

## CONSIDERANDO AS ESTRATÉGIAS CARNAVALESCAS DA MULHER PRETA E GORDA: NOVOS CAMINHOS

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**RESUMO:** Este artigo visa analisar o poema “Winter Thoughts” da autora caribenha Grace Nichols, contido no livro *The Fat Black Woman’s Poems* (1984). Partindo da ideia de que, dentro do livro, a mulher preta e gorda vive em um mundo de carnaval (BAKHTIN, 1984), este artigo discute as estratégias carnavalescas que ela usa para resistir e questionar a violência e exclusão do mundo. Relacionando seu corpo com o erótico, natureza e conhecimento, a mulher preta e gorda é capaz de criar novos e melhores conceitos de si mesma e do mundo.

**Palavras-chave:** Grace Nichols. A Mulher Preta e Gorda. Teoria do Carnaval. Fogo. Erótico.

### Introduction

The Caribbean author Grace Nichols is one of the first names that comes to mind when considering literature as a gateway to new worlds. In Nichols’s second and one of her most famous book of poems, *The Fat Black Woman’s Poems* (1984), the fat black woman is faced with the colonial and patriarchal processes’ excluding effects and creates for herself a new reality. Mara Scanlon defines the fat black woman as “a new heroine, a woman who revises the esthetic of female beauty, challenges oppressive societal forces, and emerges as a powerful queen, founder, or goddess” (1998, p. 59). The fat black woman’s way of challenging such oppressive forces is, I argue, by creating a carnival world for herself to live in. In this article I will propose my reader to embark with me in a series of considerations about the fat black woman’s carnivalesque world and her actions in it through the analysis of the poem “Winter Thoughts”, embracing aspects as knowledge, sexuality, and power.

Born in the Guyana in 1950, living now in England since 1977, and having more than 20 published books, Nichols became one of the main voices in contemporary Caribbean literature and gained great importance in the British literary scenario as well. However, there is still little critical writing on her work (LAWSON WELSH, 2007, p. 22). There is even less critical writing relating the *The Fat Black Woman’s Poems* with the theory of carnival, even though some critics have pointed to this connection, such as Maite Escudero (2000, p. 24) and Simone James Alexander (2014, p. 130), which does not reflect the complex and rich universe *The Fat Black Woman’s Poems* brings.

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The concept of carnival derives primarily from European folk festive manifestations in the Middle Ages, a calendrical ritual that took place before Lent – a Christian time of the year around the month of February, which precedes Easter and is marked by a “purification of sins”. During this period there were several public celebrations, usually in fairs. Such events were marked by social excesses, such as drinking and eating. In the 1930s, the Russian scholar Mikhail Bakhtin wrote what is considered the most important theorization about carnival and its manifestations, which is entitled *Rabelais and His World*, an analysis of François Rabelais’s oeuvre, *Gargantua and Pantagruel*. The book addresses the carnivalesque world in Rabelais’s

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work, which had been, according to Bakhtin, continually misinterpreted by the academy since after the Renaissance. Because of the soviet socialist regime, the book was only published in 1965, but gained notoriety very rapidly.

For Bakhtin, the comprehension of carnival and its elements changed from time to time and reached its maximum expression in the Middle Ages and in the Renaissance. The full experience of carnivalesque celebrations is explained by the Russian theorist as a time of suspension of all hierarchies, “a completely different, nonofficial, extraecclesiastical and extrapolitical aspect of the world, of man[sic], and of human relations; they built a second world and a second life outside officialdom, world in which all medieval people participated more or less” (1984, p. 6) and “while carnival lasts, there is no other life outside it” (1984, p. 7). Bakhtin states that this nonofficial feast celebrated a “temporary liberation from the prevailing truth and from the established order” (1984, p. 10). By proposing a definition of beauty in her image, by proclaiming herself the winner of Miss World Contest, by living freely despite Londoners’ prejudice against her, the fat black woman presents us such a free and liberating world.

In 1994, Mary Russo published *The Female Grotesque: Risk, Excess, and Modernity*, which is a proposal to realign Bakhtin’s carnival grotesque with gender theorizations. According to her, Bakhtin, like many social theorists of the nineteenth century, “fails to acknowledge or incorporate the social relations of gender in his semiotic model of the body politic, and thus his notion of the Female Grotesque remains, in all directions, repressed and undeveloped” (1994, p. 63). Russo proposes, then, a new definition of the grotesque that is more conscious of the gender and social inequalities, pointing to a new way of theorizing the carnivalesque.

For the fat black woman, with her black, fat, Caribbean, female, immigrant body in the Londoner space, Russo’s update of the grotesque is of utmost importance. Because of the way Western logic and Western systems of knowledge were built, through a series of exclusions, the fat black woman occupies a marginal space. She is, as the grotesque, the unwanted, the margins, the hidden and excluded from the norm – the male, white, heterosexual norm. According to Peter Stallybrass and Allon White, in their work about transgression, the grotesque involves a “labour of suppression” and a “perpetual work of exclusion” (1986, p. 105).

To resist such logic, the fat black woman creates, as mentioned above, her own world where she can be free and live as she pleases. In the poem “Winter Thoughts” (NICHOLS, 1984, p.38), the fat black woman ponders on her strategies to stay warm in London’s winter and, metaphorically, on her strategies to stay alive and well in such a world of exclusions.

I’ve reduced the sun  
to the neat oblong of fire  
in my living room

I’ve reduced the little  
fleshy tongues of the vagina  
to the pimpled grate  
and the reddening licking  
flames

I’ve reduced the sea  
to the throbbing fruit  
in me

And outside  
the old rose tree  
is once again winterdying

While I lay here sprawled  
thinking  
how sex and death  
are always at the heart  
of living

To keep herself warm, when the sun is gone in the harsh winter of London, the fat black woman maintains an “oblong of fire” in her living room. The dying trees are linked to the common image of winter season as death, as some sort of end. In the cycle of seasons, it is always in the winter when trees have no leaves, no fruits, no signs of life. Although this is a bleak scenario, while winter is death it is also the beginning of life, it is also regeneration, since, for spring to come and bear the fruits, winter must come first.

In the same way, carnival thought is “double-faced”. Bakhtin states that “negation and destruction (death of the old) are included as an essential phase, inseparable from affirmation, from the birth of something new and better” (1984, p. 62). Considering the winter here as the image of a harsh and cold world of racism, sexism, and exclusions, the poem points, then, to a more positive future. The resistance the fat black woman is embracing envisions a brighter tomorrow, since death is at the heart of living. The final result of this cycle, of this ambiguous “double-face fullness of life” is “always abundance, increase” (BAKHTIN, 1984, p. 62). The very image of the change of seasons is a carnivalesque element which points to a succession, renovation, the same way as “the phases of sun and moon, to the death and renewal of vegetations, and to the succession of agricultural seasons” (BAKHTIN, 1984, p.81). The fourth stanza of the poem tells us that the fat black woman is used to this cycle, “the old rose tree / is **once again** winterdying”, pointing, then, to the ephemerality of winter and such death, to how these social constructions that attempt to restrain the fat black woman will fade and, perhaps, new ones will be created for those who, like the fat black woman, create their own terms of freedom. What all this represents ultimately, in a “wider and deeper meaning”, is “the people’s hopes of a happier future, of a more just and economic order, of a new truth” (BAKHTIN, 1984, p. 81). I do not follow the notion of “truth” that Bakhtin proposes, I rather name it “narrative”, and the fat black woman’s narrative is what is being envisioned as the future. The existence of the fire amidst this scenario of death may be the representation of what resists and awaits for spring to bloom. Perhaps, a more just social logic.

As carnival and the winter, fire is also an ambiguous element. In Gaston Bachelard’s *The Psychoanalysis of Fire*, this element is described as follows:

Among all phenomena, it is really the only one to which there can be so definitely attributed the opposing values of good and evil. It shines in Paradise. It burns in Hell. It is gentleness and torture. It is cookery and it is apocalypse. It is pleasure for the *good* child sitting prudently by the hearth; yet it punishes any disobedience when the child wishes to play too close to its flames. It is well-being and it is respect. It is a tutelary and a terrible divinity, both good and bad. It can contradict itself; thus it is one of the principles of universal explanation (1964, p. 7).

Therefore, the element of fire not only is a passive resistance that waits for a better time, but it may also be a menace of combustion, it is the clock that marks the new era arriving. The action of “reducing the sun” to the fire in her living room suggests that the fat black woman is merely in a time of “hibernation”, of calm and tranquility. The use of repetitions and a marked rhythm can be associated with bedtime songs and other popular expressions that indicate the peaceful state of the fat black woman. However, if she reduced the sun, she may as well make it burst its light again.

To refer to fire in any way is also to refer to a series of secular images and stories, mythological or of our social imaginary. I will refer here to three of the most known ones, which

are the same that Bachelard analyzes in his *Fragments of A Poetics of Fire*, as possible ways to understand the fire in this poem. The first one is the image of the phoenix, which is, according to Bachelard, “an archetype of the imagination of fire” (1990, p.55). It is “a mythical bird of matchless splendour and extraordinary longevity which came from Ethiopia and, having been cremated upon a funeral pyre, had the power to be reborn from its own ashes” (CHEVALIER; GHEERBRANT, 1996, p. 752). The phoenix, then, relates directly to the notions of life and death in the poem, in its ambiguity and circularity, to the renewal and regenerating aspects of carnival and of the fat black woman’s fire; it is “the symbol of universal resurrection” (BACHELARD, 1990, p.42).

Understanding this fire through the phoenix image is to present the fat black woman’s carnival world and narrative as the only possibility. It is to say that, although we live in world of hate and violence, there is no other possibility than to become fairer, more inclusive, more freeing, such as the fat black woman’s reality. It is to understand the phoenix as that which “the world began from and in which it will end” (CHEVALIER; GHEERBRANT, 1996, p. 753). The poem, then, the calm and tranquility of the fat black woman’s thoughts in such a bleak moment of winter represented in it, points to her certainty of how we will end such logic of hate or how it will end us. Either way, a better future will come, with us or without. It is not by chance that one of the symbols the phoenix portrays is that “of what exists only in name”, beyond the grasp of human intellect (CHEVALIER; GHEERBRANT, 1996, p. 752). If our logic and systems of knowledge do not evolve sufficiently to understand such carnivalesque and “phoenixean” all-encompassing logic, that does not mean that this logic will not reign.

In fact, in another poem from the same book, “Afterword” (NICHOLS, 1984, p. 25-26) the fat black woman portrays a projection or prediction of a world “when the wind pushes back the last curtain / of male white blindness / the fat black woman will emerge / and tremblingly fearlessly / stake her claim again”. Therefore, even if humanity fades because of its incapacity to encompass and embrace all its integrants, the fat black woman – and what she may represent – will still be here, as a phoenix.

The second image is that of the Greek myth of Prometheus. The myth says that Prometheus robbed the divine fire of the Gods – from Zeus specifically – to give to the humans and suffered a terrible punishment because of it given by Zeus (APPOLODORUS, 2008, p. 36). The imagery of such act of giving fire to the humans is that of “expanding creation, marking the attainment of awareness and the appearance of mankind” (CHEVALIER; GHEERBRANT, 1996, p. 772). Fire in this story is both light (in the sense of intelligence, intellect, or even life itself) and revolt. The first comprehension is similar to that of the phoenix image, it relates this knowledge of fire to the narrative of the fat black woman. The latter, however, is related to Prometheus’s disobedience and revolt. However, it is not mere childlike disobedience, Bachelard claims it is “*constructive* disobedience. One must disobey fathers to outdo them. To disobey in order to take action is the byword of all creative spirits. The history of human progress amounts to a series of Promethean acts.” (1990, p. 82). In the context of the fat black woman, the fire of disobedience is, perhaps, the disobedience of Western norms, which claim that black, fat, female bodies are inferior and excludes them. Defying this logic may also be the meaning of this fire.

Furthermore, the fat black woman’s fire disobeys the very symbols and history of fire itself. The fire of Prometheus and of the phoenix is related to the transcendental aspects of the intellect. The Western logic of binary constructions opposes body and mind, nature and culture, and establishes the body-nature axis (and everything connected to it) as the inferior categories. As Elizabeth Grosz state, “the binarization of the sexes, the dichotomization of the world and of knowledge has been effected already at the threshold of Western reason” (1994, p.5). Thus, one may claim that the material aspects of the world were suppressed in favor of a supposed transcendental reason. It is not by chance that women and black people are related with nature

and with the body as a proof of their alleged inferiority (MILLS, 1998, p. 16; ORNTER, 2017, p. 104). The fire present in these myths and stories is the fire of transcendental reason, the knowledge Prometheus imparted with the humans and the godlike immortality of the phoenix that destroys its body and builds it again from the ashes. However, in the fat black woman's poem, the fire is materialized in the fat black woman's body and representations of it – “vagina”; “the throbbing fruit in me”. This materialization denies such transcendental superiority over the material aspects of the world, over the body, over nature, over the fat black woman herself. It is not an exclusion of the transcendental, but a way to understand the transcendental present in the material as well and vice versa. What the fat black woman's fire is proposing, then, is the recognition of how these opposed categories are more connected than we imagine and of the dismantling of such excluding hierarchy that governs our social and private relations.

Carnavalesque experience also proposes a materialization of the transcendental. One of the images or forms of expression of the carnival is the focus on the material bodily lower stratum, which is a reference to the lower part of the human body where our genital organs are, organs related to the fertility and creation of life as well as with excrements and death. It has its center “not in heaven”, as is with our current focus on the transcendental, “but everywhere; all places were equal. This new aspect permitted the author to transfer the relative center of the universe from heaven to the underground, that is, to the underworld, which according to the medieval conception was farthest removed from God” (BAKHTIN, 1984, p. 369). What this underworld represents is “the popular conquest of the world”, it draws the world “closer to man[sic], to his body, permitted him to touch and test every object, examine it from all sides, enter into it, turn it inside out, compare it to every phenomenon, however exalted and holy, analyze, weigh, measure, try it on”. All this could be only done “on the one place of material sensual experience” (BAKHTIN, 1984, p. 381). In other words, it is not the inversion from the focus on the transcendental intellect to the sensual material, but the achievement of the transcendental through the material, it is the connection of both, constructed in the material bodily lower stratum.

It also creates a new form of human rejuvenation – now, no longer through a destruction of the body as the phoenix, but through the emphasis in it. The improvement or renewal of humanity “is attained not by the rise of the individual soul toward the hierarchical higher spheres but by man's[sic] historical development” (BAKHTIN, 1984, p. 407). Therefore, both the attainment of knowledge the myth of Prometheus represents and the recreation or continuation of the intellect of the phoenix are materialized in the form of flaming revolt.

The third and final image is that of Empedocles, a Greek pre-Socratic philosopher. The legend of Empedocles's death says that he cast himself into a volcano on top of Mount Etna. Therefore, it was a death by fire. The imagery of such legend points to, somehow, freedom. Bachelard claims that “Empedocles experiences freedom for the first time when he *casts* himself to death” because “while both birth and death are glorious instants, birth is not a matter of one's choosing” (1990, p.92). Therefore, the fire, although reduced in the poem, may also be a matter of freedom for the fat black woman. Nonetheless, the image of Empedocles's fire is more than that, “in the Empedoclean act the individual looms large as fire and becomes the principal actor in a veritable cosmic drama” (BACHELARD, 1990, p.91). The becoming part of the cosmos or, more accurately speaking, comprehending that we are part of the cosmos is one of the strongest images the fire possesses.

It is also an image of carnival; the entire logic of the carnival is related to the collective and communal, hence, it also reflects on the all-embracing cosmos. The very images of the material bodily lower stratum “have a prevailingly cosmic connotation” (BAKHTIN, 1984, p. 336). In fact, it is very difficult, I would say almost impossible, to propose a focus on the material and not to relate such material with nature or, as is being called here, the cosmos.

In terms of our systems of knowledge and the logic Western world was built on, that excludes the material from its center, the body as well as nature have been neglected. Because of a vision of matter as passive, lacking intelligence, both have been characterized as inferior to the mind and culture – the realm in which human actions take place. As Stacy Alaimo puts it, matter, “the vast stuff of the world and of ourselves, has been subdivided into manageable ‘bits’ or flattened into a ‘blank slate’ for human inscription” (2010, p. 1). This division produces a continual detachment and remoteness of ourselves with our own bodies, as well as its connection with nature. The connection with the cosmos I am presenting here is not related to a transcendental connection, but to the simple fact that both derive from the same substances, are made of the same elements, and guided by the same laws of nature. Following such comprehension and the logic of carnival, the fat black woman creates a different relation of her body – which is now the holder of knowledge, therefore, possessing agency – and nature.

The first natural element we may see is the sea – an element of force and strength that appears throughout *The Fat Black Woman’s Poems* – reduced “to the throbbing fruit / in me”. It is reduced, as the fire, suggesting how, again, this is a period of retraction, but it is present nonetheless, because it is ever existent. What this reduced reification points to is that no matter how difficult things may be, how much the fat black woman may suffer with oppression and exclusion, this pulse of fight and rebellion will always exist as the necessary final outcome (as in “Afterword”) of the good and of justice. The throbbing fruit implies a continual pulsation, i.e., life, relating, then, nature with the element that constitutes life itself. If nature is what is alive, then, it cannot be passive or inferior. Again, we see a materialization of the most valued aspects of the intellect, a carnivalization of such order, an opening of its delimitations. It is through the throbbing fruit, the sea reduced in her, that the fat black woman obtains the necessary strength to overcome such cold winter.

The old rose tree winterdying, following the path of the death-life cycle of seasons and of carnival, also constitutes this construction of nature as permanence. In the Western logic, if what transcends is the intellect, then what dies and is ephemeral is nature, the body. However, seeing nature as a cosmos, a never ending, always in motion and changing universe, what dies lives again, and the cycle never stops. Therefore, if the epitome of life is its own circularity, then nature and the cosmos are what always remain. They are the permanent aspect of the world through which we may live forever (as in the most ancient dreams and wishes of our philosophers).

The containment of our bodies through an alleged inferiorization – of body, of nature, of the material – is a way to control people themselves. One of the most effective ways women, people of color, and other social minorities (which have been related to the body and nature in the inferior axis of Western binary logic) have been controlled, then, is through their sexuality. According to Judith Butler, to invoke the body and matter “is to invoke a sedimented history of sexual hierarchy and sexual erasures which should be an object of feminist inquiry” (1993, p.49). Women, especially women of color, have had to deal with the most restricting stereotypes towards their sexualities and a restraint on their sexual freedom. Black women’s sexual control begun in slavery when their fertility was used for economic success and their bodies used for the white man’s pleasure. The stereotypes of the hypersexualized black woman were the justification for the unauthorized use of such body in favour of “elite White male interests” (HILL COLLINS, “Black Feminist” 84).

Here, the fat black woman takes control of her own body and of its representations. Not only were such stereotypes used as justification but also as a way to maintain black women silenced. For a woman to talk about sex or sexual pleasure was – and still is – a danger, as was to know one’s own body, to feel pleasure with it. Nonetheless, in the fat black woman’s world where the body is the way through to the transcendental, the intellectual, it is the epitome of intelligence and agency, her sexual body parts are named – which opposes decades of silencing

– and used to represent acts of revolt and resistance. The “fleshy tongues of the vagina” become, in this necessary process of retraction in the winter, a “pimpled grate / and the reddening licking / flames”. This very sensual description puts the vagina not as the thing that is reduced but grants the same status of the fire and the sea. The vagina, then, is the holder of power, of intelligence, of revolt, of respect. It is a reconnection with the sexual element as more than just the vulgar or pornographic.

What the fat black woman’s body incorporates here is a deep connection with a resource within her “that lies in a deeply female and spiritual plane, firmly rooted in the power of our unexpressed or unrecognized feeling” (LORDE, 2007, p. 87). According to Audre Lorde, there are “many kinds of power, used and unused, acknowledged or otherwise” (2007, p. 87) and the erotic is one of them. Lorde claims that “in order to perpetuate itself, every oppression must corrupt or distort those various sources of power within the culture of the oppressed that can provide energy for change” (2007, p.87). In the case of women, “this has meant a suppression of the erotic as a considered source of power and information within our lives” (2007, p. 88). In other words, so that women could be repressed, the erotic power connected with their own bodies was suppressed.

The erotic is, according to Lorde, a power, one which “rises from our deepest and nonrational knowledge” (2007, p. 88). Erotic comes from the Greek word *eros*, the “personification of love in all its aspects” (2007, p. 89). When speaking of the erotic, Lorde claims she speaks of it “as an assertion of the life force of women; of that creative energy empowered, the knowledge and use of which we are now reclaiming in our language, our history, our dancing, our loving, our work, our lives” (2007, p. 89). It is through the erotic that the fat black woman is able not only to build a different world for herself, but to turn herself and her body the holders of knowledge, of fire.

Although the erotic is related to sexuality, it is much more than the mere usual connotations that sex has. We can see how, for the fat black woman, the erotic in her life does not depend on another person, her sexuality and erotic expressions are related only to herself. The sensual verses and references to her body and the pleasure that comes from it are independent from anyone and related to the pleasure that also comes from knowledge, from power, from justice. The “fleshy tongues of the vagina”, as above mentioned, become the bearer of knowledge and of the transcendental, therefore, the body, the sexual and erotic pleasure that comes from this deep female and spiritual place are on equal terms.

The fat black woman seizes power and knowledge – in a wider and fairer sense of both words. In the last stanza the fat black woman relates death, sex, and life. For the living to go on, death, or renovation, must exist as well as this power that derives from the erotic. Although the fat black woman uses the word “sex”, it would be an understatement to simply attribute it, theoretically, to the sexual as vulgarly understood.

The erotic as a power is also related with the fight for a more inclusive future. Lorde also claims that when “in touch with the erotic, I become less willing to accept powerlessness, or those other supplied states of being which are not native to me” (2007, p. 90). The fat black woman viewed through the erotic, the connection with the cosmos, and the comprehensions of fire here discussed becomes less of a person and more of a symbol.

There is a circularity in the poem with the repetition of the verses, the circularity of seasons, of death and life, but also in how everything is connected. The erotic power, the belonging to the cosmos, the materialization of knowledge, all lead to a wider comprehension of the world and of us as all-connected in an unnamed force of life. The fat black woman becomes a godlike presence which can see and understand beyond our forms of knowledge, beyond our modes of comprehension. She knows how the world turns, its secrets, and the mysteries of our cosmos-universe; a pythoress, if you will.

## Final Considerations

In this poem, this godlike presence decides to impart with us some knowledge about this circularity of the cosmos and shows us which path to follow. She is asserting what the future necessarily holds, as if she is calmly waiting for a battle against human hateful forces that do not know they will lose. They will lose because, as in “Afterword”, what the future holds is a better, fairer, more beautiful world. Although some may argue that she lives in a carnival world and, therefore, do not establish a relation with our reality, it is necessary to remember that carnival elements can only be created in relation to the order that already exists. Hence, the creation of this other world is only possible because of the shortcomings of our own.

The fat black woman sits along the fire as if she is part of those forces of nature herself. The sun reduced to the fire in her living room stands in the same position as the fleshy tongues of her vagina and of the sea. She is reduced, then, as these forces of nature, to fit into this world of violence while waiting for better days to arrive. Her living room becomes a retreat both in the sense of resting and of strengthening as winter elements, dying and being reborn. The fire, the erotic, nature, her body, all represent, together, this vital force that the fat black woman is and that we should listen to.

### CONSIDERING THE FAT BLACK WOMAN’S CARNIVALESQUE STRATEGIES: NEW PATHS

**ABSTRACT:** This article aims at analyzing the Caribbean author Grace Nichols’s poem “Winter Thoughts” from the book *The Fat Black Woman’s Poems* (1984). Departing from the idea that, inside the book, the fat black woman lives in a carnival world (BAKHTIN, 1984), this article discusses the carnivalesque strategies this woman uses to resist and question the violence and exclusion of our world. Relating her own body with the erotic, nature and knowledge, the fat black woman is able to create new and better concepts about herself and our world.

**Keywords:** Grace Nichols. The Fat Black Woman. Carnival Theory. Fire. Erotic.

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