

Against the Aphanisis of the Subject: Rewriting the Myth of Black Woman in Grace Nichols's *The Fat Black Woman's Poems*

Merve Günday

Middle East Technical University, Ankara, Turkey

Email: mervegndy@hotmail.com

Nurten Birlik

Department of Foreign Language Education, Faculty of Education

Middle East Technical University, 06531, Ankara, Turkey

Email: nur69tr@yahoo.com

Abstract The present study explores Afro-Caribbean poet Grace Nichols's "The Black Women Goes Shopping," "Beauty," "Looking at Miss World," and "Invitation" from her poetry collection *The Fat Black Woman's Poems* (1984) in relation to the concept of aphanisis. Based on a post-Lacanian analysis, the essay argues that against the dominant discourse of the civilizational ideal, Humanism, that silences black women by categorizing them as sexualized and racialized others, Nichols's poetic personae rewrite themselves by evacuating the standardized negative implications associated with black women, confined to the lower leg of the binary trap in Western metaphysics. Rather than presenting themselves as marginalized figures spoken by myths and produced through abjection, these women resist their fading by the semantic overkill of the Other and shatter the self-pitying image assigned to them through their subversion of the Symbolic from within. Leaking out from the cracks of grand narratives, they reposition themselves outside the dialectics of recognition and voice themselves beyond the grasp of symbolic significations. By their transgressive repositioning, they open up a new space of signification and object to their fixation by the deadly gaze of the dominant discourse.

Keywords aphanisis; Lacan; the Other; dialectics of otherness; Grace Nichols; *The Fat Black Woman's Poems*

Authors **Merve Günday** is a PhD student in English Literature at Middle East Technical University, Ankara, Turkey. Her research interests include Poetry,

Psychoanalysis, Contemporary Drama, and Literary Theory. **Prof. Dr. Nurten Birlik** has been working as a senior instructor of English Literature, since 1997, in the Department of Foreign Language Education, Faculty of Education, Middle East Technical University, Ankara, Turkey. She has a book titled, *Coleridge's Conversation Poems and Poems of High Imagination*. She has also co-authored a book titled, *Lacan in Literature and Film*. She has published articles on British Romantic Poetry, Lacanian Theory, and Zadie Smith.

Introduction

*I can say I can write
no big poem enough
to hold the essence
of a black woman
or a white woman
or a green woman.*

(Grace Nichols, *Lazy Thoughts of a Lazy Woman* 52)

Ostracized from the dominant categories of subjectivity as anthropomorphic others by the normative humanist ideal of “‘Man’ as the measure of all things” (Braidotti 67-68), black women have been denied fluidity and repressed within the dialectics of otherness. Contrary to the common discourse that tends towards a reductionist and marginalizing presentation of black women, Grace Nichols makes her poetic personae stand as active agents that speak their own words instead of accepting to be spoken by the words of the Other. Moreover, different from works where black women arouse pity for themselves, through acknowledging their double colonization, Nichols does not let her women pile on the agony for directing attention to their exploitation. Rather, she paints self-confident black women who aim at renewing history and stepping outside of their expected roles. However, it should be emphasized that “Nichols’s reworking of history does not remain within the symbolic order, but becomes the site of a possible re-entry into the Imaginary and a utopian vision of what a woman might be” (Easton 59). In the light of this, the present essay argues that straying away from the strictly defined frames and scripts aimed to tame black women, Nichols draws a vibrant portrait of black women who have a dynamic link with their desire. Through choosing the fat black woman as the speaking subject of her poetic sequence, she “signals her refusal to occupy the subject(ed) position designated for the black woman by history”

(Narain 186). With the aim of unveiling how Nichols's black women unsettle the colonial and patriarchal discourse and resist being spoken by the Other, her four poems—"The Black Women Goes Shopping," "Beauty," "Looking at Miss World," and "Invitation"—are analyzed against the background of post-Lacanian theory. Different from studies focusing on a feminist or a postcolonial reading of the poems, the paper adopts a psychoanalytical approach. Through a post-Lacanian psychoanalytical reading, it is shown how Nichols's women re-home themselves in an alternative ontological site and rewrite their own myth distorting the Symbolic with their menacing voice leaking from the unmapped Imaginary territory.

Against the Aphanisis of the Subject: Rewriting the Myth of Black Woman in Grace Nichols's *The Fat Black Woman's Poems*

As a British poet of Caribbean descent, Nichols rewrites African women's history by presenting black women not as passivized figures but as active agents who subversively reject restrictive Symbolic categorizations imposed on them. Through her poetic personae's revision of a fat black woman, who speaks from her body, she "critiques monolithic construction of race, sexuality and national identity" and challenges the "idea of a superior language" (Alexander 128). Her poetic personae's foregrounded corporeality, in this sense, echoes Cixous who says: "Write your self. Your body must be heard. Only then will the immense resources of the unconscious spring forth" (880). In a post-Lacanian terrain, their resistance to be pinned down on to a wall as doomed to remain in the lower leg of the phallogocentric signification stands as their reaction to their aphanisis—to the loss of their authentic voice.

At this point, one needs to look at what the term 'aphanisis' comes to mean from a Lacanian perspective. Introduced into psychoanalysis by Ernest Jones to mean "'the disappearance of sexual desire,'" the term 'aphanisis' has been modified by Lacan in a way to mean "the disappearance of the subject in the process of alienation" (Evans 12):

The signifier, producing itself in the field of the Other, makes manifest the subject of its signification. But it functions as a signifier only to reduce the subject in question to being no more than a signifier, to petrify the subject in the same movement, in which it calls the subject to function, to speak, as subject. There, strictly speaking, is the temporal pulsation, in which is established that which is the characteristic of the departure of the unconscious as such—the closing. (Lacan, *S XI* 207)

Though acknowledging that this process has been termed as ‘aphanisis’ by Ernest Jones, Lacan underlines in which sense he departs from him: “aphanisis is to be situated in a more radical way at the level at which the subject manifests himself in this movement of disappearance that I have described as lethal [...] I have called this movement the fading of the subject” (*S XI* 207-208). In this regard, “the being of the subject” is located “there beneath the meaning” as Lacan further notes: “It is of the nature of [...] meaning, as it emerges in the field of the Other, to be in a large part of its field, eclipsed by the disappearance of being, induced by the very function of the signifier” (Lacan, *S XI* 211). Within this context, the meaning (the Other) is oriented towards shaping the being (the subject) in the polarized frame of universalizing significations.

Arguing along similar lines with Lacan, Braidotti also underlines “the dialectics of self and other, and the binary logic of identity and otherness” that she regards “as respectively the motor for and cultural logic of universal Humanism:”

Subjectivity is equated with consciousness, universal rationality, and self-regulating ethical behaviour, whereas Otherness is defined as its negative and specular counterpart. In so far as difference spells inferiority, it acquires both essentialist and lethal connotations for people who get branded as ‘others.’ (15)

The Other causes the transition from an individual to a subject(ed) position: “The Other is the locus in which is situated the chain of the signifier that governs whatever may be made present of the subject—it is the field of that living being in which the subject has to appear” (Lacan, *S XI* 203). Given “the fact that the subject depends on the signifier and the signifier is first of all in the field of the Other,” (Lacan, *S XI* 204) the reason behind the erasure of fat black women’s authentic selves from the historical scene, through the totalizing discourse of grand narratives, is unveiled. However, Nichols’s fat black woman does not bend to the erasure of her agency in the Symbolic but instead carves out her own meaning through her bodily melodies and constantly reconnects her pre-castrated self to ascend from existence to being.

“The Black Woman Goes Shopping”

Taken from her collection *The Fat Black Woman’s Poems* (1984), where Nichols uses “revisionary mythopoesis” “to engender a new heroine, a woman who revises the esthetic of female beauty, challenges oppressive societal forces, and emerges as a powerful queen, founder or goddess” (Scanlon 59), the poem “The Black Woman

Goes Shopping” opens with the re-presentation of “a fat black woman” who is implied to be merely window shopping in the cold weather of a “London winter” with the difficulty of finding any “accommodating clothe” for her size (1-5). The difficulty the poetic persona faces in finding any clothe for her size implies that her body does not conform to the standards. In such a context based on “a systematized standard of recognizability—of Sameness—by which all others can be assessed, regulated and allotted to a designated social location,” “the notion of ‘difference’” is seen as “pejoration” (Braidotti 15; 26). While her fatness challenges the judges of normalcy by breaking away from the normative definitions of an ideal body size, her failure to find a suitable clothe implies that the Symbolic insists on not giving her any gratification unless she loses weight.

This mutual fight between the non-conformist poetic persona who resists being normalized in the Symbolic by embracing her fatness and the established system that forces her to conform to the normative standards by not producing clothes that could fit her size continues through the following lines. For instance, even “the frozen thin mannequins” of the stores that she encounters on her way make her feel uneasy by “fixing her with grin” (6-7). Similarly, no sooner does she get away from these mannequins pinning her with their deadly gaze than she is exposed to the gaze of “pretty face salegals” who exchange “slimming glances,/ thinking she do not notice” (8-10). These sale girls, who are estranged from their motherly space, are also spoken and acted upon by the Other although they act as metonymic extension of the Father. This reflects how “the position of the subject” “is essentially characterized by its place in the symbolic world, in other words in the world of speech,” prior to which “there is neither true nor false” (Lacan, *SI* 80; 228). However, instead of remaining silent to her victimization by the gaze of those already inscribed within the Symbolic, the poetic persona boldly voices the discrimination exerted on her by body politics and intrudes into the discourse which aims at her constitution as a normative subject. For instance, in the closing lines, she says: “when it come to fashion/ the choice is lean/ Nothing much beyond size 14” (19-21). “This momentary yet momentous act of levity, which refuses the paralyzing propensity of the store to fix the Fat Black Woman’s public persona as an aberration not easily accommodated, packs a subversive punch” because

in countering with witticisms her objectification in the store (which stores up unaccommodating prejudices and ways of seeing, not just ill-fitting clothes), the Fat Black Woman arguably mobilizes in a public space some of the resources she has made for herself at home. (McLeod 123)

In protesting against her absorption by the Symbolic as ‘a fat black woman,’ her merging the private with the public destabilizes the integrity of the binary system, as well. Similarly, without self-pitying herself, she questions even the “Lord” for his denying her any “breezy sunlight”: “Lord is aggravating/ Nothing soft and bright and billowing” (11-13). Complaining about the gloomy weather, she challenges the symbolic presence of the Other that denies her any access to fluidity by its freezing codes, expressing its force in the operation of body politics.

The poetic persona’s refusal of being stabilized by language is also reflected by her cursing along “all this journeying” not through the words of the standard English but through the words of her nation language: “The fat black woman curses in Swahili/ Yoruba/ and nation language under her breathing” (15-17). Reflected by her deliberate choice of “de” in such expressions as “de weather” or “de pretty face salegals” (5; 8), her use of Creole helps her to object to “the imperial ‘correctness’ of English that acknowledges the infusion of different languages, idioms and dialects into spoken Caribbean-English” (Williams, *Contemporary Poetry* 37). Besides, creative fusion and reworking of African, European and Caribbean influences underline “the fundamental plurality of Caribbean spaces” (Neumann and Rupp 476), which transgresses the universalizing assumptions of the humanized and symbolized world of Eurocentrism.

“Beauty”

As in “The Black Woman Goes Shopping,” “Nichols counters historic voicelessness and oppression by forging a new standard of beauty and a new mythology” throughout her poetic collection (Scanlon 64). Her fat black woman remains insistent on challenging her symbolization by the dual hierarchized oppositions also in the poem, “Beauty,” subverting the schematic assumption of what it means to be beautiful. “When the subject appears somewhere as meaning, he is manifested elsewhere as ‘fading’, as disappearance. There is, then [...] a matter of life and death between the unary signifier and the subject, *qua* binary signifier, cause of his disappearance,” Lacan argues (*S XI* 218). Despite the normative standards of beauty that are aimed at the aphanisis of fat black women under the label of ugliness or lack of dignity, Nichols’s poetic persona conceives herself as other than she is named and claims that beauty is “a fat black woman” (1-2). Through her resistance to “language as name-giving power,” she experiences jouissance of transgressing Lacanian concept of the signifier, depicted by Žižek as “the power which mortifies/ disembodies the life substance, ‘dissects’ the body and subordinates it to the

constraint of the signifying network” (51). Within this context, she also awakens to brightness her authentic self that had been numbed by the capture of symbolic classifications, given that serving the ends of the universalistic Humanism, ‘naming’—“which is both destructive of the thing and allows the passage of the thing onto the symbolic plane” (Lacan, *SI* 219)—equals to death of the individual:

Word is the murder of a thing, not only in the elementary sense of implying its absence—by naming a thing we treat it as absent, as dead, although it is still present—but above all in the sense of its radical *dissection*: the word ‘quarters’ the thing, it tears it out of the embedment in its concrete context, it treats its component parts as entities with an autonomous existence. (Zizek 51)

“A name, however confused it may be,” further argues Lacan, “designates a specific person, is exactly what makes up the transition to the human state” (*SI* 155). At this thorny juncture where the subject is integrated into the field of the Symbolic at the cost of her/his disposal by the signifier, the poetic persona in question exposes the constructedness of the degrading connotations assigned to her along with the fictionality of her symbolic position, erased under the label of a fat black woman. Implying her refusal of signification and regulation by the dialectics of otherness, she counters the universalizing discourse about female beauty also in the following lines where she depicts the fat black woman as “walking the fields” and “pressing a breezed/ hibiscus/ to her cheek” (3-6). Behind Nichols’s choice of an unfamiliar natural setting for her ‘beautiful’ fat black woman lies her wish to assert that beauty lies beyond the boundaries of her colonial setting. Alexander states:

Debunking conventional (colonial) paradigms of (white) female beauty, the Fat Black Woman redefines beauty, dismissing the material definition attributed to it as superficial. Extending the concept of beauty beyond mere material/ physical, the Fat Black Woman validates the natural and spiritual attributes of beauty that extend beyond a colonial geography to a tropical (Caribbean) landscape. In this decolonizing process, the Caribbean is reappropriated as the site of colonial occupation and conquest to a locale that fosters self-determination. (131)

Transpositioning herself in an uncharted territory away from the humanized world of her inscribed subjectivity, the poetic persona reconnects the field of the Imaginary where she could remain as sterilized from any categorizations. Her speaking from

the Imaginary within the Symbolic reminds us “what the subject has to free himself of is the aphanistic effect of the binary signifier” (Lacan, *S XI* 219). As part of her rejection to be stabilized by aphanistic ‘civilization,’ the poetic persona denies also wearing shoes and walks barefootedly “while the sun lights up/ her feet” (7-8). In this way, she “refutes their non-citizen status” and reimagines the society as having “a more flexible, unscripted designation” (Alexander 131).

In the second stanza, the poetic persona speaks herstory from the Imaginary and writes a new myth, instead of conforming to the myth of black women scripted by history. At this point, one needs to hear Nichols’s words in her essay “The Battle with Language,” in which she states why she created a new myth by her revision of black women:

It [mythology] has created certain images and archetypes that have come down to us over the ages, and I have observed how destructive, however inadvertently, many of them have been to the black psyche. As children we grew up with the all-powerful male white God and the biblical associations of white with light and goodness, black with darkness and evil. We feasted on the world of Greek myths, European fairy tales and legends, princes and princesses, Snow Whites and Rapunzels. I am interested in the psychological effects of this on black people even today and how it functions in the minds of white people. (287)

Pointing out their confinement to less than human status by white mentality, Nichols opens up an alternative space of signification for black women by creating a new myth. In this way, she “rejects the stereotype of the voiceless victim: historical and current sufferings are not trivialized but the emphasis is put on agency, on the capacity not only to endure but also to respond to slavery, colonialization and postcolonialization” (Fumagalli 16).

The rewriting of the discursively produced subjugated black woman is shown in the poem especially by that she, barefooted, stands in a sea, “riding the waves” and “drifting in happy oblivion” (11-12). It should be stressed that the poem’s choice of sea as a setting is not coincidental because “for Nichols, place is more than the natural and visible world. It is a complex interweaving of history, community, authority and subjectivity” (Gill 179). “Transformed into the fixity of print only to bring to the surface the frictions and tensions between West African, Caribbean and European cultures that defy unifying narratives of post/colonialism,” “the fluid sea” in Nichols does not succumb to “the painful and alienating effects of

colonialism” (Neumann and Rupp 478; 476). Instead, it serves for the subversion of the colonial past: while the woman’s “drifting” means “a denial of the bone-breaking labour as field hands and domestic servants, slave and free,” her floating “in happy oblivion” “in the ocean on which her ancestors suffered the horrors of Middle Passage of the Triangular Slave Trade, that key image of acute suffering in New World Black culture” displays another “reversal of slave times” (James, Williams, “Capitalism and Slavery” cited in Easton 61). Moreover, by re-homing herself in a sea—acting as a displaced form of an amniotic fluid in mother’s womb—the poetic persona violates the symbolic borders set before her to give her finality. As such, with her phantasy to return to her pre-castrated self, she retrieves a sense of illusory wholeness and experiences *jouissance* for sliding in the nonlinearity of the sea, where her meaning as a woman is constantly dispersed and scattered. In this way of enjoying the polysemic ground of being a woman, she goes beyond the dialectical frame of the Symbolic where “every element has value through being opposed to another” (Lacan, *S III* 9) and accordingly where she, as a woman, is defined in relation to man. Besides, she points to the “ambivalence” of her mythical position, reflecting that “woman incarnates no stable concept” because “through her is made unceasingly the passage from hope to frustration, from hate to love, from good to evil, from evil to good” (Beauvoir 163). This underlines especially the non-Cartesian status of the subject, split as a speaking I and a spoken I and never fully in the capture of language serving for his/her symbolic realization by the Other. As Verhaeghe argues:

The important thing about the subject is that it has no essence, no ontological substance. Its production is by the signifiers, coming from the field of the Other, but it would be a mistake to assume that a subject is identical to the produced signifier(s). (375)

The poetic persona’s elusiveness despite the totalizing discourse of the Other thereby unveils the constant flickering of Nichols’s poetic persona along the three registers. At this point, one needs to refer to Laforgue who emphasized women’s mirage-like status as the reason for their reduction to the level of non-existence: “‘Mirage! Mirage!’ cries Laforgue. We should kill them since we cannot comprehend them; or better tranquilize them, instruct them” (qtd. in Beauvoir 267).

Why the poetic persona’s sliding in the sea incarnates the constant imaginary flickering of signifiers necessitates a closer look on sea’s metaphorical significance. In relation to the sea’s resistance to symbolic closure, “a common construction of

European thought places a charted historicized reading of landscape in opposition to an atemporal, ‘ahistorical sea’ and “the repetitive cycle of seawater is read as incompatible with time, culture or memory,” says Tynan referring to Barthes’s depiction of sea in his *Mythologies* (1972) as a “‘non-signifying field’ which ‘bears no message’”(146). Seen by W.H. Auden also as “‘a primal undifferentiated flux,’” the non-dualistic space of sea creates menace for the operation of binary logic for being “incompatible with notions of temporality or civilization;” however, rather than being ‘ahistorical,’ sea acts as “a repository of the past, a palimpsestic textbook of erased or unvoiced Caribbean history:”

Returning to Western constructions we can observe that Barthes’s reading of the sea as a void of signification seems to derive from an understanding of ocean as fluid, shifting space that bears no material sign of human history, unlike terrestrial space, which bears more evidence of the progress of civilizations. Unlike land, the sea is unmarked by human history and therefore cannot be monumentalized in the tradition of colonial landscapes. Dwarfing the achievements of humankind, the passing of empires and epochs, the boundless waves are a constant reminder of human insignificance in the wake of the unceasing elemental. Yet, this is exactly the draw of this alternative aquatic historiography. The resistance of the sea to final inscription or decryption explains its appeal to Caribbean theorists; it denies the stabilizing impetus of imperialist accounts of the past. (Tynan 146; 150; 151)

By her temporal deviation from cursive to sea’s monumental time, the poetic persona compensates for her denial of Symbolic gratification and holds on to narcissistic gratification in the Imaginary, like a fetus floating in the womb “in happy oblivion” (12), as unaware of any shaping formulas of the phallogocentric system. Given that in religious cosmogonies, sea is read as “void, chaos, or noncivilization out of which life, order, and civilization emerge” (Tynan 147), she implies also that she blurs the boundary between categories of thought generated within binary logic and re-establishes the Imaginary in the Symbolic by her mother-like sea that will enable her imaginary fulfilment. This is shown by the lines where she is embraced by the sea, away from the intrusion of the paternal metaphor: “the sea turns back/ to hug her shape” (13-14). Her body’s such acceptance “in all its formations—deviance, outcast, othered, grotesque—signals rejection of Victorian ideals of normalcy, femininity, decency and the ideal citizen” (Alexander 128). In a similar vein, it reflects that as “the subject is ontologically polyvocal” (Braidotti

93), totalizing discourses fail to find an adequate word for her/his flux. Tynan argues, within this context, “if national ties are frequently asserted by an association of a people with soil or land, then the association of a people with the sea as a supranational zone offers an alternative for diasporized or polycultural groups” (149). Hence, reflecting the collapse of ‘the ideal body,’ the fat black woman takes the sea as an imaginary substitute for her fragments as it does not try to put her into a certain frame but affectionately accepts her with all of her non-conformist qualities.

“Looking at Miss World”

Similar to the defiant poetic persona of “Beauty” who strays away from the identity she is given in relation to the Other, under the Law of the Father, the poetic persona of “Looking at Miss World,” also, refuses to integrate into a field of dualistic symbolic significations. Standing for Nichols’s “empowered, empowering and uncontainable fat black woman,” who “confronts a series of discourses that traditionally have relegated and continue to relegate black people (especially black women) to the margins” (Fumagalli 17), she does not surrender to the racial segregation of her ‘steatopygous’¹ body. Set in the context of a beauty contest, she is depicted as staring intently with her eyes fixed and wondering whether “some Miss (plump at least/ if not fat and black)” will “uphold her name” (1-4). Waiting with excitement for the announcement of her name, she ends up feeling disappointed because she is not perceived by the jury members there, let alone being selected by them. So, she “awaits in vain” while “slim after slim aspirant appears/ baring her treasures in hopeful despair” (5-7).

“In true speech the Other is that before which you make yourself recognized. But you can make yourself recognized by it only because it is recognized first,” says Lacan (*S III* 51). Paradoxically, the decision of the poetic persona to take part in this beauty contest might imply her desire for symbolic integration, given that she wants to be perceived by the jury, acting as active bearers of gaze. However, the knowledge that she dares to participate in this contest despite her fatness and blackness shows that she does not submissively comply with the universalizing significations by being a part of this contest but rather asserts her opposition to the regulations of the colonial and patriarchal discourse. Furthermore, “assuming the

1 “Coined in the nineteenth century to describe the buttocks of ‘Hottentot’ women” (McLeod 123) and given in dictionary as the condition of having “an excessive development of fat on the buttocks that occurs chiefly among women of some African peoples and especially the Khoisan” (*Marriam-Webster*), the term ‘steatopygous’ is used by Nichols in her poem “Thoughts Drifting through the Fat Black Woman’s Head While Having a Full Babble Bath.”

role of spectator” rather than acting as an ideal participant, she “inducts herself into the judiciary chambers as the self-acclaimed adjudicator of both judges and contestants” and shakes both “the neat narrative of white masculinity” and “the male gaze” (Alexander 137-138), aimed at the constitution of her subjectivity. In this regard, her hope for winning this contest and indifference to the criteria of beauty reflect her resistance to remain in the place assigned to her in the symbolic dialectic.

As part of her rejection to be rigidified by the dialectics of recognition, the poetic persona, moreover, re-establishes the blissful context of Imaginary in the Symbolic, taking no notice of the contest results. As such, as “meaning is by nature imaginary” (Lacan, *S III* 54), she can destabilize her established position as a racialized and sexualized other and overcome dialectical oppositions to carve out for herself an authentic self-expression out of the hierarchical symbolic categorizations. From the second stanza on, for instance, she refuses to accept her determined identity gained in relation to the Other by falsifying the jury’s definition of beauty. To imply that the jury members equate beauty not with the natural but rather with the artificial, she depicts them as “mingling with chiffons” (16). Then, in an attempt to avoid this spiritual dryness, she wants to escape from confronting the utter nakedness of her being denied symbolic gratification and expresses her boredom for being there: “O the night wears on/ the night wears on” (14-15). In the last stanza, she does not merely remain indifferent to the active bearers of gaze with her lack of interest in the contest result but also tears apart the wall behind which she had been pushed as doomed to the lower leg of the binary system and actualizes her phantasy of success by pouring “some gin” and “toasting herself as a likely win” (17-19), as if she were the Miss World.

“Invitation”

Opposing the “aberrant figure of woman” that has been defined in history as “black, fat, lesbian, sexually voracious, disabled, or ugly” (Thomson 28), the poetic persona of “Invitation” also refuses to be narrated in relation to the Other. The poem opens with the self-confident words of the poetic persona who does not hesitate a moment to unburden fat black women’s silenced unconscious. “Man’s relation to a world of his own—obviously this is where we’ve been starting off from for a long while now—has never been anything but play-acting in the service of the discourse of the master,” says Lacan (*S XIX* 199). As if taking revenge on the colonial and patriarchal discourse for all those years during which they have not been given a hearing ear for their unconventional body size or color, the poetic persona defies the discourse set before her as she ironically states that her fatness doesn’t concern

anybody: “If my fat/ was too much for me/ I would have told you” (1-3). Similarly, she states that if she had been fat, she would already have lost weight by going “jogging” even in foggy weather and by dieting more carefully than “a diabetic” (6-7; 11-12). In this way, she requires the Symbolic to regard her as how she regards herself: “I’m feeling fine/ feel no need/ to change my lines” (14-16).

In the second stanza, opening again with “Come up and see me sometime” (19), the poetic persona expresses her resistance to the dialectics of otherness more fearlessly, feeling satisfied not only with her weight but also with all her body. Her wish to be recognized out of the dialectical scheme of the humanistic discourse can be regarded as her response to the signifier’s precedence over the subject, as Lacan argues:

the subject [...] if he can appear to be the slave of language is all the more so of a discourse in the universal movement in which his place is already inscribed at birth, if only by virtue of his proper name. (Écrits 113)

As part of her denial of established codes that repress her carnal side, she depicts her breasts, her thighs, and her seabelly, which in turn calls to question the reliability of the binary signification system, to constructedness of which Lacan directs attention, arguing further that “the signifier enters the signified, namely, in a form which, not being immaterial, raises the question of its place in reality” (Écrits 115). So, the poetic persona takes so much pride in her “huge” and “exciting” breasts that she depicts them as “amnions of water melon” that are too big to be grasped (21-23). She shows the same defiant reaction against her fading also in depicting her thighs: “my thighs are twin seals/ fat as slick pups” (24-25). Going one step further in her challenge to realistic narration by the regulative standards of the Symbolic, she depicts her genitals, rebelliously stating: “there’s a purple cherry/ below the blues/ of my black seabelly” (26- 28). Through giving details about her private parts, she says ‘no!’ to her fixation by the Symbolic and wants those who pin her with their gaze for her non-conformism to learn that there is nothing wrong with her body.

Conclusion

To conclude, although the subject gains identity in relation to the Other, s/he resists full submission to the grasp of language and breaks the neat narratives with her/his flux and split: “all our experience runs counter to this linearity,” held by Saussure “to be constitutive of the chain of discourse, in conformity with its emission by a single voice and with its horizontal position in our writing—if this linearity is necessary,

in fact, it is not sufficient” (Écrits 117). As subjects dissolving in the continuous presence, Grace Nichols’s poetic personae in “The Black Women Goes Shopping,” “Beauty,” “Looking at Miss World,” and “Invitation” also resist to be storied by the Other, through their insistence on not conforming to the normative standards, set by the dialectics of otherness.

In the poem “Black Women Goes Shopping,” the poetic persona walking in the cold winter of London challenges the normative standards of urbanized beauty by her body size. Similarly, in “Beauty,” the poetic persona transpositions herself from her colonial setting to sea and subverts the definition of beauty by re-establishing the Imaginary in the Symbolic. The persona of “Looking at the Miss World” openly states that she does not want to be the passive recipient of the gaze—metamorphosed into the form of the jury members in the beauty contest in which she participates—as she crowns herself as if she were Miss World. By acting in this non-dialectical way as she desires, she ignores the rules and expresses a sense of jouissance. Finally, “Invitation”’s poetic persona breaks free from the narration of Symbolic, by communicating not through language but through her body. By their rebellious attitudes to the normalizing practices, thus, all of the four poetic personae of Nichols pose a threat to the aphanistic effect of civilization.

Works Cited

- Alexander, Simone A. James. “Performing the Body: Transgressive Doubles, Fatness and Blackness.” *African Diasporic Women’s Narratives: Politics of Resistance, Survival and Citizenship*. USA: UP of Florida, 2014. 127-158.
- Beauvoir, Simone de. “Myths.” *The Second Sex*. Trans. and ed. by H. M. Parshley. London: Jonathan Cape, 1956. 159-269.
- Braidotti, Rosi. *The Posthuman*. Cambridge: Polity Press, 2013.
- Cixous, Hélène. “The Laugh of the Medusa.” Trans. by Keith Cohen and Paula Cohen. *Signs* 1. 4 (1976): 875-893.
- Easton, Alison. “The Body as History and ‘Writing the Body’: the example of Grace Nichols.” *Journal of Gender Studies* 3. 1 (1994): 55-67.
- Evans, Dylan. *An Introductory Dictionary of Lacanian Psychoanalysis*. London and New York: Routledge, 1996.
- Fumagalli, Maria Cristina. “Abreast with History: Stradanus’s America and Grace Nichols’s Fat Black Woman.” *Caribbean Perspectives on Modernity: Returning Medusa’s Gaze*. Charlottesville and London: U of Virginia P, 2009. 15-31.
- Gill, Jo. *Women’s Poetry*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh UP, 2007.
- James, C.L.R. “The Slaves.” *Slaves, Free Men, Citizens: West Indian Perspectives*. Ed. Lambros

- Comitas and David Lowenthal. Garden City, New York: Anchor Books, 1973. 4-20.
- Lacan, Jacques. "The Agency of the Letter in the Unconscious or Reason Since Freud." *Écrits*. Trans. Alan Sheridan. London and New York: Routledge, 2001. 111-136.
- . *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis. The Seminar of Jacques Lacan. Book XI*. Ed. Jacques-Alain Miller. Trans. Alan Sheridan. New York, London: W. W. Norton & Company, 1978.
- . *The Psychoses 1955-1956. The Seminar of Jacques Lacan. Book III*. Ed. Jacques-Alain Miller. Trans. Russell Grigg. New York, London: W.W. Norton & Company, 1997.
- . *...or Worse. The Seminar of Jacques Lacan. Book XIX*. Ed. Jacques-Alain Miller. Trans. A. R. Price. Cambridge: Polity Press, 2018.
- McLeod, John. "Living room: Buchi Emecheta, Joan Riley and Grace Nichols." *Postcolonial London: Rewriting the Metropolis*. London and New York: Routledge, 2004. 93-125.
- Nichols, Grace. "The Battle with Language." *Caribbean Women Writers: Essays from the First International Conference*. Ed. Selwyn R. Cudjoe. Wellesley, Massachusetts: Calaloux Publications, 1990. 283-289.
- . *The Fat Black Woman's Poems*. London: Virago Press, 1984.
- . *Lazy Thoughts of a Lazy Woman and Other Poems*. London: Virago Press, 1989.
- Narain, Denise DeCaires. "More Body to talk: righting or writing the body? The work of Lorna Goodison, Mahadai Das, Grace Nichols and Marlene Nourbese Philip." *Contemporary Caribbean Women's Poetry: Making Style*. London and New York: Routledge Taylor & Francis, 2002. 148-212.
- Neumann, Birgit and Rupp, Jan. "Sea Passages: cultural flows in Caribbean Poetry." *Atlantic Studies* 13. 4 (2016): 472-490.
- Scanlon, Mara. "The Divine Body in Grace Nichols's *The Fat Black Woman's Poems*." *World Literature Today* 72. 1 (1998): 59-66.
- "Steatopygia." *Merriam-Webster*. Available at: <<https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/steatopygous#h1>> (accessed July 26, 2019).
- Thomson, Garland Rosemarie. *Extraordinary Bodies*. 20th Ed. New York: Colombia UP, 2017.
- Tynan, Maeve. "Polyps, Plankton, and Passages: Mythopoeic Islands and Long-Memories Seas." *Space and Culture* 13. 2 (2010): 144-153.
- Williams, Eric. "Capitalism and Slavery." *From Columbus to Castro: The History of the Caribbean, 1492- 1969*. New York: Vintage Books, 1970. 136-155.
- Williams, Nerys. *Contemporary Poetry*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh UP, 2011.
- Verhaeghe, Paul. "Lacan's Answer to Alienation: Separation." *Crisis and Critique* 6. 1 (2019): 364-389.
- Zizek, Slavoj. "Why is *Woman* a Symptom of Man?" *Enjoy Your Symptom!* New York and London: Routledge, 1992. 31-112.