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FREEDOM UNDEFINED:  
BREAKING (NEO)COLONIAL STEREOTYPES  
THROUGH VOICE AND PERFORMANCE IN THE  
POETRY OF GRACE NICHOLS



*Hannah Regis*

Grace Nichols, the Guyanese-born poet, wrote her first three poetic collections—*I is a Long Memored Woman*, *The Fat Black Woman's Poems*, and *Lazy Thoughts of a Lazy Woman and Other Poems*—as a new immigrant to England in the 1980s. All three texts feature a distinctive woman as a central speaker who rejects colonial, racial and social stereotypical roles. Through an examination of a selection of poems from *I is a Long Memored Woman* and *The Fat Black Woman's Poems*, this essay interrogates how Nichols's experimental poetry aspires to build bridges and communicative networks across the diaspora and most importantly, focuses on the modalities of intervention and healing in the wake of colonisation with its unspeakable legacy of violation and violence.

The collections link two subversive and historically marginalised groups: the unnamed African-Caribbean enslaved woman bearing misogyny, abuse and social restriction on the colonial plantation<sup>1</sup>; and the anonymous liberated migrant black woman who encounters related hostilities of racial stereotyping and profiling in the diaspora. This essay engages a close-reading of Nichols' complex deployment of the oral tradition—with its designated focus on voice, speech and call and response manoeuvres—elements of the carnivalesque, illustrated in the motifs of improvisation code-switching and performance, and a bacchanalia aesthetic. Nichols encapsulates ideas of confrontation and rebellion to craft a poetics that depict

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<sup>1</sup> This collection—*I is a Long Memored Woman*—is separated into five segments with each chronicling a different stage in the journey of the unnamed woman. Her life spans other women's ordeals in the diaspora and her context reflects the uncanny link between those generations who are still searching for healing in the modern world.

trajectories of accommodation, mixing, resistance and survival. She is in effect, challenging linear European narrative conventions, which elide the powerful polyphonic undertones of postcolonial discourses.

*I is a Long Memoried Woman* and *The Fat Black Woman's Poems* include identifiable Afro-centric elements of parody, satire and masquerade which are bound up in the aesthetics of Carnival. From its initial adaptation by enslaved African groups, the Carnival was a site of rebellion and a space of possibility for the masses to test the parameters of their strength against systems of oppression particularly through performance. Historically, it was a ritualised occasion that parodied the inter-racial encounters on the colonial plantation. According to Gordon Rohlehr in his essay, "Carnival Cannibalized or Cannibal Carnivalized", its legacy can be traced to 1805-1806 (122). The constituent parts of Carnival comprised both African cultural forms and syncretised West Indian expressions, which served as a cultural bridge between the New World and continental Africa. Apart from performance and parody, other ethnic cultural markers crossed the Atlantic with the slave ships and evolved into Obeah spells, ghost stories and trickster tales. Just as visual artists<sup>2</sup> adopted creative strategies from West African sacred artifacts to streamline and stylize their New World art, this essay submits that Nichols borrows cultural and oral tropes from ancestral cosmologies to craft a retributive and experimental New World poetics as a basis for self-reconstruction.

The transformative effect and inscription of oral culture in literary discourse is of pertinence since, as Kamau Brathwaite avers in *History of the Voice*, it involved the power to validate, define and anticipate the direction in which Caribbean culture was moving (11). Louis Regis extends Brathwaite's position by offering a critical examination of the uses of the oral tradition, which include its function as verbal warfare, its role in recording, transmitting and preserving the 'unofficial' account of the events that were truncated by Western epistemes, and an effective ideological vehicle for ensuring the continuity of a radical communal ethos in the Caribbean (129-130). Regis' emphasis on collective memory is therefore intimately linked to constructions of cultural identity and its conveyance via myth-narration. In other words, the persuasive appeal and power regarding cultural transfer were routed through a highly specialised discourse.

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<sup>2</sup> See for example, the works of Trinidadian-born visual artist and cultural activist, LeRoy Clarke whose paintings such as "Absence of Festival" comprise African-inspired motifs, and the artwork of Jamaican painter, Mallica "Kapo" Reynolds whose retrospective gaze captures African-Caribbean folk psychology and physiognomy. Reynolds' painting, "Treasure Rock Faces", composed in 1985, reflects this syncretised dynamic.

Edouard Glissant offers a useful, conceptual vocabulary for thinking through the link between the oral and the scribal. One of the metaphors that Glissant mobilizes is creolisation. He defines this concept as a hybrid, cultural condition which is:

.... devoted to what has burst [or erupted] from lands that are no longer islands [...]. [T]he Creole language, whose genius consists in always being open...never [becomes] fixed except according to systems of variables that we have to imagine as much as define. Creolization carries...the adventure of multilingualism and...the incredible explosion of cultures. (34)

Glissant's reference to the "explosion of culture" is invoked in a hidden combination of (oral and written) language and performance. This aesthetic innovation has its roots in the historical predicament of locating a common language or sound-system with which the African enslaved groups could articulate and express themselves within alien plantation realities. Glissant continues to explain that since "speech was forbidden, slaves camouflaged the word under the provocative intensity of the scream. No one could translate the meaning of what seemed to be nothing but a shout" or an inarticulate cry (123-4). The vibrations of the primal scream or cry provided a form that would go beyond speech into the sphere of reverberating intonations and gestures. Literature, therefore, provided a model for a new language of art. In Nichols' poetry, sound is employed as a structural device and metaphor in which she seeks to capture the feel, the intense harshness and violence of colonialism in tones that are melancholic and at times, sinister and vengeful.

This artistic endeavour is not an orthographic mimicry of tranquil, neat lines and verse, but is one of "shock, contraction, painful negation and explosive forces" (Glissant 62). Brathwaite also notes that this variety of New World poetic form or alter/native tradition operates through the developing line of a new Creole aesthetic that is constructed out of a blend of old fragments and a mosaic of multilingual resources that awaited the newly transplanted African in the New World (*History of the Voice* 17). Additionally, he explains in *Caribbean Man in Time and Space* that during colonisation, the enslaved Africans were forced to "submerge themselves [...]. The underground language was itself constantly transforming into new forms" (1-2). This reworking of old values in new situations was inseparable from the movement of the body. It reinforces the idea that Nation Language is more than a dialect but comprised patterns of performative expression, movement and motion (*History of the Voice* 17).

This aesthetic of energy is certainly the view that Nichols adopts in her poetry and is initially materialised in the poem, "Eulogy" in which the unnamed speaker hears the voices of fellow sea-crossers who leapt to their suicide and whose bodies "toss and/moan/with each lash of the ocean/foam" (21). The persona laments, "How can I eulogise/their names?/What dance of mourning/can I make?" (21). The scenario reveals the texture of the long memoried woman's

silent struggle to find a voice with which to articulate her tragically-reduced subjectivity and the terrors of slavery. Yet, despite her subservience, she is committed in her quest to record and express the memory of martyrdom and achieves this through bodily actions—as in the "dance of mourning" (21) that she makes. Nichols is exploring the conditions under which the body (and language) might broker a different relationship within the context of colonialism. In this poem, silence is engaged as a possibility that is translated into the mechanism of dancing through which the woman's emotional grief is expressed. Her moving limbs that dance between the silence and holes of history, facilitates an improvised mode of bereavement.

Here, the idea of self-autonomy, which is rooted in embodied practices, emerges as an empowering, cultural exercise. Moira Gatens expresses that the motif of the "body politic", by virtue of its colonial historical specificity, is more than often entangled in social and discursive meshes (82). If Gatens is right, the images and statuses of the long memoried woman as pall-bearer, knowledge-worker, wake-goer, dreamer and legendary ancestress reflect efforts at communal-definition via a valorisation of social and cultural performance. Her daring swing of the body serves as a guide for surviving and standing firmly under the systems that were designed to obliterate and punish any display of black solidarity and ritual-making.

In "Each Time They Came" her ceremonial gestures endure. Unable to worship her ancestors using her native tongue, she commits herself to the sacred act of simply moving her lips in prayer "as if to touch them"(19). Her lips move in a dreaming, prayer-like fashion as she witnesses "the new arrivals/faces full of old/incisions/calves grooved from/shackles/ankles swollen/from pain" (19). As she struggles to locate a vernacular in order to ventilate the pain induced by the violence that she witnesses, she makes unintelligible intercession to her ancestors for calm and intervention. Her quiet resistance lies concealed beneath the surface of her seemingly passive exterior. The gap which stems from the unavailability of language and the right to speech demonstrates the ruthless policies of the colonizing powers, which sought to stifle and suppress the expressions of the enslaved men, women and children on the plantations<sup>3</sup>.

The struggle to deploy an appropriate register of address is interrogated by Ashcroft in his chapter on language in *Post-Colonial Transformation*. He asks, "[C]an writing in one language convey the reality of a different culture? And can a reader fully understand a different cultural reality being communicated in the text?" (59). While Ashcroft is referring, in part, to the distance that is created by reading something that an author has written in a language other than his/her mother tongue, his assertions can also be extended to an understanding about experiences that are difficult to verbalize. In principle, Nichols imposes an art, which combines

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<sup>3</sup> Bill Ashcroft in *The Empire Writes Back* opines that, "In the colonial Caribbean, the enslaved populations were isolated from their common language group as far as possible and sold in mixed lots as a deliberate means of limiting the possibilities of rebellion" (144).

prayer and body language with the written word to signify an epistemology that may be used to accentuate the unapparent but resilient layers of the enslaved woman. By affirming the merit and practicality of silent protest that operates on a personal/private level and which conceals or blurs the social/communal responsibility, the poet is wielding and producing a subterranean revolution where the seeds of rebellion germinate. Edouard Glissant views this strategy as empowering and states:

It is nothing new to declare that for us...gesture [and] dance are forms of communication, just as important as the gift of speech. This is how we first managed to emerge from the plantation [...]. For us, it is a matter of ultimately reconciling the values of the culture of writing and the *long-repressed* traditions of orality. (emphasis mine 248-9)

By learning how to make small transgressive moves through her body, the persona is negotiating, challenging and appropriating categories of difference. This tactic offers a different articulation of what freedom looked like on a quotidian basis. Although freedom would emerge as the quintessential struggle of the nineteenth century, liberation in the seventeenth and eighteenth-century remained a state of being.

The poems, inspired by a dream of Nichols, can be seen as having a direct element of the unconscious, that is to say from the same sources of an identity that is bound up closely with the body and the power of speech. It aligns with Julia Kristeva's concept of the "sudden emergence of uncanniness" through which the abject body turns to the province of symbolic language or habits, which manifest as a disruptive force (2). Kristeva defines the abject as that which is cast off—the pariah, dejected or excluded in society (2). However, Kristeva posits that the female body in the face of abject subjection and social death will, however, re-invent the self through "symbolic...intents" (10). This is engaged in the poem, "Taint" in which the persona describes her body as a commodity and a site of exchange and betrayal. Nichols employs animal imagery to assert the point that the protagonist has been betrayed by men the "colour of [her] own skin" (22). Nichols calls attention to the black, female body that is sold in the market "like a fowl [and] a goat" (22). Determined to imagine a different future beyond her servitude, and firmly rejecting the gendered violence against her physique, mind and senses, she asserts: "Daily I rinse the taint of treachery from my mouth" (22). Treachery, normally perceived as an act, has become a visceral sensation for the speaker. Since she cannot yet verbalize her outrage, it makes itself felt as a bitter taste, which represents internalised abjection—something she swallows daily. Her body, in this sense, is refusing and transgressing the monopolistic powers that place new demands on her identity.

This rebellion intensifies into a more material force in "Skin Teeth" where she moves from silence to speech and declares, "Not every skin-teeth/is smile "Massa"" (56). Apart from the

linguistic mixing of Standard and Creole lexical markers, the deracinated persona speaks directly to "Massa" and becomes a figure through which the overburdened labourers assert their voices. She becomes a crusading spirit who is drawing on verbal cunning, vicious picong and a vocabulary of threat. This is evidenced in her refrain: "Know that I smile/Know that I bend/only the better to rise and strike again" (56). The lines effectively reveal her code-switching and performative abilities within which she flaunts a phonological menace that is usable for persuasive effect. The unforgettable lines echo the vibrations of passive revolt as in the militancy of "strike again", which undermine the white stereotype of the servile, 'always smiling slave.'

This hatred that smiles reminds one of the links between accounts of sudden death epitomised for example, in untraceable diseases and arsenic poisoning of the white aristocracy and social strife that went far beyond colourful jesting. The speaker's bodily signaling of her intentions to demolish the master race and class can be read as a form of archetypal African warriorhood most overtly expressed in the Haitian Revolution. Rohlehr posits that the intent to exterminate the planter class was firstly concealed and secretly transmitted via song (122). The white French and English overseers, with the memory of Haiti ever on their minds, could not underestimate the contemplations of the masses. The untrustworthy and smiling slave thus remained a subliminal part of the caucasian consciousness during and long after emancipation.

The spirit of resistance runs throughout the subsequent poem, "Your Blessing" as an organizing motif. The persona finds the strength to cry out for her mother's blessing upon discovering that she is pregnant. In a ceremonial act, she pleads: "Heal me with the power of your blackness/Cover me/Heal me/Shield me.../Uplift me/Instruct me/Reclothe me/With the power of your blessing" (60). Defying the intimate violence perpetrated by her slave owner, and attempting to heal in the wake of that storm, the long-remembered woman moves from silence to speech. She utilizes a call-and-response technique or litany form which comprises a chorus and double-entendre. The rhyming couplets and intercessory prayers catalogue her vicious rape and its attendant horrors. Although the rape is meant to cement her inferiority, she locates an inner space and turns to the supernatural world for mediation and release.

As she sings to her ancestral mother across the Atlantic, she processes her physical and psychic hurt. It is here that Nichols combines voice and action, as encapsulated in the fluidity and continuation of the run-on lines. The woman's primal cry invites a direct exchange from an oracular presence whose voice she hears and which speaks to her directly:

As we have known Victory/As we have known Death [...]/So rise you up my daughter  
[...]/ Like the drumskin that is beaten/on the outside.../but keeps its bottom whole/So  
be you my daughter [...] By the drumming of rain/and the running of stream/by the

beating of sun/and the flash of steel/by the ripple of flesh/and despairing of dream/Heal, my daughter, heal. (62)

The rhyming couplets uttered by the ghostly presence read like an incantation that imparts strength to the woman. Healing and negotiation through spiritual networks therefore initiate opportunities for autonomy and self-recovery.

Equally important, is that the persona moves along a Creole continuum as depicted in the non-standard "I'm burden with child" (60). The speaker's co-optation of the erstwhile signs of linguistic power to her own ends, and intimate engagement with her ancestor's oracular pronouncements, certainly gesture at the poet's experiment with polyphony that emerges out of the eclectic quality of the multiple realities in the collection. Polyvalent associations are also present in the sublimated first-person narrating voice, whose consciousness absorbs the many tongues of all the enslaved women in the diaspora. This narrative technique approximates the characteristic of mediums whose temperaments are populated by possessing deities and other alliances. In other words, Nichols' long-remembered speaker, becomes the living voice of the present and future and is controlled by visions of the past and present. Her bodily and vocal drives are powerful insurgent expressions which she exercises over her subaltern status that eschews realms of possibility and agency.

Practicing freedom, thus, meant navigating carefully around multiple terrains of bondage—rape, captivity, oppression and punishment. *I is a Long Remembered Woman* is Nichols' first comprehensive attempt at orchestrating the aesthetic markers of language, the lucid simplicity of body movements and a reconciliation with ancestors as a basis for building a complex, underground structure that erects bridges for others to stand firmly on. It anticipates the spirit of freedom across the circum-African Caribbean communities. While the speaker in this collection certainly shapes black womanhood in significant ways, the concept of identity-making continues to be problematised in the diaspora long after the abolition of slavery. The long-remembered woman has consequently reached the first but crucial step in the progression that Nichols continues in her next anthology, *The Fat Black Woman's Poems*.

It is important to note that the protagonist in *The Fat Black Woman's Poems*, unlike the long-remembered woman, has a home beyond that of her body. Yet, she must confront the challenges in feeling truly "at home" as a Caribbean immigrant in London and must seek a place from which to speak. She can be read as an embodiment of what Mikhail Bakhtin terms, "the material bodily principle" through which she wields her flesh to counterattack white, neo-colonial oppression (18). The fat black woman, like Nichols herself at the time that the collection was published (1984), was a recent immigrant to London from the Caribbean. John McLeod asserts that during the early post-war era, Caribbean immigrants to areas such as Brixton were "subjected to a series of attitudes which frequently objectified and demonised them often in

terms of race while questioning their rights of citizenship and tenure in one of the world's most historically cosmopolitan cities" (2). Paul Gilroy echoes a similar but unique perspective and observes that "racism does not...move tidily and unchanged through time and history. It assumes new forms and articulates new antagonisms in different situations" (11). In London, the mutable and dexterous, free black woman does what she could to disrupt the new demands that are levied upon her body. In this sense, she operates as a counter-hegemonic force for the contestations and re-constructions of race, nation, class, sexuality and gender along equitable lines.

By problematizing the haunting dynamics of the Atlantic slave trade in the modern world, Nichols seeks to deconstruct the discriminatory viewpoints of white supremacy through the assertive disposition and physique of her speaker. The body, in this collection, is reclaimed through a revisionary myth-poiesis that engenders a new heroine whose bawdy behaviour and defiance of highbrow culture is accomplished via a free-wheeling narrative style, a rebellious, tongue-in-cheek view at the world, role-reversing tactics that are encoded in theories of the carnivalesque, and a wielding of what Funso Aiyejina has termed, a "bacchanalia aesthetic"<sup>4</sup>. To this extent, black femme freedom is envisioned in the African diasporic woman's capacity to belong to herself. It is a vision that demands a radical accounting of blackness not as bondage and subjection, but as present and future possibility.

In this collection, Nichols redefines the standards of beauty and conceives the heavy-weighted persona as a new Eve or creator goddess who revises the criteria of agency, public rebellion and economic mobility. These aesthetic and ideological manoeuvres dovetail with Bakhtin's idea of the carnivalesque, which he theorizes as "the peculiar logic of the 'inside out,' of the 'turnabout,' of a continual shifting from top to bottom, from front to rear, of numerous parodies and travesties, humiliations, profanations, comic crownings and uncrownings" (11). The fat black woman's irreverence and defiance of the white status quo in London, interlock with this inverted order in the poem, "The Assertion" where she uncrowns the powers that be, the "white robed chiefs...in their posture of resignation" (4) who are constrained to wait for her. The chiefs are the white male powers at loose in the postcolonial world, a power which Nichols diffuses through the speaker's performance.

Above the white-robed chiefs, she is adorned with gold<sup>5</sup> and bedecked in the folds of her own flesh. She anchors herself on a "golden stool [of authority]/and refuses to move" (4); her posture

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<sup>4</sup> See Aiyejina's, "Esu Elegbara: A Source of an Alter/Native Theory of African Literature and Criticism." Professorial Lecture. The University of the West Indies, St. Augustine, 2009.

<sup>5</sup> The impact of the speaker's fashion legacy on the contemporary African-American entertainment industry is apparent in the aesthetic of several Hip-Hop and Rap artists such as Lil' Kim, Aretha Franklin, Eve Cooper, Missy Eliot and others, who sport numerous gold fillings and garnish their bodies with a plethora of jewelry. This connection helps shed light on how transgression continues to be a crucial constituent of success in modern performative areas.

solidifies the reclamation of power and agency. Her exposed feet and "fat black toes" (4) evoke both classical Ashanti goddesses and the poor labouring women on the plantation estates. The poet's blending of these two archetypal memories, through the countenance of the elaborately decorated but bare-footed speaker, serves to deconstruct the humdrum and universally accepted norms of black female identity. These varying perspectives are linked through the fluid consciousness of the protagonist who rejects reductive and hegemonic visions of colonial history. The speaker's undefiled authority is concretised at the end of the poem when she "chuckle[s]" and declares: "This is my birthright" (4). Here, she has come to embody everything the prosperous white, European community must disavow in the ultimate "other": surplus-value, hegemony, wealth and power.

Her symbolic role-reversing manoeuvres persist when she informs the reader of what she is not as in the case of "The Fat Black Woman Remembers." Making a backward glance to her own mother, "and them days of playing/the Jovial Jemima" (5), she polemically declares that she is no character like her mother who yielded to the commands of her white master and mistress, "tossing pancakes/to heaven...pressing little white heads/against her big-aproned breasts" (5). Despite this merry performance, Nichols adds a dangerous element to the historical figure of Mammy with her "happy heart [and]/ murderous blue laughter" (5). The Mammy's strange, ecstatic laughter connotes the uncanniness of her concealed violence that lurks beneath her skin-teeth.

Through this reclamation of the female body by way of masked resistance, Nichols accomplishes what Hélène Cixous promises in "The Laugh of the Medusa": "by writing herself, woman will return to the body which has been more than confiscated from her [...]. the body [will be] heard [and...] the immense resources of the unconscious [will] spring forth" (350). With a wry, self-directed jest, the speaker's ancestor moves beyond the stereotype of the compliant enslaved, black woman. In other words, the persona develops a tangible code of rebellion far superior to that of her European masters who pride themselves as the dominant race through her hysterical giggle. Her scandalous, intense laughter signposts her subversive and revolutionary streak, which Elaine Savory fittingly describes as highly "political...skeptical of institutions and power, and essentially survivalist" (109.) To this extent, Nichols' women are resilient tricksters who astonish, mock and outsmart their oppressors. In *The Fat Black Woman's Poems*, the default response of silence is overturned via the heightened awareness and consciousness of the speaker whose survival skills are derived from a vibrant history of black femme relations and networks of maternal power.

However, in this oeuvre, Nichols draws attention to the point that the fat black woman also struggles with a world not ready to accept her as a viable icon or sexual being. This is explicit in the poem, "The Fat Black Woman Goes Shopping" where she moves through the suburbs of London as an alien. She laments that shopping "in London winter/is a real drag" (8) as she goes

"from store to store/in search of accommodating clothes" (8). Homi Bhabha notes that in postcolonial literature, reference to the English weather serves "to invoke, at once, the most changeable and imminent signs of national difference. It encourages memories of the 'deep' nation crafted in chalk and limestone...the corner of a foreign [and isolating] field that is forever England" ("Dissemination" 169). As the persona searches through the garments in the boutiques (an isolating task), she notices that the "pretty face sales gals" cast "slimming glances" (8) which both mock her physical heaviness and isolate her size and taste in clothing in relation to the London standards. Such resentment of the black subaltern concretizes the vicious cycles of black xenophobia and racial stereotyping, which are familiar nightmares of the plantation.

In the context of the post-Atlantic world that is saturated with innovations in fashion, and which broke away from centuries of idealised femininity, the poem's sub-plot yields a critique of contemporary Western culture from a body politic and gendered perspective. The sign of decadent aristocracy represented by the white "thin mannequins" and slim faces of the salesgirls (8) underlines an attempt to re-structure modern standards of female beauty<sup>6</sup> according to the historical codes of Western social-spaces that thrived on unbridled attitudes of power, greed and self-indulgence. The poem thus evokes a multi-dimensional relationship between the body of the speaker, fashion and cultural values.

In this sense, the protagonist, whose skin is black and whose body is fuller<sup>7</sup> than the fading clerks with pale skin, refuses the gaze that attempts to mutilate her vitality and self-esteem. She chooses to stand between black elegance and the liberating context of her curves. In response, she "curses in Swahili/Yoruba/and nation language" (8). The confrontation between the white, slim, British women and the voluptuous black woman imposes a disruptive mood identified within the framework of Aiyejina's bacchanal aesthetics. Aiyejina states:

Bacchanal aesthetics, at the basic level, is the...practice that appropriates and radicalizes the underground cultural practices fashioned by ordinary New World Africans to deal with the realities of...deracination and exploitation [...]. [It] is

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<sup>6</sup> The poem's context implies the subtle ways in which attitudes of colonisation with its legacies of control, female oppression, victimisation and commodified female sexuality, seek to re-invent and remake itself in new places and situations.

<sup>7</sup> It is important to note that while Nichols is re-orienting the black female body towards ideas of reclamation, there is a danger in situating or over-determining identity through the body which can inadvertently reproduce the association of woman with sexual appetite and ideas of consumption entrenched in ideas of colonialism. However, this essay posits that it is through Nichols' reparative approaches via the terrain of literature and an emphasis on woman's strength, skill and symbolic action that she deconstructs racialised and erroneous notions of the African-Caribbean woman (enslaved or otherwise) as indifferent to pain and lacking the tools for retributive justice in the face of systemic abuse and marginalisation.

therefore, the aesthetics of the crossroads as the meeting point of possibilities: the old and the new. (11)

The conflict between the two socially unequal antagonists in the poem—one black who hails from a legacy of subservience, and the other Caucasian with authoritarian instincts—is an apt site for the speaker to assert her strong rejection of the image of the heavy-weighted black woman as unpretty. Unlike her ancestor in the long memoried woman collection, she no longer jostles to speak but impulsively renounces (neo)colonial valuation and inequity.

Her retaliation is conveyed through a democratic and free-wheeling nation language that incorporates the versatile Creole vernacular. Nichols' democratisation of the persona's voice permits her to ideologically connect with the dynamics of popular culture as concretised within the arena of Calypso and Dancehall where colour and size matter. Andrea Shaw assesses the ways in which the female body has come to play an instrumental role in the recasting of Calypso and Dancehall music. Shaw asserts that outside of the hegemony of male performances, female-based performances have championed the sexual agency of women and have disrupted the white, upper and middle-classed criteria for beauty, prosperity and desire often characterised by runway models in fashion magazines (192). She provides the examples of mega-stars like Denise Belfon and Carlene Smith who draw on countervailing verbal cunning and poignant displays of transgression to affirm a new practice of female prosperity, allure and talent (192-5). The critical premise of signposting the formal, thematic, political and cultural links between nation language, ritualised performances and a wide range of textual representations of female-oriented cultural resistance, indeed reflect the polemic and transgressive undertones of Nichols' oeuvre.

Although her protagonists have been commodified, categorised and stereotyped by various patriarchal and racist systems, the poet provides each with powerful tools of resistance, metamorphosis and re-invention that are anchored in both their voices and bodies. It is a standpoint that reflects alternative models for multivalent ways of being in the world. The fat black woman establishes herself within a lineage that extends from the long memoried speaker whose strength and skill have facilitated trajectories of negotiation within a vicious and brutal colonial reality. The interventions located within the experiment with language and dualities of performance certainly broaden the transgressive horizons available to modern communities who aim to achieve a viable and coherent self. It is here that history becomes memory and practice becomes rite. The effect is the recuperation of a rich ancestral history with a capacity to strengthen and amplify ideas of revolution, liberation and self-agency in the contemporary world.

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