

## 5 Performing the Body

### Transgressive Doubles, Fatness and Blackness

When questioned at a poetry reading by a British audience of women about her representative female characters, Guyanese-born poet Grace Nichols refutes black female victimhood. This response not only draws attention to the prevailing assumption of blackness and womanness, but it also challenges the stereotypical representations of black female subjects. In refuting this predestined “victim mentality” or syndrome with which black women have been saddled as markers of their identity, Nichols posits language as the tool of resistance. Underscoring its importance, she specifically draws attention to the celebration and preservation of the language of our forefathers and foremothers. Consequently, Nichols posits a compelling line of reasoning for the validation and continued existence of Creole, which she argues was constantly interacting with standard English in her world, although Creole “was regarded, obviously, as the inferior by the colonial powers . . . and still has a social stigma attached to it in the Caribbean” (Nichols, “Battle” 284). On one hand, it signals our linguistic survival, our link to the past, being that it is a “language our foremothers and forefathers struggled to create and we’re saying that it’s a valid, vibrant language. We are no longer going to treat it with contempt or allow it to be misplaced” (284).

On the other hand, it provides spiritual sustenance that requires “the need to preserve something that’s important to us” (Nichols, “Battle” 97–98). Creole therefore functions as a marker of identity and resistance; it legitimizes one’s identity and citizenship. Furthermore, avoiding the

entrapment that places women in a stranglehold of perpetual dependency and victimization, Nichols, in a symbolic gesture, rebutted in poetry:

Of Course When They Ask for Poems  
About the 'realities' of Black Women

they want a little black blood  
what they really want  
at times  
is a specimen  
whose heart is in the dust

a mother-of-sufferer  
trampled/oppressed  
they want a little black blood  
undressed  
and validation  
for the abused stereotype  
already in their heads

or else they want  
a perfect song  
. . . maybe this poem is to say  
that I like to see  
we black women  
full-of we-selves walking

crushing out  
with each dancing step

the twisted self-negating  
history  
we've inherited  
crushing out  
with each dancing step.

(285–87)

Bolstering Nichols's objection to black women being depicted as pathological, British-based sociologist Ife Amadiume, assessing the racist element in western women's movements, calls attention to the blatant

misrepresentation of black women and their exclusion from the national discourse. Alleging that whereas a selective group of women (read middle-class white women) is chosen as representative of the movement, she ascertains that only “the downtrodden” are chosen “when it comes to African [women]” (*Male Daughters* 5). Further, she questions the routine portrayal of “Black women as universally deprived,” arguing that this picture “only reinforces racism” (5). In this regard, Nichols is one of the many women who Amadiume recognizes has begun “to expose the racism in the women’s movement and to accuse Western feminists of a new imperialism” (4). Nichols’s verbal indictment—“they want a little black blood / whose heart is in the dust / a mother-of-sufferer / trampled/oppressed / for the abused stereotype / already in their heads”—substantiates the “fantasized measure of superiority” that Amadiume argues white feminists exert “over African and other Third World Women” (3).

Similar to the objectionable idea of a superior language, Nichols challenges the notion of a superimposed identity or, more poignantly, a monolithic European identity. Furthermore, the *Fat Black Woman* critiques monolithic construction of race, sexuality, and national identity; in other words, she fiercely interrogates the practice of exclusionary citizenship. *The Fat Black Woman’s Poems* serves as testimony to this challenge even as it presents a formidable case for a broader, all-inclusive, and more realistic portrayal of black womanhood.<sup>1</sup> It is therefore not surprising that the first poem in this collection is titled “Beauty,” exemplifying and validating varying interpretations of beauty and consequently rejecting a monolithic imposed definition. Fittingly, the final poem in this section is titled “Afterword,” permitting self-affirmation and lending visibility to the “invisible” fat black woman and reinstating her as a worthy citizen. As such, Nichols renders her eponymous heroine, the *Fat Black Woman*, visible, making her the site/sight of public political debates as her fat black body functions as a platform, a discursive strategy, so to speak, that permits and validates alternative identity or subjectivity. This alternative identity challenges fixed identity and ideal citizenship. To this end, Nichols engages an interesting confluence of fatness and laziness in her poetry collections, *The Fat Black Woman’s Poems* and *Lazy Thoughts of a Lazy Woman*, drawing on the age-old racist stereotypes of the Sambo and the Mammy archetypes assigned to black subjects. Just as these stereotypes stand in contradistinction to the nation’s definition of the ideal body or citizen, in that they register blacks as non-persons and non-citizens, fatness and blackness are

equally incompatible with the nation's agenda. Redefining the "vulgar," Nichols shows that "vulgarity" is innately present in the promotion of gender and body conformity. Along these lines, acceptance of the body in all its formations—deviance, outcast, othered, grotesque—signals rejection of Victorian ideals of normalcy, femininity, decency, and the ideal citizen. As Duany ascertains, the invalidation of decency, propriety, and heteronormativity has strong resonance with the traversing of legal and cultural borders and boundaries in that they disrupt established norms and interrupt the distinction between "us and them" (1). Consequently, the Fat Black Woman deconstructs the nation-state's definition of ideal citizenship, cross-examining the politics of identity and belonging and collapsing enforced boundaries and borders. Further in her promotion of transnational citizenship (and attendant diasporic communities), Nichols's *Fat Black Woman's Poems* spans borders and boundaries in its response to Saartjie Baartman's exploitation, which culminated in her orchestrated and staged performances across Europe. "Performing her excess flesh" by choice, in contradistinction to Baartman, the Fat Black Woman presents a formidable challenge to black women's denial of citizenship and their assumed hypervisibility and hypersexuality.

Analyzing the concept of the "vulgar" body in Jamaican popular culture, Carolyn Cooper reasons that "the 'vulgarity' of the vulgar must itself be contested" (*Noises* 8). Claiming that "this conception of the vulgar seems to originate in a fear of the coarse texture of the (feminised) body and the baseness of the flesh," Cooper shows that consequently the "vulgar" body is demonized and devalued. "In all domains, the 'vulgar' is that which can be traced to 'Africa'; the 'refined' is that which can be traced to 'Europe.' In the domain of language and verbal creativity, English is 'refined' and Jamaican is 'vulgar'; oral texts are 'vulgar'; written texts are 'refined.'" (8). This cultural/linguistic difference establishes a divide between highbrow and lowbrow, us versus them, and "euro/afrocentric [culture] that is encoded in the . . . body politic" (8). Decades earlier, Russian philosopher and literary theorist Mikhail Bakhtin employs the "grotesque" (which stands in opposition to the "classic") in his exploration of high/low symbolism.<sup>2</sup> Offering a concrete example of the high/low theorization of the body, Bakhtin summarizes that "one of the fundamental tendencies of the grotesque image of the body is to show two bodies in one: the one giving birth and dying, the other conceived, generated, and born. This is the pregnant and begetting body, or at least a body ready for conception