature of the norm of whiteness is what Grace Nichols's *Fat Black Woman* is fighting against. She does so by writing about her body, because in the world of othering, the one who defines has got the power. By writing about her own body she gains the authority over it and therefore, her identity. The *Fat Black Woman* discusses and uses exactly those features that her surroundings would consider as the signs of difference, of the other. Furthermore, although I said earlier that I do not consider Nichols's poems as primarily feminist poetry, her *Fat Black Woman* definitely comments on the limits and representations of femininity. Under both the male as well as the white gaze, the Black, female body is attacked from two directions simultaneously. To the extent to which Nichols's characters refuse to fall victim to the male norm, the poetry can be defined as feminist in nature. Furthermore, the way the poems concentrate only on the female experience and hardly remember the existence of men – unless they appear as the oppressors of the female body or as weak old men – they can be considered feminist in their agenda to bring up the female strength. However, although the society treats her – indirectly as well as on purpose – as the other, she refuses to take up the position of an object. Furthermore, as Bordo writes, in the sphere of femininity, much depends upon the acceptance of norms and practises (Bordo, Jaggar 1989, 15). Nichols's characters' femininity does not fit the white, British world and its standards around her. Again, general beauty ideals exercise social control on the *Fat Black Woman's* body. However, the woman in *The Fat Black Woman's Poems* is claiming her voice and taking up space for her body because she has the possibility to do so – unlike the woman in *I Is a Long Memored Woman*. The female body ends up as the metaphor for freedom. This concept of freedom refers to the body's place and role in the contemporary world but also on a wider scale, as the contrasting image to the slavery experienced in the past by Black women.

If it is true that “'British' is the name imposed by the English on the non-English” (McLeod 2004, 17), then it seems clear that Nichols's female protagonist is not interested in becoming English, if she cannot do it on her own terms. Both works present a woman who is not willing to let go of her own heritage, even if it results in discrimination or even death. The poems challenge the authority over the definition of multiculturalism as a term and the way white citizens by implication get to define it and look at it as outsiders. Just as was the case with the “exotic other”, multiculturalism by definition is a white invention and, therefore, conflicts with its own meaning. There is a strong connection between body and identity and, furthermore, our contemporary world often revolves around the physical. In Nichols's poems,

the connection of the body and identity in a multicultural society is treated as central. This is understandable, as a person's body is always central and inescapable – extreme attempts result in self-mutilation and eating disorders, even suicide. This inevitable role of the body combined with its high contemporary value form a challenge for the Black, female body as it fights both for its place among the white ideals and the given role of the other. Nichols's women want to be able to define themselves, instead of being defined from the outside, based on their looks, their body or the colour of their skin. The identity of Nichols's contemporary woman can be characterized as flexible – she does not want to be given one role. This flexibility contrasts with the label of a slave, encountered in the past. Lastly, the role of the body in contemporary society is, in general, important and central. It almost seems that, with the names of her collections, Nichols is asking why the long memoried woman – instead of gaining respect – becomes viewed as just one more overweight, Black woman under the Western gaze. Both collections challenge discrimination, both in their own ways – ways that would have been possible in the past and those that are offered now. Through the images of the female body, Grace Nichols wants the reader to compare history to the contemporary world, see the evolved and hidden forms of racism and discrimination – the embedded othering – and think about the real meanings and possibilities of multiculturalism.

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APPENDIX 1



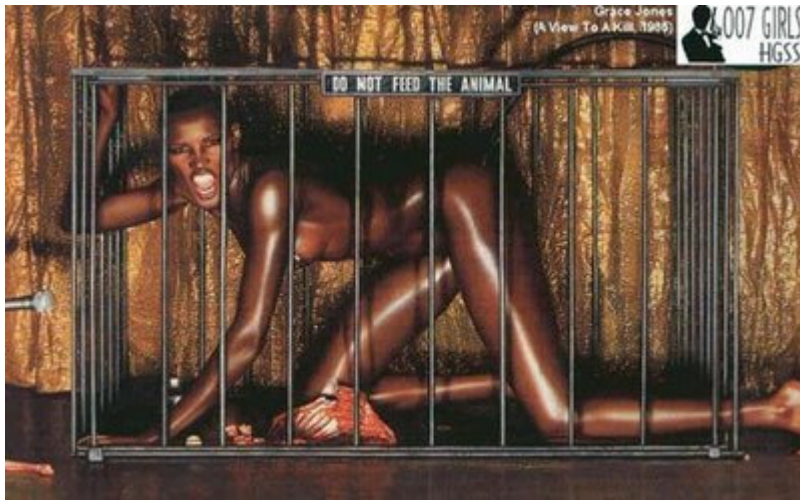
APPENDIX 2



APPENDIX 3



APPENDIX 4



APPENDIX 5



APPENDIX 6

