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**Freedom is a State of Body: Rewriting the Body in  
Caribbean Female Poetry**

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## **TITLE**

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## **ABSTRACT**

This project presents an analysis of Caribbean female collections of poetry such as *Wife* by Tiphonie Yanique, *She Who Sleeps With Bones* and *The Merchant of Feathers*, both collections by Tanya Shirley, and *Pepper Seed* by Malika Booker. The aim of the project is to demonstrate how the female body constitutes the means to freedom by detaching it from the oppressive discourses that label the body of the Black woman on the Caribbean. Before the analyses, I will discuss the universal notion of freedom, feminist theories of the female body and of the Black female body. Moreover, I will analyse the dichotomization of the mind and the body, in which the mind is always more privileged, and I will unfold the historical moments that shaped the identity of the Black Caribbean women, and more importantly, how these women changed the meaning of freedom through every-day bodily practices.

**Key words:** body, freedom, Tiphonie Yanique, Tanya Shirley, Malika Booker, poetry

## **TÍTULO**

La Libertad es un Estado del Cuerpo: Reescribiendo el Cuerpo en la Poesía Femenina Caribeña

## **RESUMEN**

Este proyecto presenta un análisis de colecciones de poesía caribeña femenina tales como *Wife* de Tiphonie Yanique, *She Who Sleeps With Bones* y *The Merchant of Feathers*, las dos colecciones de Tanya Shirley, y *Pepper Seed* de Malika Booker. El objetivo de este proyecto es demostrar como el cuerpo de la mujer constituye el medio para obtener la libertad desligándolo de los discursos opresivos que etiquetan el cuerpo de la mujer negra en el Caribe. Antes del análisis, hablaré sobre el significado universal de la libertad, seguido de teorías feministas sobre el cuerpo de la mujer y el cuerpo de la mujer negra. Además, exploraré la dicotomía entre la mente y el cuerpo, en la que la mente siempre se privilegia más, y expondré momentos históricos que constituyeron la identidad de las mujeres negras en el Caribe, pero lo que es más importante, cómo estas mujeres cambiaron el significado de la libertad a través de las prácticas corporales cotidianas.

**Palabras clave:** cuerpo, libertad, Tiphonie Yanique, Tanya Shirley, Malika Booker, poesía

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## INTRODUCTION

In modern Caribbean feminist literature, a new generation of female writers intend to give back subjectivity to female characters who, according to Tiphonie Yanique, despite having active roles in male literature, were deprived of a full personhood that motivated their actions. In the selected collections of poetry, the authors decide to present not only their own experiences, but also those of other women on the Caribbean. What is common in most of the poems and stories they tell, is that the female body is always at the core of each poem, resilient and strong.

In this project I intend to analyse the collections of poetry written by different Caribbean authors. One of them is Tanya Shirley, from Jamaica, who wrote two of the collections that are going to be analysed: *She Who Sleeps With Bones* (2009) and *The Merchant of Feathers* (2014). The first collection constitutes a meditation on what it means to be human, it is a more spiritual collection in a sense, in which the female body is a resilient body, a body that is strongly connected to nature. The second collection is harsher, it shows violence and misogyny that women live on the Caribbean, a type of violence that is acted on the bodies of women in order to keep them in the inferior position. The next collection is *Pepper Seed* (2013) by Malika Booker, born in London with origins in Grenada and Guyana. Her poems expose the crude reality with which women and girls are faced on the Caribbean; realities that make women become “stony” (2013, p. 45). The last collection is *Wife* (2015) by Tiphonie Yanique, from the Virgin Islands. In these poems the female body is most explicitly presented as a site of transgression and of every-day life’s experiences. It is a body that pleads for healing and re-invention.

Before the analysis of the poems written by the mentioned authors, I am going to discuss the notion of freedom. “Universally”, we understand it as related to reason, to the mind. I will analyse briefly why we have this meaning of freedom by giving some common definitions of it and by exposing Enlightenment’s role in its coining. I’m not intending to diminish the freedom of the mind, which is also important, but I will show how limited this notion is and how important is to understand freedom of the body, which is far from being free because of all the discourses and constrictions it receives in society. I will analyse feminist theories of the body by Western authors such as Judith Butler, Susan Bordo, Angela King and Krystal Cleary, to present how female bodies are constructed in society and to expose the artificiality of gender. Afterwards, I will talk about feminist theories of the Black female body through the theories of authors such as Patricia Hill Collins, Janell Hobson, Anna Kasafi Perkins and Akeia Benard, that show how the body of the Black woman was used and abused since slavery, how this body

was exposed as “grotesque” and how the nakedness of African women was used to justify colonialism and the label of “non-human” for the whole race. Nevertheless, all authors clearly state that despite all the horrid oppression and rape, women found their ways of subversion of the identity they were given.

Furthermore, in order to understand the dichotomy between the mind and the body, this project will present an analysis of some of the theories presented by Elizabeth Grosz in her book *Volatile Bodies* (1994). The author explains how male philosophers considered the mind as a superior element of human existence, and the body as closer to an object, trivial and dirty. Thus, maleness was associated with the mind, and femaleness with the body, reducing women to objects to be used. The same theories were applied to create categories of human or rational, and non-human or purely bodies, and used to justify slavery. The author shows how those theories evolved until the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century and how the importance of corporeal experience became more relevant, blurring the line between the mind and the body. Grosz clarifies that she uses theories written by Western men, as those theories are usually considered as “universal truth”. Nonetheless, those theories can be transformed and used by feminist theorists to understand the female subjectivity through the body. The body, according to her, is written in society, by law, medicine, and many other social norms. If the body is written, that means that it can be rewritten and re-inscribed in society with a new meaning. This is the idea I will try to demonstrate in the analysis of poems: Caribbean female poetesses intend to rewrite, and re-invent, the Black female body in order to give it a new meaning.

The last theoretical approach will analyse how Black women on the Caribbean challenged the discourses of race and gender imposed on them, as they lived their bodies differently than it was established. Denise Noble, in her book *Decolonizing and Feminizing Freedom* (2016), shows how women on the Caribbean were first racialized only, not being considered human beings, and after the emancipation, Western planters forced the liberated population to learn gender. Double oppression was acted on the body of the Black woman considered as inferior because of race and also because of gender, thus, acquiring the most marginal position in society. Nevertheless, these women never conformed and constantly challenged or even transformed the meaning of freedom and their bodies through different corporeal practices in their every-day life. Those bodily subversions were crucial for the creation of the identity of the Black Caribbean woman as it is a proof that those women were fully conscious of their oppression and it is their personal and alternative practices of the body that helped them to

shape themselves differently. This consciousness and the centrality of the body is expressed in Caribbean female poetry that will be analysed in the last part of this project.

Tiphonie Yanique, Tanya Shirley and Malika Booker write their poetry about many different issues and topics. Nevertheless, the female body is always at the centre of each poem. These authors show every-day life's obstacles and enjoyments of the body of the Black woman on the Caribbean. The chosen poems for the analysis are organized in five different sections. The first one presents poems that advocate for healing from "slavery's stigma" (Shirley, 2009, p. 72) through corporeal rites, by inviting women to love their bodies and never forgetting to value them. The second one consists of poems that expose gender violence that is so present on the Caribbean and is captured in literature. The next ensemble of poems pleads for the acceptance of heritage, knowledge and resistance passed from mothers to daughters, a tradition that is crucial on the Caribbean. Furthermore, these authors encourage women to take action, to get rid of all the constraints and to be alive, in connection with nature, as well as to be conscious of their bodies as those bodies store valuable knowledge. And finally, the last group of poems expose the enjoyment of the body, wholesome and confident body of the Black Caribbean woman worth of mutual pleasure and respect after the extensive history of sexual abuse. There is a celebration of the excess of the body, of the flesh, powerful and without constraints.

The purpose of this project is to unfold, through the theories explained here and the analysis of the poems in Caribbean feminist poetry, how the body can be a tool for subversion of the oppressing discourses. The body is the kernel that germinates into freedom. In other words, female Caribbean poetesses write about self-making through the centrality of the body as a means to freedom. Thus, the body is a core element and a tool crucial for women's healing and emancipation, insomuch as bodily experiences have the power to challenge the traditional meaning of freedom and the meaning of the female body.

## **1.THEORETICAL BACKGROUND**

### *1.1. Conceptualizing freedom and body*

#### 1.1.2. Discussing freedom

“Freedom is a state of mind” is a statement that many of us have heard multiple times in our lives. It seems natural to associate freedom with mental or spiritual states, but when it comes to corporeity, freedom is mentioned as the opposite to prison or slavery.

For example, the Cambridge Dictionary defines freedom as “the condition or right of being able or allowed to do, say, think, etc. whatever you want to, without being controlled or limited”. The Oxford Dictionary goes for similar definitions: “the power or right to act, speak, or think as one wants” and “the state of not being imprisoned or enslaved”. The right to exercise one's own mind seems to be always put at the center and the verb “act” is not that broad as the actions are always limited by the law or the moral.

The notion of freedom started to be heavily discussed during the Enlightenment or the Age of Reason (1715-1789), which was the beginning of ideas that lately would affect the whole humanity. According to Peter Gay (1973) the philosophers of those times presented “freedom in its many forms – freedom from arbitrary power, freedom of speech, freedom of trade, freedom to realize one’s talents, freedom of aesthetic response, freedom in word, of moral man to take his way in the world” (p. 3). For him, the Enlightenment and its notions of freedom were always problematic and should be demystified as being ideal. Some of the most prominent philosophers of this movement were Diderot, Rousseau, Voltaire, Kant and others. For all of them freedom is always linked to the law, as law adjusts freedom and restricts it. Freedom is always gradable and never absolute. Rousseau, for example, distinguished the natural freedom, the one that meant free actions and should be, therefore, repressed, and the moral one, values acquired in society that come to constitute the mind of an individual:

That account turns on Rousseau's important distinction between natural freedom and what he calls moral freedom or autonomy, a distinction that is understood as, roughly, a distinction between being able to do what one wills to do without interference or impediment and self-conscious rational self-determination. (Affeldt, 1999, p. 303)

Kant linked freedom and law, but this law was a “self-imposed law”. It was a moral of each individual: “The act rests absolutely and ultimately upon the will of the individual to do the action” (Perry, 1900, p. 643). The act or will, according to him, have equal state with reason,



and consequently, reason and freedom, or mind and freedom, are conceived as two correlative elements, being the body of little importance. Kant also states that the individual must recognize that others similar to him, human beings, possess this freedom too: “Thus far on purely Kantian grounds we are entitled to consider man only as one among many objects of experience, and as enjoying a freedom that is the possession of all alike (Perry, 1900, p.638). A free person was, then, a human being and all who were “alike”, which meant a white man or, more precisely, a white bourgeois man and all who were similar to him. Everyone who did not fit this category was excluded from the practice of freedom. The excluded ones were white women and all non-white women and men. While spreading the ideas about freedom, those philosophers never rejected slavery and never considered women to be part of the new changes they were trying to introduce in their societies.

William Marias Malisoff (1940) as well exposes his suspicions about the notion of freedom. For him, freedom has many forms: “The term ‘free’ apparently is applicable to things, theoretical entities, mechanical motions, biological functions and a vast variety of human psychological states and sociological interactions. It may be measurable” (p. 266). Thus, freedom is an idea that is gradable, that can undergo an evolution and mutate through time. Thus, the Enlightenment’s notion of freedom would alter and would be used by the oppressed groups with new meanings, applied to their own realities. The idea of freedom would lead to rebellions of slaves on plantations, to the abolition of slavery and emancipation, and also to the fight for women’s rights and feminist movements.

If we analyse the etymology of the word “freedom” (Online Etymology Dictionary), we can elaborate a poetic and innovative meaning of it. “Free” comes from the Old English “freo” which means “exempt from; joyful”. Its origin is in the Proto-Germanic “friez”, meaning “beloved; not in bondage”. If we go further, “free” in its initial form was “pri” which means “to love”. “Dom” in Old English means “statute; judgement” from German “tum” meaning “jurisdiction, state, condition, quality”. Freedom could be the condition to love and the quality of beloved: beloved by oneself. It can mean to love one's own being, the “jurisdiction” of the self, physical and spiritual.

### 1.1.3. The body

#### 1.1.3.1. Feminist theories of the body

The figure of the woman has long been depicted as mysterious, desired and hated, threatening and docile. Butler opens her discussion on gender and the role of the body in *Gender Trouble*

(1990) saying that in Western society, impregnated by a “phallogocentric language, women constitute the unrepresentable [...] the sex that cannot be thought, a linguistic absence and opacity” (p. 9). Because of the threat women supposed to men, King argues (2004), “‘woman’ has been discursively constructed (condemned) as inferior yet also threatening to man, thus in perpetual need of containment and control and subjected (condemned) to particular disciplinary techniques” (p. 30). This discipline or punishment was purposefully carried out on the female body by “gender ideologies and sexist reasoning” creating binary categories “that have characterized western thought from the philosophers of ancient Greece to the Enlightenment and beyond” (King, 2004, p. 31).

Gender discourses are therefore conventional cultural and social products, unnatural and binary. We learn gender the moment we are born by receiving all kinds of information, oral, physical and visual that already divide human beings into males and females (Bordo, 1993/2004). Butler (1990) states that “no one is born with a gender – gender is always acquired” (p. 111). Her idea is that gender is a process or an “activity” (p. 112) we learn through repetition and end up perceiving as natural. Following on this idea, Cleary argues that “Gender, then, is a verb – a series of acts and reenactments of learned behaviors, dress, mannerisms, and so on that only in their ongoing repetition come to feel and appear to us as natural” (2016, p. 3). This binarization is entirely political and it “suits the economic needs of heterosexuality and lends a naturalistic gloss to the institution of heterosexuality” (Butler, 1990, p. 112).

Cleary marks the relevance of the bodies when she states that “women’s subordination is the product of unequal social, political, and economic relations rather than inferior embodiment” (2016, p. 2). Even though this is true, female inferiority was always justified through the supposedly biological abilities of female bodies. Angela King (2004) applies Foucault’s ideas on punishment and discipline to the process of understanding of how female bodies are disciplined into obedience: “[...] the female body as a particular target of disciplinary power in order to argue that gender, specifically femininity, is a discipline that produces bodies and identities and operates as an effective form of social control” (p. 30). The same idea is expressed by Bordo who states that “the body is a locus of social control” and “a metaphor for culture” (1993/2004, p. 165).

The fact that female bodies had always been subjected to strict control comes from the dichotomy between the mind and the body:

In the mind/body dualism the body and mind are regarded as quite separate [...] Mind and reason are superior to the emotions and senses and divorced from one another. Man is mind and represents culture: the rational, unified, thinking subject; woman is body and represents nature: irrational, emotional and driven by instinct and physical need. Mind/culture/man must harness and control this potentially unruly body/nature/woman through the application of knowledge and willpower. (King, 2004, p. 31)

Thus, men found a justification for controlling the female body which was reinforced with essentialist ideas that attributed biological “differences and reasons”, a consequence that “leads to more intense policing of women’s bodies and specific apparatuses of control” (King, 2004, g. 33). Gender system is so powerful that it “intersects with other systems of domination and is therefore experienced differentially among women across race, class, and sexuality” (Cleary, 2016, p. 4).

Nevertheless, despite all the constrictions and disciplines, there is always a space for subversion, opening the possibility to “reclaim and rejoice in the body as a site of valuable knowledge production” (Cleary, 2016, p. 1). To do that it is important to resist the law, or imposed discourses, from within, challenging it and questioning it from the inside:

If subversion is possible, it will be a subversion from within in terms of the law, through the possibilities that emerge when the law turns against itself and spawns unexpected permutations of itself. The culturally constructed body will then be liberated, neither to its “natural” past, nor to its original pleasures, but to an open future of cultural possibilities (Butler, 1990, p. 93).

This idea will be followed by Denise in the last theoretical section, as she will explain how Black Caribbean women subverted the discourses of race and gender imposed on them. The disciplinary forces work especially on the small levels, every-day practices, and it is possible to make a change on this level of the every-day life (King, 2004). Those resistances are the ones expressed in the poems analyzed in the last section, poems that rewrite bodies and freedom.

#### 1.1.3.2. The Black women’s bodies

It is true that many Western feminist theories, while wanting to create a universal feminism for women of all colors and nations, had little consideration for the differences that women of color had lived, as they not only suffered and still suffer the oppression of gender discourses, but

also racial and class discourses. Chandra Talpade Mohanty (1984) makes the following statement:

The assumption of women as an already constituted, coherent group with identical interests and desires, regardless of class, ethnic or racial location or contradictions, implies a notion of gender or sexual difference or even patriarchy which can be applied universally and cross-culturally. (p. 336-337)

Therefore, it is important to understand those differences. In order to justify slavery, many discourses started to arise in Western society, stating that African people were “less capable of intellectual excellence, more suited to manual labour, and therefore as less human than whites” (Collins, 1989, p.747). Thus, Black people were dehumanized and treated as animals or worse, being considered as lacking a soul and mind, and only having a body to exploit; a racialized body, but not gendered:

[...] Africans were compared to apes— with the same animalistic childishness, savageness, bestiality, sexuality and lack of intellectual capacity ... Female bodies were regarded with similar types of measurement ...since the times of Aristotle the female body had only been studied only as it deviated from the male. Females across the animal kingdom were viewed as primarily sexual beings. (Story, 2010, p. 27, cited by Akeia Benard, 2016, p. 3)

Hobson (2009) and Collins (1989), as well as Benard (2016), argue that the Black female body was crucial in order to create the race difference and to define the Black race in opposition to the white race: “The body is a physical symbol full of meaning and it is inscribed in society with its place in the system always exposed to the public” (Benard, 2016, p. 2). The depictions that despised the Black female body started already with travel narratives in Africa which were valuing the degree of civilization of non-white communities by the way women were treated, their bodies and their clothing. Thus, those travellers “often depicted African women’s bodies as mythic and monstrous, in which their exposed breasts and genitalia, appearing animalistic and abundant, supported popular views of Africa’s ‘lack of civilization’” (Hobson, 2009, p.94). Collins and Hobson use the example of Sara Baartman, the African enslaved woman born in south Africa in Khoikhoi, a nomadic community, and forced into France where she was exposed in freak-shows as “‘grotesque,’ ‘strange,’ ‘unfeminine,’ ‘lascivious,’ and ‘obscene’” (Hobson, 2009, p. 87). Characteristics that all Black women would receive and that would create labels for the whole race (Hobson, 2009). Therefore, according to Benard, “[...]”

stereotyping and degrading imagery— deprive women of their human rights and reinforce systems of structural and symbolic violence” (p. 9).

Despite those depictions of the Black female body, white men would rape massively the enslaved African women, forcing them into “sexual exploitation” as well as in “systems of concubinage” (Benard, 2016, p. 2). Moreover, Black women would not be considered as human beings, and therefore, genderless and forced into inhumane labour. They would be also oppressed by the discourses on the body aesthetics that depicted the female Black body as “monstrous” and oppressed by gender discourses, considered inferior to men.

Notwithstanding all this oppression, Black women in America, Caribbean and other places found their ways of resistance and of subversion of the meanings of their identities in society. Collins (1989), Noble (2016) and Kasafi (2011) argue that African heritage was the main factor as some religions, values and different practices put emphasis on the importance of the bodies: “Black societies reflect elements of a core African value system that existed prior to and independently of racial oppression” (Collins, p.755). This resistance was mostly enacted on daily-life actions and meanings, which shows that Black women “have been neither passive victims of nor willing accomplice to their own domination” (Collins, 1989, p. 747). Patricia Hill Collins (1989) as well talks about Black women’s consciousness of their mistreatment and nowadays, this consciousness, that always existed, is expressed in all types of art and in the Black feminist theories. Its expression is an important tool for resistance, because this consciousness is infused with new important meanings that need to be spread in order to encourage Black women to “value their own subjective knowledge base” (p. 750).

Resistance is also highly expressed through music and dance, as Hobson (2009) and Noble (2016) argue, such as dancehall, hip-hop, reggae, calypso and so on, where dancing moves mean liberation of the constraints of the “puritan and submissive” female gender role imposed on Black women. Therefore, those sexual moves “provide a female-centred space for affirmation and pleasure in their bodies, even as these scripts prepare them later for the male gaze” (Hobson, 2009, p.102).

Anna Kasafi Perkins (2011), focusing on Black women on the Caribbean, discusses the meaning of the Caribbean Carnival, which opposes and subverts the notions of the body imposed by the Christian religion, in which the body “is to be controlled, rejected, and disciplined through fear of its sinful potentials” (p. 362). The body that is to be controlled more thoroughly is the body of the woman, considered to be more threatening and innately sinful:

"In some Christian perspectives, the female body is particularly problematic because of the association of the female with the carnal/bodily/weakness and the male with reason/mind/control" (p. 362). Women and body are both threatening to the male hegemonic system and Christian religion. The female body is the elements that can subvert those two systems. Therefore, Carnival opens a space for Caribbean women to rebel against the negative notions about the body, as "the body is a 'material' against morality, discipline and control" (p. 369) and is "transformed into means of liberation and transformation" (p.369).

The oppressions during colonialism has had an enormous impact on the figure of the Black woman, its consequences are still lived today. In the Caribbean there is a tension between sticking to the strict rules about the female subjects, religion and colonial legacy, and rebelling against through dance, music, education, literature and so on (Senior, 1991).

The literature written about Black women used to reinforce colonial discourses. Concentrating on the Caribbean, male Caribbean writers would not be giving much voice to women and would not create a whole, true and strong subjectivity for female characters, although Caribbean Black women had been and are very active and have crucial roles in their communities, as they are responsible for child rearing and sustaining their families; mostly women from lower classes who are the majority (Senior, 1991).

According to Tiphonie Tanique, during the discussion about Caribbean feminism at Barnard College in 2015, women in Caribbean literature, even written by men, have always been active figures, but they have lacked a subjectivity, a personhood that would impulse them to act in one way or another, and Caribbean feminism in literature is about giving back that subjectivity to female characters<sup>1</sup>.

## 1.2. Insights

### 1.2.1. *Volatile Bodies*: Understanding the centrality of the body.

During many centuries, in Western societies there existed a strong dichotomy between the mind and the body, being the mind considered to be more privileged in order to understand the identity of an individual. Elizabeth Grosz makes the statement that in Western society there exists a strong dichotomy between the mind and the body, being the mind associated with maleness and the body with femaleness. During colonization, the body would be also

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<sup>1</sup> Link for the full discussion in Works Cited.

associated with colonized people who would be conceived as bodies without the mind, therefore, not human beings.

Throughout the history of Western philosophy, the body was always conceived as “a source of interference in, and danger to, the operations of reason” (p. 5). We can already find evidences of the binary organization in society in Ancient Greece because the female body was considered as only a recipient where the male’s flesh gives form to the new human being. Another philosopher who devalued the body was Descartes as he succeeded in presenting the mind as being superior to the body, as well as to the nature. This leads to the idea of impossibility of the body and mind to correlate. Other philosophers, such as Locke, thought that the body was a mere object; theories that reinforced misogyny and women's subordination. The bodies of people of color and white women were, therefore, viewed as objects to be exploited.

Nevertheless, differences between male and female bodies are established in a binary position in a way that “women’s corporeal specificity is used to explain and justify the different (read: unequal) social positions and cognitive abilities of the two sexes “(p. 14). The body of a young white male was established as a model of perfection and humanity, others who did not conform to this “ideal” body and “superior” mind were considered quasi-humans or non-humans, the dominated ones, and whose domination is specifically justified because of the different specificities of the body considered as inferior and in need of being controlled.

Grosz analyses the ways in which the mind is established in the way that it accords with “the social meaning of the body” (p. 27) or “the ways in which the psyche is a projection of the body’s form” (p. 27). To do that, the author analyzes Freud’s theories and models of psyche. According to Grosz, Freud demonstrated that the body and the psyche are interrelated and can’t exist one without the other. His theories are based on what he called the *ego*, which is a conscious psyche responsible for distinguishing the reality, corporeal feelings, and non-reality, thoughts from within. The *ego* “is itself the projection of the surface” (Freud, 1923: 23, cited by Grosz, 1994, p.33-34), which means that without the body, there is no ego, no psyche. If the psyche was separated from the body “there could be no way of unifying the subject’s experiences of a single being, no way of asserting property over those experiences, no way of taking responsibility for them” (p.31). If some individuals were only bodies without the mind, there would be no point to blame them or punish them for their deeds, as they would be considered as not being conscious of themselves as individuals. Nevertheless, Western women

as well as enslaved populations showed consciousness of their positions and manifested their opposition to it, claiming their humanity.

Nevertheless, the surface, or the body, is not a product of nature but rather, it “is continually augmented by products of history and culture, which it readily incorporates in its own intimate space” (p. 38). In our early stages of life we are given a social construction of our body image as a whole; even though we can have access to some of its parts, we only perceive and understand the body by the whole images we are given. This image of the body that we are given is formed in our minds, before we even get to know our bodies. Women learn that they lack something essential that gives power in society, the phallus, and are automatically reduced to the inferior position in the patriarchal system. The sexual organs, thus, are crucial when shaping the bodies in a binarized way as they are “dividing up a sexual-corporeal continuum onto two mutually exclusive categories which in fact belie the multiplicity of bodies and body types” (p. 58). The pre-elaborated information about the body is a tool useful to categorize people and keep them obedient, as everybody interiorizes its own bodily capacities before knowing their bodies, thus, receiving a certain position in society.

Another relevant theory for the further analysis of the poems is phenomenology. Phenomenology stands for the understanding of the subject only in relation to its body: “[...] we perceive and receive information of and from the world through our bodies” (p. 86). Perceptions and senses are a passage between the mind and the body, to understand them, both the mind and the body are crucial. Therefore, the experiences form and inform the body, but they are not natural or reliable, as they also carry components of culture and social constructions: “Experience is not outside social, political, historical, and cultural forces and in this sense cannot provide an outside vantage point from which to judge them” (p. 94). Nevertheless, experience is paradoxical, as it inscribes the subject in society, but at the same time it can subvert “sociopolitical values” (p. 95), which is the case of Black women. Theorists like Noble (2016) and Hill Collins (1989) claim that enslaved women used those features and positions they were ascribed in society to dismantle the system from within. For example, if their experience was to work on the field, they used that to create secret markets to have personal income.

It is also important to explore the external factors that shape the body image. Grosz uses the metaphor of the body compared to a page on which one can literally write and inscribe the body and the meaning of the subject, with the useful tools of “social, surgical, epistemic,



disciplinary” origin (p. 117): “The messages or texts produced by this body writing construct bodies as networks of meaning and social significance, producing them as meaningful and functional ‘subjects’ within social ensembles” (p. 117). Grosz then, proceeds to analyze Michel de Certeau’s understanding of this inscription of the body:

[...] the inscription of the social surface of the body is the tracing of pedagogical, juridical, medical, and economic texts, laws and practices onto the flesh to carve out social subject as such, a subject capable of labor, of production and manipulation, a subject capable of acting as a subject and, at the same time, capable of being deciphered, interpreted, understood (p. 117).

Thus, bodies are “living narratives” (p. 118) written and shaped through cultural and social discourses. Nevertheless, these narratives are never complete, as the body is too complex and too unstable; this leaves a space for resistance to those imposed descriptions. The most prominent and employed way to avoid this resistance is through punishment of the flesh which “induces the subject from within to accept the mediation of social regulations in its attempts to gain gratification” (p. 120).

The body as culturally made subject/object is a theme discussed by Foucault. He presents the concept of “biopower”, which is a type of power created “to regulate the minute details of daily life and behavior in both individuals and populations” (p. 152). Sex is a tactic to manipulate and organize the society under a constant regard, which organizes the space of the individuals: “Sex is a means of access both to the life of the body and the life of the species” (Foucault, 1978, p. 145-146, cited by Grosz, 1994, p. 152). After the emancipation of slave population, government used this “biopower” to control people’s lives on former colonies, as the liberated population had to learn gender. The attribution of specific strict bodily specificities and gender allowed the government to control even the most intimate aspects of people’s lives.

Nevertheless, for Foucault, as for Nietzsche, the body is a blank page before it is inscribed in society by conventional body images. Grosz questions this idea as she explains that this idea is impossible to apply in the same way to the women’s corporeal experience. She argues that the same message inscribed on the male and on the female body will have different significances, because their bodily experiences are different as, for example, the experience of menstruation and pregnancy.

Another theory she analyzes is by Deleuze and Guattari. They have a radically different view of the body. For them, the body and mind are made of many fragments that merge together

without any kind of order or hierarchy. Their combinations are temporary. These authors argue that the bodies are stolen from the individuals in order to fabricate another one. The body is stolen from girls in their early age by receiving amounts of instructions and prohibitions “in order to impose a history or prehistory, upon her” (Deleuze and Guattari, 1973, p. 276, cited by Grosz, 1994, p. 175). The created form of a woman is just an illusion, as they claim; it is the “the projection of (men’s) fantasies” (p. 176).

Those fantasies are based on the differences that men attribute to women as the Other, surrounding women with mystery. They create a set of characteristics for others based on their own established theories: “[...] biological and psychological processes can be induced in subjects through the inculcation into certain beliefs about the body and its place in social and religious life” (p. 190). For Grosz, there is no biological bodies, because the supposed biological capacities of the bodies vary from one culture to the other. This demonstrates that biological arguments are to be discarded when understanding the notion of the body that we have today. Biology, Grosz argues, “is an open materiality, a set of (possibly infinite) tendencies and potentialities which may be developed, yet whose development will necessarily hinder or induce other developments and other trajectories” (p.191).

Grosz, then, talks about one important feature of the human bodies, the fluids. The fluids, according to her, mark the body as clean or unclean. Female fluids are considered as dirty, such as menstruation, and male fluids are seen as the clean ones, the semen, which contributes to the procreation. The body fluids are more related to women, considered as “seeping” beings, unstable, in need of control and solidification, but one important thing is that the fluids “assert the priority of the body over subjectivity” (p. 194). This is the reason why we fear and feel disgusted by the body fluids, especially the female ones. The fluids are “otherness” to the solid subject (p. 195). By presenting themselves as solid, “men demarcate their own bodies as clean and proper [...] men take on the right of the proprietors of women’s bodies too insofar as women’s bodies are conceived as the receptacles of men’s body fluids and the nesting place of their product – the fetus” (p. 202). Therefore, men get rid of their fluids inside women’s bodies, bodies that they start to imagine as their properties.

To sum up, this section analysed the ways in which Western understanding of the bodies and female bodies were constructed. It focuses on Western values as it is these values and beliefs that are generally imposed as “universal truth”. These notions impacted many places, as

colonisation transplanted the system of gender and the conceptions of the body and mind on to other people.

### 1.2.2. *A Caribbean Genealogy*: Freedom and self-making of Black Caribbean women

In this book the author traces historical events, discourses and ideologies that shaped the figure of the Black Caribbean woman. But the main point is to analyse how these women subverted and questioned all those elements, and still do, by living their bodies differently and creating their own meaning of freedom.

The author puts emphasis on British policies on the colonised Caribbean territories, as they are closely related to the bodies of enslaved people during colonisation. The two main aspects that must be taken into account are: coloniality and governmentality. Coloniality could be described as a set of discourses and practices that are not directed to pre-existent subject, but rather it creates those subjects, their identities and features: “this model of discourse and subjectification has been criticized as producing a repressive model of subjectification, in which the subject is rendered docile and without agency” (p. 25). Thus, coloniality invented degrading features and labels for the enslaved population in order to justify colonialism and slavery by creating its subjects through colonial discourses. This system was supported by “governmentality”, a term coined by Foucault, which is a type of government that governs its subjects mentally and physically, penetrating the every-day life and intimacies of those subjects. In other words, this kind of control and invasive government is supposed to manipulate the most private aspects of people who live under this system, especially the bodily practices, in order to immediately repress any kind of rebellion. Nevertheless, this kind of system leaves a space for subversion of the power and of the definition of the self. As an example, enslaved women would abort the result of rape in order to not pass the status of slavery to their offspring. Thus, Noble argues that, during colonialism, the main body to be controlled was the body of the Black women, and that it was controlled through racialized and gendered discourses that have never been fully absorbed by Black Caribbean women, but rather collided with the every-day bodily practices that gave way to new meanings of freedom.

To analyse the crucial role of the discourses of race and gender it is precise to go back in time, to the beginnings of slavery in the Americas. As a consequence of the Enlightenment’s movement in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, many categories of human beings were created. A human person was, from the European perception, a white man, and by default, a white woman. The rest were not considered human or were almost human. The basis to judge people’s humanity was their

gender relation system as it was considered that only human beings could organize themselves by gender. Thus, African enslaved people did not have any strict gender system and “both colonized males and females were judged as non-human” (p. 41).

The discourse of gender was applied when slavery was abolished. The abolishment of slavery itself was not fully a result of Enlightenment, as the ideas of freedom of this movement were developed only for “white, bourgeois and male” subjects (p. 108). Other reasons anticipated the abolition of slavery. The most important ones were the rebellions across colonised territories that started to be more frequent in the 19<sup>th</sup> century as the ideas of freedom and slaves’ self-consciousness as subjects were more and more prominent.

As a consequence, the British government abolished slavery and substituted it by wage labour. Notwithstanding, the slave-holders wouldn’t support this: “A large part of the planters’ resistance was expressed within the terms of classical liberalism—that is, emancipation threatened the loss of their rights in their own property (i.e. the slaves)” (p. 194). Despite that, in 1834 slavery would be abolished and new ways of maintaining the rule would be invented by Western colonisers.

In this environment, Christian missionaries wanted to teach the “immature” population how to construct patriarch families and lead a correct Christian life (p. 197). But they didn’t want to rely on wage labour to achieve these aims, so they created free villages for the emancipated population:

The missions’ role in purchasing and setting up free villages demonstrates the processes of Westernization and religious conversion through which the newly emancipated were to be inducted into the Western freedoms of liberalism and Christianity, and their norms of gender and sexuality (p. 198).

Western gender system was transplanted onto Caribbean territories. Thus, Black males had to learn how to be “men” and Black females had to learn how to be “women”. In other words, they had to learn gender. According to this, women had to take the inferior position and be dominated by men. Gender works both for Christianity and wage labour, as males would be forced to work for planters in order maintain women and children who were forced into houses and depended on men. Therefore, before the emancipation, women in the Caribbean were only racialized and after the abolition of slavery, also gendered, acquiring the most marginal position through those discourses of race and gender.

Noble unfolds the most important ways in which Black Caribbean women “used their new powers of freedom to resist colonial state and religious governance” (p. 199). The three main acts of resistance were the creation of small markets, the refusal of marriage contracts and the creation and practice of religions different from Christianity. Even if women were forced to be at home, they still had to harvest their own crops considered to be “female crops” (p. 199). What they did was to create small markets and networks of female kinship that would help them to sell and buy products. This gave women a certain independence and autonomy from their men as they did have an income for themselves. Olive Senior (1991) explains in her book *Working Miracles: Women's Lives in the English-speaking Caribbean* that those networks and markets still exist and are essential for many women on the Caribbean, especially those from lower classes in whose families men are usually absent and unwilling to sustain their children. Another way of subverting the imposed gender system was to reject marriage. Women wanted to preserve their autonomy by not marrying, as they knew that they wouldn’t be able to leave their husbands once married and probably would have to suffer physical violence. Therefore, the rates of marriage were very low in the period that followed the emancipation. The third act of subversion was the practice of religions that were not purely Christian, but rather syncretic, that fused African religions with Christianity, along with the creation of hidden churches that practiced Christianity differently. Noble concludes saying that all these actions “were important practices of freedom and self-making within and beyond the freedoms that colonial liberalism sought to impose” (p. 216).

Returning to the importance of female kinship, Noble analyses the figure of the independent Black woman from the perspective of ten women she interviewed for her book. Most of these women define independence as “self-determination and personal sovereignty as women” (p.104). The interviewed women understood independence as “forms of resistance to a blind acceptance of a patriarchal or masculinist definition of authority and to the assumption of men’s proprietary rights over women” (p.116). Thus, when it comes to marriage, women do desire to be married but only as long as it doesn’t limit their own freedom, so marriage “was clearly secondary to a commitment to retaining self-determination and avoiding personal dependency” (p. 117). In order to retain their autonomy, women do acknowledge that sometimes they had to give up a relationship and “a willingness to endure material hardship in the defence of self-determination for oneself as a woman and mother was seen to mark Black women out from other groups of women” (p. 117). Therefore, these women are ready to “pay the price of freedom” (p. 118) by bearing all the problems by themselves.

The figure of a Black independent woman is almost a cliché and is rooted in Caribbean countries. Many women feel both proud and burdened as the image of the independent Black woman is viewed as a tradition passed on from mothers to daughters, but it doesn't leave a space for vulnerability. If a Black woman seeks help, she automatically breaks the image of the independent woman, therefore seen as not strong, and consequently, as not a real Black woman and, certainly, not free.

Black women learned to live relying on themselves, without expecting others to help or take responsibility. On the one hand that may constitute the figure of a strong woman who is able to survive and overcome any struggle, but on the other, women do all in silence, in a sense, and silence may be pernicious as it silences the issues that need to be addressed such as “internalized racism, misogyny and violence within Black relationships and communities” (p. 132).

Noble discusses the dichotomy of the mind and the body, already analysed by Grosz in the previous section, and argues that the Black women were viewed as unable of taking care of themselves as their bodies were considered to not be accompanied by a rational mind, thus making them non-human beings that couldn't own their own bodies and by extension, couldn't be free. Some of the methods to heal the consequences of those assumptions are presented by Sacred Woman programme, created by the Queen Afua, which consists of 12 methods to empower Black women and heal them through the bodily practices:

In this fractured state of disembodied and self-alienated consciousness the programme suggests that the African descendant in the West cannot experience real and effective freedom. Therefore, liberation requires knowledge of the body and its spiritual powers (p. 256).

This programme is very influenced by Afrocentrism, and it seeks to challenge westernization and Western approaches in creating identities, but also the meaning of freedom derived from the Enlightenment. Even though those practices intend to cure Black women from the trauma of slavery's heritage, it does present some discordances with the modern world, as such practices focus excessively on the reproductive capacities of women and reinforce “a heteronormative Afrocentric governmentality and closure” (p. 253). But still, this programme problematizes modernity and “frames how Black subjectivity and Black freedom can be healed through its detailed practices of the self” (p. 260) in order to achieve true and full freedom. The practices directed to heal women increase their affection towards their own bodies. This

affection can also be seen in the analysis of the poems in the last part of this project, in which poetesses write about loving and enjoying their bodies by erasing negative meanings those bodies were once given.

Music also plays a huge role in resisting westernization as it orally and physically expresses the identity of a community. Noble proceeds to analyse this and states that “Black music has deployed orality, sound and the body to challenge the hegemony of the scribal, the visual and reason as the basis of modern self-understanding and knowledge” (p. 278). The author puts as an example the genre of Dancehall, Jamaican type of music, which symbolizes resistance to racism by expressing freely the sexuality. In Noble’s words:

Sex and sexuality are central to Dancehall-reggae’s poetics of resistance to a bourgeois nationalist discourse of gender respectability that has its roots in colonial morality’s attempts to impose a patriarchal gender order on the Caribbean family after the abolition of slavery in 1838. (p. 304)

Women in Dancehall are in a paradoxical situation as on the one hand they can be viewed as hypersexualized subjects, but on the other, the fact that they openly show and enjoy their bodies “mocks or simply ignores the authority of middle-class creole Jamaican notions of gender and racial respectability which, though ideologically hegemonic, have never been normative in practice” (p. 306).

Parting from the content of this book we can assert that the body and freedom always go hand in hand and that Black Caribbean women challenged, and still challenge, Western liberal discourses on gender and race, and also problematized the notion of freedom by creating their own premises and practices of it. Noble insists on “the embodied nature of existence/consciousness” (p. 271) as a means to freedom of Black women and Black community as a whole.

## **2.THE BODY IN CARIBBEAN FEMALE POETRY**

As previously discussed, many events and discourses shaped the identity of the Black woman and those discourses were specifically directed toward the Black female body. Different types of subversion and resistance during colonial times were seen in the theoretical section of this project. Nowadays, resistance is shown in literature, in different types of art, as well as in social media or in universities, because this knowledge is passed from one generation of women to

the next one. This part of the project aims to explore the centrality of the body in Caribbean female poetry through the collections *She Who Sleeps With Bones* (2009) and *The Merchant of Feathers* (2014) by Tanya Shirley, *Pepper Seed* (2013) by Malika Booker and *Wife* (2015) Tiphonie Yanique. Through this analysis of poems, it will be possible to show how Caribbean poetesses intend to rewrite the body of the Black woman in order to heal it and re-inscribe it in society with new meanings. In addition, through the analysis it would be possible to trace how the female body can be a tool for the reinvention of the meaning of freedom.

### *2.1. Erasing slavery's stigma*

This section will unfold the importance of healing and restoration from slavery's trauma. Before analysing the mentioned collections, I will introduce the poem "On Reading Thistlewood's Diary" written by Ann-Margaret Lim, a Jamaican poet who won the 27<sup>th</sup> *Festival International de Poesía de Medellin* in 2017, as it shows the intrinsic relation of the body as a tool for freedom. Thomas Thistlewood was a slaveholder in Jamaica in the 18<sup>th</sup> century who wrote a diary in which he explained how many enslaved women he raped and how brutally he punished them if they tried to escape. One of them was Phibbah, whose fate is unfolded in the poem by Lim. The author rhymes the name Phibbah with syvah, which is a Dancehall's dance move that consists of crossing the arms and releasing them as if opening the wings to fly in a squatted position of the body. It is a move of liberation, which was invented by the Jamaican artist Ding Dong in 2015. Thus, Lim imagines Phibbah dancing syvah in order to escape pain and slavery: "for when women syvah, they squat for takeoff, /spread wings and fly". The emancipation comes through the bodily movements, dance moves that the body performs as a means to freedom:

And the takeoff  
when the body comes fully into play,  
is the throwing of the shackles,  
and I sing: Syvah, syvah, syvah,  
and think of you, Phibbah,  
in miserable slavery.

On the one side, the body can be oppressed, as most of the discourses are directed toward the body. On the other, the body can be a means to freedom and a tool for subversion. As discussed in the theoretical section, the body of enslaved Black women was the body that received the



most negative meanings and discourses. Just like Phibbah, many enslaved women were racialized, raped and abused by their slaveholders. And, as Noble (2016) explains, these women had their own ways of challenging the identities they were given by colonial discourses and use their bodies to become free just like Phibbah does through dancing, through living differently her own body.

The legacy of slavery may leave a mark on the bodies that is passed through generations and may be maintained by the institutions and society. Race labels people, and with the help of the media and people's internalized notions of the self, may cause the abandonment of one's own body, low self-esteem, and so on. In the poem "Breathing Art" by T. Shirley, we can see how the protagonist makes people write words on her body to describe it and give it a meaning:

A woman who wrote "beloved" to erase slavery's stigma:  
The black body is never worthy [...]  
Words the body wore, the body kept  
For days when the body forgets it is beloved. (2009, p.72)

Words written on the body label the body and give it meanings. It is dangerous to let others write those words as many negative words had been written on the body of the Black woman. Such words can be internalized and cause the belief of not being worthy. To erase those words, or rewrite the bodies, it is important to give it new meanings such as "beloved", a word capable of healing from slavery's trauma. In that sense, the author plead for rewriting the body of the Black woman and re-inscribe it in society with a new meaning.

The protagonist of this poem tries to erase some of the words written on her body "I wonder where each word went after you scrubbed/your skin clean [...]" (p. 72). The writing on the body as if on the page is a theme discussed by Grosz (1994) who argues that the writing is never fully completed as the body is too complex to definitively inscribe it. That means that there is a possibility to rewrite the body, write new words on it and give it new meaning to re-inscribe it in society. A word written on the body can be a talisman against all degrading meanings that were once written on the Black female body, as the history "labelled the black female body 'grotesque', 'strange', 'unfeminine', 'lascivious' and 'obscene'" (Hobson, 2009, p.87). Therefore, instead of degrading words, one can write beautiful, important and, especially, free and beloved.

Tanya Shirley, in her poem "Restoration" imagines a rite that people would need to perform to get rid of this atrocious past and be born again:

open the window  
on blue-black bruises  
rimmed with the throat's tears  
lay the body down  
drawn small circles  
across foreheads, jaws,  
breasts  
all the way  
to empty  
nail beds  
each circle  
a return home  
to self  
unbroken  
pardon the price  
of our passage. [...]  
put your mouth  
over the dead flesh [...]  
moan back the sea  
blow back the ship [...]  
moan  
blow (p.25-26)

The rites imply the earth and the body as key elements. Through the whole poem one could trace the constant intertwining of nature and body: “forest”, “tongues”, “water”, “blood”, “earth”, “throat’s tears”, “body”, “foreheads” and so on. It is a way of emancipation from slavery and slavery’s stigma, necessarily through the body, as it is the body that received so much violence and it is the body that is marked by slavery’s past. The significance of the body and the earthly rites are the heritage from African religions, as argue Noble (2016), Perkins (2011) and Collins (1989) who states that women still carry knowledge from “African past and philosophy” (p. 768). It is this heritage that created a space for the alternative bodily experiences unwilling to stick to the rules of the colonisers:

Interestingly, the African-derived religions like Kumina in Jamaica or Orisha in Trinidad or Vodun in Haiti present an integrative and complementary show of divine power which is the basis for a valuation of the body (Stewart 2005, cited by Perkins, 2011). The body is experienced as an indispensable spiritual medium in these religious communities and is therefore of great value. (Perkins, 2011, p. 372)

## 2.2. Gender violence: resisting bodies

Gender violence is an issue with which women on the Caribbean are faced very frequently. This violence is expressed in literature, especially by the female authors. In the poem “What We Do Not See”, Tanya Shirley (2014) talks about the will of a woman to face the world as “she wants to banish all men and their weapons” (p. 39), nevertheless she feels paralyzed and finds a shelter in her body as “she curls caterpillar-like into herself” (p. 39). Tanya Shirley shows a tension between rebelling against men or enduring the struggle of the unequal gender relations. It also shows a suffering in silence, as Noble (2016) explained, a silence that is not solving the problems which Caribbean Black women face, as they prefer to be the figure of the strong Black woman who is not vulnerable:

She will walk with a bounce and a swing and the world  
will claim her as one of the living, not knowing  
how close she lives to the ground,  
dust always gathering in her mouth. (p. 39)

According to Senior, “the strong impulse to female self-resilience is continuously subverted by contradictory female socialization and its results” (p. 181). Women are angry with their men, but most of them remain silent, curling onto themselves, close to the ground while accumulating pain and unsaid words of resilience. Even though there are women enhancing their resilience, there is a strong male, and even female, opposition to achieve this change, because political culture is dominated by men (Kirton and Healey, 2012, p. 739).

As already discussed, gender is another discourse that forced Black women into the inferior position to men, trying to reduce their bodies to objects to be used. Gender system forces women on the Caribbean to suffer through physical violence inflicted on their bodies. In the poem “After Liming on the Local Rum Shop on Diamond Street”, Malika Booker (2013) exposes domestic violence with which women are faced in the Caribbean:

He slashes his cutlass across her face,  
Her raised hand failed to shield  
Against the second blow.  
One finger cut clean off. [...]  
She took him back in.  
I hear no apology left his lips. (p. 60)

Dr. Sharla Blank (2013) states that “women throughout the English-speaking Caribbean report that men are unreliable, unfaithful, physically violent, mentally cruel, and financially irresponsible” (p. 5) but many women accept these attitudes as normal because men are not socialised to be otherwise, so even though they acknowledge and criticize those behaviours, women stay with their men (Senior, 1991).

Oppression also comes in other forms, but, nevertheless, it also affects the body, such as introducing changes on the body, to make it more attractive to men and to society in general, to make the body smaller, to change its essence in order to conform to the expectations of those who have more power in society. For example, “Teaching Jane Eyre” by Shirley (2014) is a poem that shows how a lover tries to modify a woman whom he is dating:

In the weeks to come as I danced flatfooted in your dense air  
and you bought me new perfume, said my old one smelled  
like mosquito repellent, refined my diet to suit your taste  
for the raw delights, suggested I cut the colour out my hair -  
it made me look wild and not like myself,  
ironies of all ironies: I, who taught that book about  
men locking women in confined spaces, didn't realize  
I had climbed into its pages. (p. 49)

Women put in “confined spaces” cannot become wholesome, as that would mean a threat to the male hegemony. In other words, the constrictions imposed on the female body prevent women from occupying spaces considered to be “male spaces”. If women’s bodies were not controlled by different discourses, biological and aesthetical, it would mean a threat to men’s power, as women would feel empowered enough to take control of their bodies and consequently, to claim those spaces that they were denied.

A new generation of women demand more than they are given in order to break out of those “confined spaces”. Caribbean women want to share a relationship that need an equal involvement of both partners<sup>2</sup> and a surpassing of the fears of female corporeality:

NEGOTIATION

*Big dick cyaan go a supermarket*

Anonymous proverb

But what else will you bring to the table?

[...]

---

<sup>2</sup> The authors analysed here present stories about heterosexual relation only.

Can you go to a grocery store  
at midnight to buy super-sized tampons  
or will you bring me back a bag of cotton  
and a string? (p. 40-1)

In this poem the author asks to embrace the female body, as the menstruation is one of those symbols of femaleness that is frightening and perceived by men as disgusting, something that should be hidden, something that nobody can control. This generation of women want men to overcome those assumptions, to accept the whole body and its reality. It is a new generation of women, but also men, who go beyond any limits and who are working to express new ambitions through literature that, hopefully, will bring changes in real life. Education is key, as well as mutual love and support. It is clear that two positions are still present, in literature and in real life:

On the one hand there is the construction of the powerful matriarch, strong and resilient (remember that women did heavy work on plantations); on the other hand, the feminine ideal of respectability, domesticity and morality (influenced by the church) is equally powerful. (Kirton and Healy, 2012, p. 739)

### *2.3. From mothers to daughters: corporeal knowledge*

This female power, even though in contradiction with society, is, nevertheless, an important factor of resilience as mothers, aunts and grandmothers always pass their knowledge to younger girls. Black women on the Caribbean, as explained by Noble (2016), had long time resisted oppression through and with their bodies and those practices are the inheritance for younger women. Notwithstanding, authors such as Yanique and Shirley seem to go beyond this. They accept the heritage but transform it into new tools to fight new situations, because, as Jamaica Kincaid stated (2015), “no one is entitled to live a life which is free; it’s naive”. She explains that individuals inherit the experiences of the people they come from, they inherit everything that happened to them and that becomes part of them, their life. This acceptance of the heritage of the ancestors and personal experiences is what can make a person free, because nobody starts as a blank page, especially women (Grosz, 1994). In the poem “She Who Sleeps With Bones” by Shirley (2009), the author explains the story of a daughter who resisted inheriting her mother’s powers, but in the end she embraces them:

I decided long ago I would never  
grow into her. [...]

But still the curse chose me  
and I see: [...]  
Already I know too much.  
It will kill me to give this up.  
Dead people breathe down my neck.  
Their bones creak when I roll over in my sleep.  
Last week my man left.  
I do not remember his name or how we met.  
I belong to the land of my mother and look behind” (p. 11)

If a woman rejects the richness of this inheritance, it will “kill her”, metaphorically speaking, and she won’t have tools enough to face this world properly. The relationship is especially strong between women who rely on their female family members and friends to support their families. There is an enormous importance of “Black women’s tradition of sisterhood” (Collins, 1989, p. 763) and, as Olive Senior (1991) states that through “family networks, women especially can develop a resource base which enables them to cope with their child-rearing and economic responsibilities” (p. 24) and those networks consist of grandmothers, mothers, daughters, aunts and cousins who help each other out. The poem “The Shifting Ground” (2009) by the same author conveys a similar idea, as the protagonist goes to the “Rasta man” so he could give her the ritual’s recipe that would make her different from her mother. But she realizes how similar they are, not only in spirit, also their bodies and gestures are the same, so no ritual will be able to disrupt those resemblances:

If only he had seen, looking into the car,  
that more than our faces are similar, we share  
the same shape – a wide waist, dent below hip,  
flat, broad backsides – a turned in leg when we sit, [...]

How could I walk with no ground beneath me  
when already so much in this world is shifting? (p. 65)

The resemblance of the flesh indicates that the body never starts as a blank page, but it rather receives the heritage of the progenitors and of all the ancestors. In that sense, the body is conditioned, and some people would claim that that means that the body is not free. Nevertheless, can freedom mean something different than starting anew in order to become free? Could the authors analysed in this project present a different kind freedom that means acceptance of the heritage, instead of running away from it? I claim that this is what Caribbean female authors try to transmit in their literature. When Shirley asks how could she walk without

the “ground beneath” her when the world “is shifting”, she could refer to the important knowledge her mother and all female ancestors and family members have to offer to her to give her tools enough to face the changing world, and it is through the bodily marks that she realizes this, as it connects her directly with the important women in her life.

Different kinds of knowledge may be passed from one women’s generation to another. For example, one thing that women learn, is how to protect themselves in a society where domestic violence is an everyday feature. Malika Booker (2013) writes about it in her poem “Warning”:

Some great grandmother told her daughter,  
*Never let no man hit you and sleep,*  
*pepper the food, boil hot water and throw,*  
*use knife and make clean cut down there,*  
*use cutlass and chop, then go police.*  
Each daughter told over and over,  
like *brush your teeth*, till it stick. (p. 41)

Older women, more experienced, teach the younger ones to protect their own bodies from violence and mutilation provoked by the problematic gender relations since the times of emancipation, when women resisted being married in order to not suffer physical violence caused by men. The body is a kind of a temple that must be preserved from exterior coercion. In Jamaica Kincaid’s (2015) words, “the most important thing for a woman is to possess her own body”. During a long time, the body constituted for women on the Caribbean a tool for survival that was “the potential for basic survival, financial security, and socioeconomic advancement for the girls/women in question and their families” (Duvivier, 2008, p. 1104).

Notwithstanding, there are differences between older and younger generations. Those different views are crucial in the new resilient feminist literature. There is the necessity for constant innovation in order to find a balance between traditional knowledge and new ideas, progress and improvement. Regarding motherhood, older generations think of motherhood and children as their only option and their only product, though, nowadays girls have more options because of the education they receive (Senior, 1991). The poem “Prayer” by Malika Booker exposes this tension between the older and younger generations:

My mother tells me, *Your womb*  
*will dry and shrivel up.*  
I dance through life, deaf,  
no child planned in my party. (p. 43)

Thus, each woman should decide if she wants to have children or not, as it is her own body that is involved in the process. The author “danced through life”, so to say, enjoyed herself instead of giving birth, and was “deaf” to the pressure of the family and society for having children. Hence, it is a new woman that appears in literature, full of ambitions who wants to create herself differently and who doesn’t want to be a mother, at least not so soon in her life (Lawrence, 1983). Tiphonie Yanique (2015) as well talks about motherhood in her poem “Last Yanique Nation” (p. 50): “The pit in my womb where the doctor lover/says is my self, is not a nation./[...] Despite the proxy of vows I am both body and nation”. The author claims the sufficiency of her personhood as she is the body, therefore she exists as a corporeal subject, and she is part of the nation, not just a womb that would make more individuals to enlarge that nation. This new woman from the Caribbean is firmly declaring her completeness, determined to resist and insist on her full subjectivity as a human being.

#### *2.4. Manifestations of bodily rebellions*

The resistance against constraints imposed on the body, and therefore, on the subject, is fiercely exposed in the two collections by Tanya Shirley, in which two young girls react through their bodies against the identities they are given. There are two corporeal rebellions: the first one is more public and aggressive, and the second one is more private, more personal, but still powerful.

The first kind is expressed in the poem “Flower Girl” (2014):

she released a howl, the kind that scares  
they prey and shatter ribs in its way  
out the body – the body skilled in contortion -  
pushing the limit of limbs and restraints. [...]  
But the poor mother was transfixed-  
each convulsion a rip in the umbilical cord.  
Where did a child like this come from and how  
do you mother this? (p. 16-17)

The little girl starts convulsing and howling as her mother and aunts try to comb her hair. The child seems to go through a painful physical process of resistance, but the mother’s and aunts’ only concern is to make the little girl look “pretty”, so she can go to her aunt’s wedding. They want to change her hair’s natural appearance, and the girl starts howling and convulsing, rejecting those changes on her body. In order to calm her, they inflict pain on her body: “the



army of aunts swooped down, carried her/into the tub, turned on the cold water full-force" (p. 17). The image works as an example of the double projection of the body, as a means to rebellion and as a receiver of coercion. This corporeal punishment is a tool to force the body into obedience in order to eliminate any kind of resistance (Grosz, 1994).

A private resistance is also possible, in company with oneself, through the bodily practice and reinvention of freedom. The short writing, not a poem, but part of the collection *She Who Sleeps With Bones*, "Immaculate" (2009) by T. Shirley, mesmerizingly plasms the moment of coming out of all the constraints imposed on a Black Caribbean girl on her way back from school:

There were many days when it rained. There were many days that found me unprotected. There was one particular day, when I was wearing my uniform – white blouse, white pleated skirt over white full slip, over white cotton brassiere, white cotton panty –and it rained. I walked slowly in the rain – exactly what we were told not to do. *Ladies, walk briskly, move on, move on. Remember rain is an enemy of chastity. Walk briskly ladies.* But that particular day I walked the way I thought a lady would. She would wear the rain. I could feel myself moving in this rain – moving in such pure patterns. I lay on the grass and dared it to grow. The grass opened like a bed of a thousand scissors and held me up most dangerously from the place I thought this grass would cut again over and over in lady-like slices. I floated outside my clothes, outside whiteness, goodness, crosses, confessions. I prayed for the rain and expulsion (p. 56).

The rain acts as a purifier on the body, it cleans the body of all the stigmas imposed by factors such as religion or race. It is a new way of being "a lady", a new way of living the body and womanhood. The earth also has an important role in this passage, the girl goes back to the earth, on the grass, without clothing and without labels and constrictions, her body is down to earth. It may symbolize a connection with nature, which is not something to dominate or civilize, but something to give in and become one, pure and true to the feelings, mental and also physical state. The fusion which becomes possible only when the body is free. According to Grosz, "The body is influenced by the subject's psychological, interpersonal, and sociohistorical relations and malleable and continually changing, always potentially open to new meanings and investments" (p. 81). Giving a new meaning seems to be the primordial task, the only factor that will change the corporeality of the female subject, thus, producing a change in society.

A similar connection of body and earth is also present in the poem "What I learned in Grenada" by Tanya Shirley (2009):

So you never knew  
You were ground provision?"

No, but I always knew  
I was deeper  
than this life I'm living.

Now, I keep thinking  
what it means to be one  
with the earth, to face each day  
with the threat of being eaten. (p. 15)

In this poem, the author talks about the importance of her name as "tannia", an edible plant on the Caribbean which grows in the earth. Tanya is a name of the author, a symbol of being rooted in the earth or coming from the earth. There seems to be a fear of being "eaten" or used by others for them to exist, to be a "ground provision" that nourishes or sacrifices oneself for the subsistence of others. The author meditates about the value of it and doesn't want to be only the "ground provision" because she feels that she is "deeper" than this. Tiphonie Yanique (2015) states, at the discussion in Brandon College, that there is an importance of subjectivity behind any action; the female characters in literature "have to be fully fleshed out characters". It is a moment of arriving at the point of choosing what one's personhood means, and which decisions are to be taken after learning about oneself. The moment that female characters become aware of their bodies, or corporeality, they become aware of their complete personhood that justifies the decisions they make and the actions they do.

### *2.5. Healing and self-creation*

What is common to all those authors analysed here is the way they advocate for a process of healing. The healing is impossible if the body is not at the core of the process. The poem "A Note to the Couple's Therapist" by Tiphonie Yanique (2015) expresses a yearning for being more than what the body is allowed to be. It is a body that wants to break the boundaries and constraints that make it smaller than it is, make it less than it could be:

My self-diagnosis: It's just this body  
I was given.  
It wants to be more.  
Now it smells like rust  
but I'm too young  
to flake away. [...]

But if I'm rust, I want to come off  
on fingers, leave a stain  
and if I am water then I plan to be the ocean.  
I'll leave salt behind. (p. 23)

The poem exposes the body of a young woman that already “became rust” because of all the inscriptions it carries on itself and all the duties the body should perform in society, especially as a wife in this case, as the poem is centring on the couple’s relationship. All those obligations of the female body work as a “reassertion of domesticity and dependency as the feminine ideal” (Bordo, 1993/2004, p. 170). It is a body that was already pre-elaborated and “given” to the protagonist of this poem, but the fact is that this body “wants to be more”. Even if it will not be possible to fully break out of constraints, the body is capable of leaving a “stain”, a mark that can make the first move toward the freedom. The body and water in the last verses fit the theory of liquidity and women explained by Grosz (1994), a theory that unfolds how women, associated with liquid, and men, associated with solid, create those binary categories in which the liquid is a threat to the solidity and “what is disturbing about the viscous or the fluid is its refusal to conform to the laws governing the clean and proper, the solid and the self-identical, its otherness to the notion of an entity – the very notion that governs self-representations and understanding of the body” (Grosz, 1994, p. 195). In this case, the liquid or water is the whole ocean, the most powerful and untamed source of water, and if the woman is water, she is the ocean, as the author claims.

The poem “Body Logic” by Tipahnie Yanique (2015) conveys the idea of the body and memory, a body that can be also contradictory, but it is only the body itself that is capable of being read:

The body has its own  
infant logic.  
Its own way to know  
if what you speak is true. [...]  
Picture this, baby: the body's on your side.  
It will open you  
and leave you open.  
And you'll have to read it  
like a sonogram. (p. 13)

The body can be “on your side” or the body can “betray you” (p. 13). That could probably express the tension between what is imposed on the body and what we learn about it as a pre-elaborated product, and the sensations that the body experiences. The body has memory and according to the theories of phenomenology explained by Grosz (1994) we live the bodies and exist only through the sensations and emotions that the body experiences, and those experiences are forever printed or written on the body, not only the ones that we have lived, but also those that our parents and ancestors had lives. Therefore, in order to establish a connection with the body, understand it, it is necessary to read what it has to say. The body is presented as a subject itself in this poem, not a mere object to be used as “we can’t live our bodies as mere objects” (Grosz, 1994, p. 91). A body is a living being that makes decisions and leads, it protests and “has its own way to know”.

Tiphanie Yanique proceeds to write the poem “Eight Weeks as Freeda” about taking control of the body and make it “resurrect”:

Sit. I say, stand.  
I say body, obey.  
I am the steward.  
Body, my slave,  
My primary lover,  
you must manage. [...]  
I say, stand. I say,  
resurrect. (p. 38)

The body, after having been long enough someone's property, the focus of all kinds of oppressive discourses already mentioned several times in this project, needs to be first, taken under control by the subject, not in a coercive way, but in a way of becoming one with the body; to be alive. It is a process of “taking back your own body”, asking the body to resist. This process may put “the black female body as a site for decolonization” (Hobson, 2009, p. 101).

The resurrection of the body means being conscious of it, therefore, it implies learning about it, understanding its power, but it also means enjoying the body instead of repressing it in accordance with Christian religion: “women refuse the identity proposed by the dominant Christian-influences ideology and use the body as a material against morality, discipline and control” (Perkins, 2011, p. 369). The female body is, therefore, the tool for decolonization and subversion of the imposed labels and it will manifest itself when it will be taken back.

The subversion of the repression of the female body is also manifested through sexual acts. As already mentioned, Black women on the Caribbean have been raped and forced into prostitution during centuries, and many authors write about the inheritance of trauma inscribed in the body, and more specifically, on the womb of the Black woman “whose exploited sexuality fueled the economies of slavery and colonialism through forced reproduction and labour” (Hobson, 2009, p. 101). Tanya Shirley, for example, writes about the importance of mutual pleasure and the equality of the partners in the act of making-love. In those poems a woman is enjoying the act with the whole body, which is not a body to be used anymore, not to be exploited or to be raped and traumatized. It is a wholesome body that can and should be enjoyed:

#### JOURNEY

I want to be the mango  
that makes you long to be home. [...]  
Let me dry your dripping words,  
feed you flesh until you're hoarse.  
[...] (2009, p. 35)

#### AGAIN

You hear the river beneath my navel  
Running to your open mouth.  
Open your eyes and feast: let this body  
Be an altar for new tears.  
(2014, p. 40)

In those two poems the body is again compared to some elements of nature. The author compared the female body to a fruit that is enjoyed. The body is enjoyed by the protagonist of the poem and her partner, but because she gives her consent, not because she is forced to do it. “Feeding flesh” is a choice. The poems symbolize resistance that is manifested also in the works of the Black female painters, as explained by Michelle Stephens, (2016) as she states that “the excess flesh also figures as a black body that resists being phallicized” (p. 24). In the poem “Again” the body is an altar that collects tears. The tears symbolise the release of pain through the body. “The river beneath my navel” can be one of those feminine fluids, not to be controlled or feared, but enjoyed; they are imminently “running to your open mouth” to be feasted. The whole female body must be accepted, loved, celebrated.

To end this analysis, I would like to analyse the poem which precisely presents the “excess of the flesh” and its power, as illustrated in the poem “Kill him Wid It, Eh, Eh” by Tanya Shirley (2014):

Jack Ass say di world nuh level  
There are men paying fat women to squash them  
[...]  
The woman don't have to give up no front  
Just lie down on the man until him heart come close to stopping  
[...]  
But all praise to the fat woman who can squash a man good  
Because one wrong move and you literally kill a man wid it  
[...]  
How much a heart can take, how to ease yourself down part by part  
Is not easy to divide yourself so  
Is no easy to walk with so much power in your flesh (p. 69)

This humorous poem transmits a unique energy. It makes the readers laugh, but this laughter is not mocking fat women or Black fat women in any way, even though they are currently the focus of jokes on the Internet (Hobson, 2009, Benard, 2016). The “excess of the flesh” of the Black woman reiterates the idea of M. Stephens (2016). According to her, art diminished the figure of the Black woman and reduced it to a “racialized object”. She comments the painting called “Olympia” by Édouard Manet, in which two women are present: a white naked woman at the centre and a black enslaved woman who is a servant, presented as lacking femininity or gender. What the new generation of authors try to do is to give back subjectivity and female sensuality through paintings of the “excess of flesh” of Black women (Stephens, 2016). The body of that woman in the poem is “too much” for men to take and its not easy to make it less in order to make others, men, to feel comfortable with themselves.

The body is a powerful site of subversion and re-invention of oneself. In words of Michelle Stephens, “contemporary Caribbean women artists turn inward, literally and figuratively, in order to shift our attention away from the overdetermined black body of social and visual construction and toward a more haptic, tactile, viscous experience of ourselves as flesh” (2016, p. 29). That body is formed and informed through senses and experiences. It is a body that is magnificently viscous, liquid, embraced and feasted; a body that is a source of freedom, that means, beloved in its original meaning.

## CONCLUSIONS

This project has presented multiple theories and historical evidences that show how the identity of the Black woman was shaped through the discourses of race and gender that diminished and abused her body. Notwithstanding, Black women on the Caribbean had always found their own corporeal subversion of those discourses during colonialism as they lived their lives and freedom through the different practices of the body, such as dancing, practicing religions that gave importance to the experiences of the body or practicing abortions after being raped by the slaveholders.

Resistance to Western oppression acted on the bodies of Black women always existed, since the beginning of slavery and beyond and today, even though many things have changed for the better, there are still things in need of being radically changed. Authors such as Tanya Shirley show the importance of the knowledge gathered by women and passed from one generation to the next, knowledge of bodily practices and protection that young women should accept. The acceptance of heritage will lead to restoration and healing of the bodies that bear slavery's heritage. This heritage can be overcome through the bodies, that can be rewritten and given new meanings by writers, painters, music and even every-day simple practices. The reinvention of the self is a way of being free, as the bodies are open for constant recreation.

Freedom can acquire new meanings. It does not necessarily mean rejecting the past and starting anew, because individuals are conditioned by history, the heritage of their parents and ancestors, the present society's norms, personal experiences and so on. All of those elements are marked on the body, written and inscribed on it. Leaving aside the utopia of starting anew, Caribbean feminist writers present freedom as acceptance, healing and constant self-creation in which the body has the primordial role.

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