

**BLACK CORPOREALITY: EXPLORING WOMEN'S  
EMBODIMENT IN CARIBBEAN, BRAZILIAN AND DIASPORIC  
HISTORIES.**

by

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## ABSTRACT

Black and brown women have long been written out of official histories and remain invisible in the publication of literature. They are the products of multiple, conflictive historical processes and today, their voices remain unheard, particularly in Hispanic Caribbean and Brazilian contexts. It is essential that this silence is addressed and questions of race, gender, womanhood, migration and politics in the Hispanic Caribbean, Brazil and the diaspora are explored, offering suggestions as to how history could be rewritten. By engaging with literature, film and performance texts by Josefina Báez, Nelly Rosario, Mayra Santos-Febres, Carlos Diegues, Célia Aparecida Pereira (Celinha), Miriam Alves, Conceição Evaristo and Esmeralda Ribeiro, it is possible to relocate black and brown women within the realms of a new, inclusive, cross-Caribbean black feminist consciousness. The main source of oppression for black and brown women are their migrating, marked and politicised bodies, and this study adds to corporeal discourse, providing an essential lens through which to explore their experiences and reveal the extent to which these bodies offer a collective tone of protest towards systems, processes and historical moments that have not only marginalised, but ignored them.

*To my Mum,  
who was passionate about education.*

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## INTRODUCTION

To the present day, black and brown women's experiences have been shaped by complex and contradictory historical processes and discourses on global blackness. This thesis engages with the Caribbean and Brazil, where racial identity is fluid, and based on a colour continuum that complicates processes of identity formation and questions of power relations. I will locate black and brown women within dominant discourses in the Caribbean and Brazil, using cultural production and corporeal discourse to open up a space within which their experiences can be revealed, reworked and relocated in official histories. The corporeal is an essential lens through which to read the formation and repetition of these histories, and to analyse both literary and filmic responses to histories that are built upon a complex nexus of power, race and gender. The principal aim of this thesis is rooted in the notion of black womanhood, specifically in the Hispanic Caribbean and the Brazil, as well as in the diaspora. The selected authors articulate blackness, womanhood, race, sex and identity politics across both time and place, building up a collective voice of defiance which challenges homogenous discourses of the body. This discussion traces the ways in which literature and performance function as a way of "writing" the body that has long been silenced and marginalised, exploring what this body can suggest to us with regards to the rewriting of history. It will examine how reading these works through a corporeal lens can strike up a discussion about how these bodies are used to explore wider issues of identity, race, gender, sexuality, politics, history, migration and belonging.

The carefully selected corpus of works functions as a laboratory within which their conditions as black female subjects are explored and subsequently worked out. There is still not enough scholarship that takes a transnational and cross-border approach, and I believe that employing this method of research and analysis will enable me to develop a cross-Caribbean and Brazilian examination of these complex conditions. I argue that the redefinition of black and brown women's histories can be achieved through a comparative reading of their bodies, and that in order to undertake this investigation, it is necessary to engage with three types of historical and contemporary bodies: migrating, marked and politicised. Black feminist scholars have studied the notion of intersectionality and gender inequality (Collins 2000; Harris 1999; Hooks 1984), but with a prominent view towards the United States and the Anglophone Caribbean. There is a distinct lack of work that converses with the Hispanic Caribbean context and this thesis locates black feminist theory and scholarship in Brazil and the Spanish-speaking Caribbean, as well as drawing Haiti into the discussion, as can be seen in chapter one.

The role of black and brown women and their position in transnational history is a dynamic field of research, and the exploration of the body across the Caribbean, Brazil and the diaspora is a particularly exciting focus area. By examining texts and performances by cross-Caribbean and Brazilian writers and directors, I analyse the development of a new, progressive voice and cross-Caribbean consciousness which prioritises female perspectives of the black experience. Josefina Baez, Nelly Rosario, Mayra Santos-Febres, Miriam Alves, Conceição Evaristo, Celinha and Esmeralda Ribeiro provide an opportunity for the examination of the ways in which history is mapped onto the body, and how the corporeal can be used to explore wider issues that still permeate society today. I also



discuss Carlos Diegues' film, *Xica da Silva*, as it sets up a dynamic conversation about slavery in Brazil, and provides further scope for a discussion within the realms of feminist discourse.

The three chapters in this thesis map different points across the Caribbean and Brazil in order to insert the body into dominant national discourses, facilitating a panorama of the intersection of gender with other social concepts. Feminism in the Caribbean is complex, and it is impossible to discuss issues of gender separately from those of race and class. By engaging with multiple contexts, it becomes possible to contribute to a new, cross-Caribbean feminist consciousness which values lived experience as a means by which to generate knowledge and subsequently, power. Throughout this thesis, I use black feminism as a theoretical framework within which to offer a reading and rewriting of black and brown bodies and their embodied histories, outside discourses of oppression, focusing primarily on the Dominican Republic, Brazil and the diaspora in the United States. I look at both the Hispanic Caribbean and Brazil at the same time, as in these contexts, the shared experiences of women are all linked to victimisation and plantation societies, and female bodies are one of the principal conduits through which black women suffer oppression. By examining these contexts together, I demonstrate how these bodies can be presented *outside* the realms of this subjugation.

Chapter one, "Race, Place and the Anatomy of Migration" engages with the Dominican diaspora in the United States and offers an exploration of displacement and dislocation from cultural, familial, linguistic and geographical "homes". Through the analysis of works by two diasporic Dominican writers; Josefina Baez and Nelly Rosario and drawing on both Chomsky's discourse on immigration (2014) and Bhabha's Third Space (1994),

amongst others, I examine what I term the “anatomy of migration”, engaging with questions of borders, belonging and illegality, setting in motion a vibrant conversation about the interconnectedness of the body and the place of race (particularly the notion of Dominican blackness), gender and migration. I discuss Báez’s *Dominicanish* and *Comrade, Bliss Ain’t Playing*, comparatively with Rosario’s *Song of the Water Saints* with a principal focus on the female immigrant body. These three works enable me to make suggestions with regards to the physical and psychological transformations that take place when borders are crossed. I draw current affairs and US immigration laws into the conversation between theory, borders and bodies, concluding that processes of female identity construction are problematised by the crossing of borders, and diasporic Dominican bodies are unquestionably built upon the ways in which they negotiate the movement and the overall process of becoming a cross-border subject.

Chapter two, “Cross-Caribbean (re)negotiation: Scars, Desire and Corporeal Memory”, homes in on “marked” black and brown bodies as intricate sites of both memory and trauma. I read Mayra Santos-Febres’ neo-slave narrative *Fe en Disfraz* as offering a contemporary reworking of their pre-ascribed roles, within the realms of the subtext of 18<sup>th</sup> century freed mulata slave woman, Chica da Silva. I discuss both continuities and divergences between *Fe Verdejo* and *Chica da Silva*, analysing questions of sadomasochism, hypersexuality and masquerade. I also draw on Carlos Diegues’ 1976 film *Xica da Silva*, as he offers a valuable criticism of Brazilian slave society and strikes up a conversation about the complex notion of gender and power relations in both Brazilian slave society and contemporary cross-Caribbean contexts. At the heart of the discussion is the inversion of these power roles, and I use feminist scholarship (Collins 2000;

Stinchcomb 2004; Kempadoo 2009), to provide a complex analysis of the different possibilities of body use. *Fe en Disfraz* facilitates a rewriting of slave histories and to expose the harrowing violence and abuse in slavery that had long been silenced.

Finally, chapter three, “*O Corpo Negro Feminino; Race, Afro-Aesthetics and Poetic Activism in Brazil*”, examines works by black Brazilian women writers in order to provide a political reading of the “performance” of identity. This chapter discusses *aparência*, Afro-aesthetics and the extremely complex notions of race in Brazil, aiming to reposition the black woman’s body in official Brazilian history. I use works by Miriam Alves, Conceição Evaristo, Esmeralda Ribeiro and Celinha to discuss how Afro-Brazilian women’s participation in feminism and political activism can redefine the political dimension of complex questions of race, citizenship and agency. By locating works by these writers within the context of Brazil following the 1985 transition to democracy, I delineate the socially-constructed paradigms of Afro-Brazilian women as *mães pretas* a *mulatas*, engaging with Mercer (1994), Tate (2009), Caldwell (2007), Gonzalez (1982), Torres-Saillant (1999), amongst others. This corpus of texts identifies literature both as resistance and an instrument of politics, as will be demonstrated by the authors’ participation in political literary group, *Quilombhoje*. I engage in complex discussions of race and colour in Brazil, concluding that the corporeal is an essential vehicle if we are to reconfigure the body and voice to reclaim the Afro-Brazilian woman’s place in the official history of Brazil.

## CHAPTER 1: RACE, PLACE AND THE ANATOMY OF MIGRATION

*“Ni aquí ni allá*

*Not even with your guiri guiri papers*

*There’s no guarantee*

*Here, there, anywhere*

*There’s no guarantee*

*Without accent or PhD”*

**Josefina Báez, *Dominicanish* (48)**

Today, the migrating woman’s body is at the heart of a number of dominant political, geographical and national discourses, and if the conditions of black female subjects are to be worked out, a cross-border approach to the analysis of this body is essential. The aim of this chapter is to initiate a dialogue between theory, borders and bodies and explore what I term, the ‘anatomy of migration’, as presented in contemporary Dominican and Dominican-American literary and performance texts. It will discuss the physical and psychological transformations that take place when borders are crossed, analysing the turbulent process of becoming a cross-border subject. This comparative study will address the performance texts *Dominicanish* and *Comrade, Bliss Ain’t Playing* by Josefina Báez, alongside Nelly Rosario’s *Song of the Water Saints*, engaging with Dominican women’s transnational experiences on a broad scale. At current, questions of immigration in the United States are at the forefront of political discussion on a global scale, with U.S immigration law being “*complex, inconsistent and sometimes perverse*” (Chomsky, 2014: x), openly working to make certain people illegal; a concept that is perhaps more relevant today than it has ever been before. Engaging with questions of migration, belonging and not-belonging, alongside legality and illegality, contributes to the development of a vibrant

conversation about the interconnection between marked bodies and the place of race, gender and migration. These questions have even greater urgency today and scholarship on this subject, particularly with reference to diasporic Dominican women, needs to be developed further.

A focus on the female immigrant body as presented in works by black, diasporic women writers highlights the essential role of gender in transnational experiences. Reading these texts within socio-political and historical contexts, as seen through a gendered and corporeal lens, allows for a more comprehensive understanding of migrant experiences between the Hispanic Caribbean and the United States, engaging with the aforementioned notions of home, citizenship and belonging. As “*gender differences structure people’s access to resources and power for mobility*” (Duany, 2011: 31), it is essential that men’s and women’s transnational experiences of border crossings are read separately. Although male immigrant experiences also occupy a significant role in the study of borders and diasporic identities, this chapter will focus solely on the experiences of women in order to combat the notion of invisibility and relocate silenced voices within official histories. This will locate gender even deeper into questions of migration.

Linking the experiences of Dominican women across both borders and across generations, facilitates the establishment of the extent to which processes of identity construction are problematized by the crossing of borders and how the complexities of race, and more specifically, blackness, are drawn to the forefront as a result of this movement. “Dominican history has clearly played a very significant role in literary expression”, and, Afro-Dominicans have had to “endure centuries of absence from the story of Dominican history because of the highly racialized Dominican rhetoric that became the country’s

official discourse for national identity” (Stinchcomb, 2004: 5). The choice of texts is dictated primarily by their multiple locations, contribution to the discussion of diasporic Dominican women and the facilitation of the importance of their role to the study of diasporic Dominican literature and processes of identity formation within a transnational construct. These texts facilitate their visibility and situation in official history, and ultimately, contest the aforementioned absence. Their specific questions of race, ethnicity, class, gender and migration will facilitate a deeper understanding of the body politic within this context, in addition to providing valuable points of both contrast and comparison with the texts that are to be analysed in the rest of this study. Josefina Báez’s performance works, *Dominicanish* and *Comrade, Bliss Ain’t Playing*, will function as a pivot upon which this study will be orientated. Nelly Rosario’s *Song of the Water Saints* will also be discussed, as a means by which to broaden the cross-cultural and cross-border scope of my analysis. This will enable me to read further into the historical relationship between the nations in question, and their impact on the contemporary status of Dominican and diasporic Dominican women; a very vibrant and exciting growing body of work. I will analyse each author in their own right and then draw their works together in a comparative section at the end of this chapter.

Both Báez and Rosario write from within the diaspora; they are both Dominican immigrant women living in the United States. As the immigrant body does not solely come to be the main issue in terms of questions of race, but also gender, the interaction with both race and gender spheres is played out through both history and literature, with many Dominican and Dominican American works focuses on the trafficked and sexualised immigrant woman’s body. The Dominican Republic is not only high on the list for sex tourism, but many

Dominican women in the US, have been trafficked as a product of sex(uality); a question that is dealt with closely in the works of both Josefina Báez and Nelly Rosario. As will be demonstrated throughout this thesis, black women's bodies have long been sites of contestation, and the topic of the woman's (immigrant) body in danger (rape) plays a key role in works by Dominican and Dominican American women. Both Báez and Rosario use their literature as a means by which to track identity, history and politics through this body, however, their emphases are different. Josefina Báez has an intense focus on the immigrant woman's body in the diaspora, and through spoken word and performance poetry, explores how this body negotiates and develops under a new binary racial system. Through performance and physical theatre, she engages in the physical and psychological struggles and conflicts that come with this. Nelly Rosario, however, really homes in on the crises of the female immigrant body in danger, raising questions regarding disease, danger and survival, all of which are inseparable from the way in which she sees Caribbean literature. She engages with all of the aesthetic questions of complicated constructions of Dominican blackness and violence in order to reveal the conflictive notions of racial, gender and national identity in Hispaniola. I see the reading of *Dominicanish*, *Comrade*, *Bliss Ain't Playing* and *Song of The Water Saints* together as particularly valuable to the discussion of borders and bodies as both writers present different uses for the female immigrant body during the acts of crossing borders and negotiating complex systems and processes.

This chapter works to establish and develop a conversation between theory, borders and bodies, based on the intricate relationship between corporeality and migration. The presence of these questions contributes to the formation of a vibrant conversation about the interconnection between marked bodies, which is of even greater urgency today.

Current affairs and global politics enable this chapter to really home in on the presence of intersectional issues such as race, gender and sexuality in the lives of diasporic Dominican women. Each of these elements contributes to the aforementioned question of citizenship, and will work to demonstrate that the black woman's immigrant experience is very much shaped by how these aspects intersect with official discourses, processes and policies, actively dominating concepts of *fronteras*. The idea of borders and bodies are inscribed into multiple contexts, covering general issues and questions of migration, both in the homeland and in the diaspora. Migrating female bodies are not written into one context, but instead, transcend geographical, cultural and linguistic borders, constituting to the notion of what I term, the *anatomy of migration*. The immigrant experience is built upon dominant notions of corporeality, elements of race and gender, and how they influence both the way this body is read, and how it experiences and overcomes borders. U.S immigration policy to Dominican exodus has been increasingly restrictive, originating from their predominantly lower-middle class origins and non-white racial classification (Duany, 2011: 231). This body is therefore key to migration debates, both past and present, and diasporic Dominican women's writing is a vehicle which aids the way we come to understand this.

## **Borders**

The notion of borders is not only very relevant but also timely, as current immigration policies in the United States consistently work to deny access to citizenship rights for many, particularly black and Latino groups. It is essential to note that these are the same rights that are granted to other groups, such as Europeans. As identified by Nelly Rosario, it's about pinpointing who is an "alien" and "who belongs in this country and who doesn't,



who's a threat to this country and who isn't" (Candelario, 2004: 81). At the heart of this chapter are immigration debates and questions of cultural and legal citizenship; both of which are drawn on heavily by Báez and Rosario. Immigration and citizenship are both intricately linked to issues of illegality, and will therefore be read within theoretical parameters which discuss this as experienced by the black/mulata immigrant woman's body.

Central to the development of these questions is immigration rights activist Aviva Chomsky, and her book "Undocumented: How Immigration Became Illegal" (2014), which explores how the law becomes complicit in criminalising, and demonstrates how the notions of "undocumentedness" and illegality are concepts that work to both exclude and exploit. Reading *Dominicanish, Comrade, Bliss ain't playing* and *Song of the Water Saints* within the parameters of "Undocumented" enables us to gauge an understanding of contemporary theories on immigration, which prove essential to corporeal analysis. Current US immigration policy is both complex and conflictive, and contributes to the ever-shifting, turbulent nature of human status in America, as "although, on the surface, the system is color-blind [...] in fact, it targets people of colour. But it works better in this supposedly postracial age, because it never uses race directly to discriminate. Instead, it criminalises people of colour and then discriminates them on the basis of their criminal status" (Chomsky, 2014). This turbulent condition is most definitely applicable to the case of Dominicans in the U.S. Chomsky questions why, if US-born citizens see the freedom of border crossings and of travel as being birth right, why are poor people from abroad not able to do so?: "*The only birthright inherited here is the ability to voice your disagreement accompanied with others living afar in another margin. Although voicing the dispute does*

*not mean any step towards a decent dialogue, let alone a solution”* (Báez, 2013. They “discriminate, on the basis of nationality, regarding who is allowed to be where” (Chomsky, 2014).

It goes without saying that both immigration and the issues it raises are at the forefront of all major current political discussion, and international affairs will aid the development of this chapter. In order to engage with the black immigrant woman’s perspective of the United States, the current situation regarding race and place in this context is of paramount importance. The reception of black and brown people, particularly those born outside of the U.S is extremely conflictive and unpredictable; particularly at the level of politics. There have been numerous articles analysing Donald Trump’s use of language when speaking in public, and his frequent use of ‘the’ before ‘African Americans and ‘Latinos’, has been considered a means by which to distance himself from the people pertaining to these groups. This is just one of the many example of Othering and it functions as a way of separating himself and his nation from the groups of Americans to which he is referring. He labels them as a uniform mass and monolithic group. This means of classification not only dehumanizes and makes illegitimate these groups, but it also removes the rich, diverse nature of Americans, labelling them not only as Others but also criminalising and discriminating against them. Evidently, his ultimate aim is to sift out these ‘criminals’, and although published prior to Trump’s presidency, this sentiment towards blacks and Latinos that permeates U.S society, is evident in Dominican and Dominican American literary production. The selected texts offer a good insight into the black experience in late twentieth and early twenty-first century America.

To complement *Undocumented*, I will also frame the selected narratives around Danny Méndez's *Narratives of Migration and Displacement* (2012), which discusses the body and pain as consequential of migration and border crossing. Dominican immigrants in the United States are shaped by the coexistence of multiple cultures, a notion that ultimately strikes up questions in relation to the ways in which the hybridity of cultures, languages, race, ethnicity, gender and sexuality are experienced, both in the homeland and in the diaspora. I will be building on his idea that "*writing between national/state/island borders and languages, these writers have chartered multifaceted narrative strategies of meditation and translation of national, ethnic, class and gender experiences, which are also a reflection of their own culturally multiple Caribbean identities*" (180). This is apparent for both Báez and Rosario, negotiating a new nation, a new language and new race and gender systems; all of which work on the basis of exclusion.

Báez interacts directly with the concept of immigrant processing in the United States, using *Comrade, Bliss ain't playing* as a space within which to explore the reality of life as a diasporic Dominican. The corporeal significance of border crossing is further complicated and enhanced through a questioning of the dream-reality dichotomy that is very real within discussions on immigration to the U.S. What is known typically as the "American dream" is not made out to be so dreamlike in *Comrade, Bliss ain't playing*. In the opening section of the text she introduces the idea of "*fingerprints*" (2). As the element that makes all humans unique and the only identity 'document' that cannot be forged, fingerprints are at the heart of questions of belonging/not belonging and legality/illegality. Fingerprinting is very much a reality for immigrants in the United States, especially Latinos. Biometric data collection in an obligatory step in order to obtain documentation and consequently, become

legal. Having their unique signature documented is perhaps one of the first processes that an immigrant has to go through upon arrival, and for Báez, it serves to break down the notion of America being a paradise of opportunity and potential. Her persona states that these fingerprints “*display details and desired hidden secrets. Fulfilled or not, they disappeared*”. The ‘loss’ of these secrets engages with her feelings towards her loss of ‘home’ and converses with the aforementioned melancholy which comes hand-in-hand with the ‘real’ immigrant experience.

The anatomy of migration is therefore a very apparent reality from the outset, and the impact that it has on processes of identity construction for Dominican and Dominican-American women facilitates debates on race, gender and nation. Migration and mobility can be defined as being the initiators of a constant and often conflictive state of “not-quite belonging”, and there is further need for an exploration of the processes of identity formation that come hand-in-hand with the immigrant experience. *Dominicanish, Comrade, Bliss ain't playing* and *Song of the Water Saints* are all products of border crossings between the Hispanic Caribbean and the United States, and function as a mirror which reveals both personal and collective transnational experiences. The specificities of where both Báez and Rosario, as well as their personas, left and where they now reside play a key role in understanding the idea of never being ‘fully’ Caribbean, nor American; a concept central to dialogues of race and migration. Josefina Báez and Nelly Rosario are particularly significant in discussions surrounding the idea of ‘becoming’, as although they were both born in the Dominican Republic, they were brought up in the cultural, urban space that is New York city. This failure to every fully ‘become’ locates them within what can be referred to as a ‘Third Space’ (Bhabha, 1994). This space undoubtedly contributes

to the inclusion and the development of both hybrid and multifaceted notions of culture, whilst working towards inclusion, not exclusion. It is very relevant to conversations on the complicated notions of Dominicaness and Americanness, encountered by both writers. This theory is of particular significance to discussions of transnationalism and transculturation, as it is the “in-between space that carries the burden of the meaning of culture, and by exploring this Third Space, we may elude the politics of polarity and emerge as the others of ourselves” (Bhabha, 1994: 37). This is very true of Dominicans in the United States as they are in an ‘in-between’ process; between identities, between cultures and between languages, for many of whom it can last a lifetime.

### **Negotiating Home and Space**

For Josefina Báez, this in-between space is played out through her complicated and somewhat problematic notion of ‘home’: “*home is where theatre is*” (37). This Third Space is the point at which the aforementioned identities merge, and clash. In this case, Dominicaness and Americanness both compliment and conflict each other, and this space therefore works towards a reading of the contemporary status of diasporic Dominican women in the United States. *Dominicanish* explores the ways in which the borders that are crossed during this process can be described as physical and psychological *interspaces*, dominated by a permanent sense of not-belonging, or; ‘guiri’; indicative of feelings of uncertainty, and inbetweenness. It is essential to note that neither Dominicaness or Americanness are by no means homogenous and when they combine, it is at this point of inbetweenness that the true importance of the body in questions of migration is drawn to the forefront. These feelings indicate the extent to which the subjectivity process is never complete. This is an experience of migration and displacement that can be seen across

Latino communities, and is communicated most explicitly through immigrant bodies and the spaces which they inhabit. In the prelude to *Dominicanish, Frontispiece*, Torres-Saillant states that “we witness the community’s collective existence pervasively ordered and disrupted by constant contact with compatriots from home, as well as with the difference and sameness of people of homelands the world over, against the backdrop of the discontinuous crucible of American society” (14). This constant contact with both Dominican culture as experienced within diasporic communities in the United States, as well as U.S systems and processes is what creates this *Dominicanish* identity: “*10 plátanos por 1 dollar. Se hacen bizcochos al estilo dominicano. Se hacen manicure y pedicure al domicilio. Traducciones. Se llenan de solicitudes de Welfare*” (56). This section taken from the “Washington Heights List” section of *Dominicanish* is a non-linear, random observation of signs, lettering, advertisements and services that Báez observes in her surroundings. Here we can see the ways in which although in the United States, this community is ‘becoming’ increasingly more Dominican, it is also becoming more prominent.

Director of the Cuban Research Institute and Professor of Anthropology, Jorge Duany, argues that Hispanic Caribbean migrants “blur the borders of their countries with the United States”, and consequently create “hybrid zones of contact between their places of origin and destination” (Duany, 2011: 228). It is therefore possible to take and develop it by placing these bodies within these ‘hybrid zones’, and analyse their processes of identity formation and the impact of these zones on intersectional aspects; race, gender and sexuality. This is evident throughout works by Báez. *Dominicanish* observes these blurred borders and hybrid cultures and the performance aspect of the text really illustrates how

Báez physically negotiates these changes. It is this constant contact with both cultures that leaves her *Dominicanish*; the impossibility of becoming one or the other. Her constant Spanglish references to both cultures as interwoven is an expression of her constant efforts to find her identity within this clash of cultures. *Comrade, Bliss ain't playing* presents these hybrid zones of contact as constant challenges as she “code-switches from language to languages; from dimension to dimension. No translation. No passport”. Whereas *Dominicanish* observes and negotiates the way “life experience is the element that defines your contact with dominicanishness” (Mir, 2000: 12), *Comrade, Bliss ain't playing*, presents a more uncontrolled struggle to define and negotiate identity systems in the diaspora. What Báez demonstrates are two different stages in the migration process, however, both struggle with the notion of ‘home’ abroad and Duany’s ‘hybrid zones of contact’.

In response to these hybridised cultures, Josefina Báez consistently disrupts dominant discourses of who belongs where, by claiming both La Romana and New York as home space. In the preface “In Inglis”, Báez herself states that *Dominicanish* occurs in:

“A chosen geography, La Romana, New York, and India. Eclectic use of symbols, times, and places where the past, present and future happen in the here today now...monologue dialogue conversation. In an acute awareness of the ordinary from my gladly, not so unique life” (6).

She provokes questions based on places of birth and residence, identity and citizenship, and borders and boundaries. Both Báez and Rosario are located within late twentieth and early twenty-first century New York, as well as wider discourses of shared experiences of migration, questions of home and displacement across diasporic Latino communities in the

United States. At the heart of these questions as experienced in the diaspora are questions of race and racial identity; a very complex notion in the Dominican Republic that upon arrival in the United States is complicated further by the negotiation of a new, exclusive system of categorisation.

### **Constructing Race in the Dominican Republic**

Both writers address countries within which race and racial conflicts are deeply enshrined and it therefore contributes to the further enrichment of the growing body of work taking shape within the realm of American, African-American and Caribbean women's studies. The way in which race, specifically blackness, works in the Dominican Republic, impacts questions of race in Haiti and the United States. In the Dominican Republic, blackness is both highly complex and conflictive and colour continuum and phenotype cannot be categorised nor divided into individual, smaller groups. There are many different ideas in terms of who is blanco/a, mulato/a, pardo/a, and consequently, racial categorization is very much subjective. This therefore provides a stark contrast to the binary racial system encountered upon arrival in the United States; something that Latinos generally seek to avoid. The classification of body forms, colours and ideals can be described as an "infinite kaleidoscope" (Howard, 2011: 5), with hundreds of different skin tones and ethnicities. Similarly, as will be demonstrated in chapter three, in the context of Brazil, the colour aesthetic in the Dominican Republic is centred upon a juxtaposition of positive whiteness with an increasingly negative portrayal of blackness. This is a very common thread across Latin American literatures, with blackness almost being treated as 'disease'; a concept dealt with intricately in Nelly Rosario's *Song of the Water Saints*.



The Dominican Republic is historically renowned for its overwhelming anti-Haitian sentiment (coined *antihaitianismo*), and there is a great deal of stigma surrounding questions of blackness. This complex racial relationship is affirmed by Myriam Chancy, who states that “within the Americas, perhaps no transnational relationship is more vexed than that of Haiti and the Dominican Republic” (2012: 53); a very telling statement when discussed alongside questions of identity. At the heart of both of these nations is a prominent racist ideology born of colonialism; an aspect of their history that occupies a critical position in this study. It is as a result of this ideology and complex nature of Dominican racial consciousness that processes of identity are so conflictive. Upon arrival in the United States where there is no conscious effort to make a distinction between Dominicans and Haitians, a problematized process of identity construction is inevitable. The point at which this *antihaitianismo* meets with the dominant binary racial system ingrained in the U.S is one of undeniable conflict. The result of the aforementioned identity crises is embodied by Josefina Báez in the form of her *Dominicanish* identity, communicated through the physical and mental challenges that she faces following this process of transculturation. *Transculturation*, as coined by Cuban anthropologist Fernando Ortiz (2002), is key to the understanding of cross-border identities. The results of this process and Báez’s embracing of her new cross-border identity manifest themselves most clearly in the technique and style which she employs in her performance. She uses her non-linear performance as a means by which to openly demonstrate the individual elements that come together to form this *Dominicanish* identity.

The theatre and performance aspect of *Dominicanish* is particularly important here. Since her first performance of the text (1999), Báez has been known to combine a black cocktail

dress with Bantu knots, references to African-American music, Kuchipudi dance and her own *Dominicanish* interlanguage to reveal the multiplicity of cultures and identities which she embodies. This combination is by no means accidental. Instead, it is an embodiment of what she believes comes to form her own *Dominicanishness* or *Dominicanness*. *Dominicanness* is developed based on the historical conflicts with Haiti, and Dominican Dictator Rafael Leónidas Trujillo himself, promoted the notion of *dominicanidad* as being the opposite of all things Haitian. Báez reworks this notion by accepting and celebrating her own *Dominicanness*, whilst in the diaspora, becoming part of the growing community of *Dominicanyorks*. For Torres-Saillant (1999), the notion of *Dominicanyork* functions as a means by which to explore and present immigrant experience of Dominicans who migrated to the United States following the 1961 assassination of Dominican dictator, Rafael Leonidas Trujillo. Torres-Saillant suggests that *dominicanyork* makes implications about the class, race and economic status of Dominican immigrants: “*El dominican-york* debe carecer por lo general de linaje aristocrático, ganarse la vida como trabajador de cuello azul y compartir un vecindario habitado por sus iguales, sean compatriotas, inmigrantes de otros países latinoamericanos o negros norteamericanos” (18). This automatically locates them as inferior within this new context, provoking conflicts of race and belonging, and making the U.S cultural landscape very significant in their processes of identity construction.

The dynamics of movement, corporeality and temporality are inextricably linked to narratives of migration, displacement and states of constant movement. U.S space is essential to complex processes of Dominican and Dominican-American identity construction as it is the key to the formation of Dominican racial discourse, setting up a

contrast between urban U.S and rural Hispaniola. New York itself comes to occupy a particularly important role for many Dominican authors and their protagonists in terms of the creation of both Caribbean and Latino/a identities, and comes to form the space within which many female immigrant bodies develop:

“A geographic, economic and symbolic extension of the Hispanic Caribbean that reconfigures class definitions of insular experience in order to incorporate it into alternative cartography delimited by culture and its displacements” (Martínez-San Miguel, 2003: 322-330)

*Dominicanish* and *Comrade, Bliss ain't playing*, alongside other works by Báez<sup>1</sup>, centre themselves upon questions of *here* and *there*, and *Dominicanish* in particular functions as a celebration of cross-cultural identities and seeks to fuse the concepts of *aquí y allá* in the U.S cultural landscape:

“Yo soy igual que un fracatán de gente que tenemos orígenes sociales similares; quienes intercalamos risa y llanto, gustos y sustos, dolores y tambores, bachata y rap, aquí y allá. Yo soy una Dominican York. Y esta condición me otorga una infinidad de estímulos constantes y variados. Enriqueciendo mi cultura personal en formas inesperadas” (7).

She acknowledges her *dominicanyork* identity and identifies it as a condition which keeps her in constant movement, stimulating her cultural, racial, linguistic and national identity and further complicating the *aquí y allá*. The way in which her body negotiates these spaces is at the heart of her work. The *barrios* of New York contribute to the growth and

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<sup>1</sup> *Levente no. Yolayorkdominicanyork* (2012) and *As is E* (2015).

development of Hispanic and Latino communities and cultures in the United States. Perhaps the most significant of these is the Washington Heights area of the city, also known as *Quisqueya Heights*- a name which reflects the large and thriving Dominican population in the area. The role occupied by this multicultural epicentre works towards the creation of a cross-border identity as a transnational migrant in New York.

Both spaces represent feelings of ‘home’ for Báez. La Romana is inevitably her home in the sense that it is where she was born and where she grew up, but the urban space of New York is what has facilitated her growth as a female transnational subject. Although conflicts of culture and identity are rife, it becomes a centre of opportunity and development; something that she would not have had access to had she remained in La Romana. The *crooked city*<sup>2</sup> draws out all of the aspects of life that she has access to as a woman as opposed to drawing on restrictions and limits. This therefore gives her a sense of freedom and development that she did not have in the Dominican Republic:

“me chulié en el hall  
Metí mano en el rufo  
Craqueo chicle como Shameka Brown  
Hablo con Boricua  
Y me peino como Morena.  
La viejita de abajo no e’ viejita ná  
El super se está tirando a la culona del 5to piso  
Jangueo con el pájaro del barrio  
Me junto con la muchacha que salió preñá

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<sup>2</sup> See Méndez, *Narratives of Migration and Displacement in Dominican Literature* (2012)

Salgo con mi ex  
Halo con el muchacho que estaba preso  
Garabatié paredes y trenes  
City  
*I pulled the emergency cord”* (43-44).

The connection and explicit feelings of celebration that she communicates through *Dominicanish* are far from the realities which she later communicates in *Bliss*. *Bliss* is indicative of feelings of dislocation, angst, loss and chaos in New York and Báez communicates predominant feelings of melancholy, distance and entrapment. It is in this text that Báez’s feelings of being constantly in motion are made particularly explicit, leading me to argue that in this text, the concepts of motion and mobility are in fact converted in loss. Báez appears to mourn the loss of ‘home’:

“Migrant. Migrate.  
Migrant migraine.  
Migrant. Migrate. Migraine.  
Migraine, my grains. [...]  
Migration rapidly wrapped all my existence.  
I move from second to minutes to hours to  
Days to weeks to months to years and years  
And years. Migrating every day.  
Day to night.  
Night to day”.

*Comrade, Bliss Ain’t Playing.*

This constant motion locates the act of migrating on the body and it affirms its highly corporeal nature. *Comrade, Bliss Ain't Playing* is centred on the notion of a constantly evolving identity which never seems to stop long enough for it to be defined. Here, identity is more of a question than an answer; it is never truly resolved. By “migrating every day”, Báez’s persona is at the core of an unsettled, nonlinear course of identity negotiation. The persona does not appear to have fully negotiated the multiple identity crises that come hand in hand with the act of border crossing. *Comrade, Bliss Ain't Playing* testifies this by demonstrating that the cultural condition of being Dominican is to live between time and place, further enhancing this ‘non-stop’ configuration of identity:

*“Of the many feelings*

*Felt in this life,*

*Identity,*

*And its plural, identities,*

*Is the most complex.*

*So they say.*

*So their theories say.*

*So.*

*Imagine. A prioritized feeling*

*That photographs a nation.*

*Flagless nation.*

*A feeling that shows and tells how and why I*

*Constantly dance*

*Loving my black body*

*And my natural crown of hair.*

*Playing with the elements at hand.*

*Elements that are not my flags either”*

***Comrade, Bliss Ain’t Playing***

She occupies multiple locations throughout the past, the present and the future, but all of which manifest themselves together, forming this turbulent and unsettled identity. Just like Mayra Santos-Febres’ protagonist, Fe Verdejo; she has no flag.

Báez sees the body as becoming a discursive text in its own right, and comes to form a borderland space through which she can perform her transcultural identity without falling victim to a number of dominant prejudices, as she would have done in the Dominican Republic. New York can therefore be identified as a glocality<sup>3</sup> which comes to embody her struggles to survive whilst “chewing English and spitting Spanish” (2000: 42). *Dominicanish*, as an embodied identity in itself, is therefore glocalized, and writes its own space in the city of New York. Báez’s notion of *Dominicanish* is indicative of much more than just a social reality that is driven by fluctuating ‘levels’ of Dominicaness. For Josefina, the *Dominicanish* condition defines “cual es la universalidad de lo muy local” (in interview), and works to find a place for her own body. This is echoed in *Song of the Water Saints*, as Leila grows up in the United States not in the “tight shoe” (2002; 242) that is the island of Hispaniola. The way in which Rosario re-introduces Graciela’s voice here enables Leila to draw on the past to re-mold her future. Unlike the women before her, freedom is in fact a possibility. New York’s ‘vastness’ doesn’t ‘seep gloom’ into her as it

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<sup>3</sup> The terms “glocality” and “glocalization” refer to the identification of the local in the global. Glocality manifests itself in the idea of living “local” aspects of Dominican culture within the community of Washington Heights, within the glocalized context of the United States.

does for Mercedes and Andrés (199), but instead provides her with a space within which she has the resources to grow and develop a future for herself.

Towards the end of *Dominicanish*, Báez engages in a discussion named “Washington Heights List”, made up predominantly of words and phrases that she has taken from billboards and public spaces, and then compiled into a somewhat chaotic list-like section. The majority of the things she lists go straight to the body, engaging with the notions of its preservation, its beauty and the body in danger. Here she goes beyond questions of race and gender, exploring ideas with reference cultural, gastronomic and educational elements: “Empanadillas de yucca. Grocery Los Primos” (58), “Bingo familiar. Bingo aquí en su iglesia” (58), “GED ESL clases gratis para usted” (57). She pulls together a series of non-linear, fragmented and very much unrelated names, places and ideas which she experiences in Washington Heights. The fragmented, chaotic nature of the performance echoes the complex and disjointed nature of her experience as an immigrant woman in the United States. By moving away from the negotiation of race and gender, Báez demonstrates the ways in which negotiation and hybridisation is apparent at all levels; it surrounds her.

### **Language**

The significance of language to migration is of paramount importance. The move from La Romana to New York means a significant change in her physical, social and linguistic mobility, and the acquisition of English comes to influence a great change in the way in which she functions. It is undoubtedly a highly corporeal experience; as demonstrated by the extent to which she is forced to physically manipulate her mouth in order to communicate in this new tongue:



“I thought that I will never learn English / No way I will not put my mouth like that / No way jamás ni never no way / Gosh to pronounce one little phrase one must become another Person with the mouth all twisted... Yo no voy a poner la boca asi como un guante” (2002: 22)

This physical deformation of her ‘boca’ adds another corporeal dimension to the transformations that take place when borders are crossed. When performing *Dominicanish* she makes a point of exaggerating vowel sounds and moving her mouth almost as if she is chewing, whilst she negotiates the strange words she is being forced to pronounce. Her experience with the English language alone is corporeal, pulling her away from her ‘home’ in Spanish and forcing her to negotiate a new tongue and new cultural landscape. The acquisition of this second language is perhaps one of the most significant elements of this transformation. She asserts that by communicating in this foreign tongue, she is forced to adopt another identity or to become somebody else- a stranger: “*become another person with the mouth all twisted*”. This idea of becoming someone else perhaps distances her from the receiving culture, leaving both the audience and herself questioning whether the move to the United States erases her true self. In keeping with Duany’s notion of hybrid points of contact between home and the diaspora, the negotiation of both languages within the United States is one of the most important elements of her process of becoming a cross-border subject. Living in both Spanish and English further emphasises her *Dominicanishness* and increasingly complicates her process of identity formation. The way in which she has to physically force herself to manipulate her mouth in order to communicate in this new language is more than just learning a new tongue. It is:

*“Beyond ESL (English as a second language) where worlds collide. A nonlinear expression of our nonlinear life. Poetic and nonsensical texts tapping into unofficial stories and undocumented history. And eclectic use of symbols, times and places. Dominicanish, a language created by the awareness of the ordinary in the here, today, now. Dominicanish, just an exercise”* (Báez, 2000: backcover).

Her learning of and immersion in the English language opens her eyes to the other cultures and ethnicities that contribute to the awakening of her own racial consciousness in the ‘crooked city’. Her use of African-American music and culture as a means by which to affirm her blackness is of great significance in *Dominicanish*. The Isley Brothers album cover introduces a sense of black pride, leading to a self-affirmation of her own blackness: “Black is my colour”. These cultural references work as a means by which to physically root herself into this new cultural space. Her assertion of her own blackness echoes the advancement of black pride movements in the United States, such as The Civil Rights Movement (1955), Black Power Movement (1960) and ‘Black is Beautiful’. The ‘Black is Beautiful’ movement came to rise in the second half of the twentieth century, and began to encourage young black people to take pride in their own African identities. Although not a political movement, it is very applicable to the works of Josefina Báez as it worked to promote change through music, fashion, art and literature. This engagement with arts and cultures as a means by which to drive significant change is ingrained in Báez’s physical theatre and performance poetry. Her body explores the ways in which she negotiates these concepts and her art functions as a very real commentary which narrates immigrant experiences and realities. Her body acts as the voice which society does not give to immigrants, regardless of whether or not they possess legal status.

Conversely, *Comrade, Bliss ain't Playing* deems her blackness to be a major part of her *ser* that inhibits her social progression and restricts her movement in general: “*Dark skin colour does closed doors / All over the world; including at our homes / Hurts more at our homes / Would that be a home? / A home where fading skin creams are more appreciated than mother's milk*”. Her attitude towards her own blackness has noticeably changed and the suffering that comes hand-in-hand with the forging of cross-border identities is really brought to the surface here. The change in the way she feels about herself with regards to her race and her Dominicaness traces the complexity of negotiation an immigrant identity. Where in *Dominicanish* her blackness facilitates her negotiations of new spaces, *Comrade, Bliss ain't playing* explores the ways in which skin is a stigma in the diaspora and removes the opportunities she believed she may gain in crossing the border and becoming a *dominicanyork*.

As discussed earlier on in this chapter, the idea of ‘home’ occupying multiple locations is central to Báez’s life and consequently, her work. In addition to having her home in two places, it is evident that this movement and linguistic change also provokes a profound sense of foreignness. Not only is language a marker of her social mobility in the United States but it is also one of the markers of change when she returns to the Dominican Republic. In the U.S space, being able to speak English works in her favour in terms of upward social mobility, employment and being valued as a citizen. However, although language enables her to root herself in both contexts, it also uproots her past and relationships. Now, not only is she a *guiiri* in the United States, but also in the Dominican Republic:

“I went back there on vacation

There is La Romana

Here is 107<sup>th</sup> street ok

**Tú sabes inglés?**

**Ay habla un chin para nosotros ver si**

**Tu sabes**

I was changed they were changed he she it

Were changed too

Pretérito pluscuamperfecto indicative

Imperative

Back home home is 107 ok

***(Dominicanish: 31)***

Language writes her into the role of a permanent *guiiri*. This foreignness is echoed in *Comrade, Bliss ain't Playing*, with language forming one of the main point of contrast between the two texts. She presents herself as feeling ‘foreign’ in her Dominican tongue in an American context, as well as demonstrating feelings of not-belonging when writing in English. Both works use language as a means by which to communicate feelings of distance, conflict and disjunction. *Dominicanish* highlights her struggles to assimilate into the US cultural and political landscape, and *Comrade, Bliss ain't playing* reflects a potential cutting of her ties to the Dominican Republic and her mother tongue; leaving her in a state of constant motion. She does not appear to find a permanent ‘home’ in either place, and therefore occupies Bhabha’s third space. Her use of Spanglish functions as a marker of turbulence, motion and ‘becoming’. However, her use of English in *Bliss* is perhaps more

unsettling for her audience as it presents a persona who appears much more melancholic and almost disturbed, overtaken and overcome by colonial invasion and its national impact. There are evident feelings of loss, and the use of English in *Comrade, Bliss ain't playing* cuts the ties between the Dominican Republic and the diaspora. The dissolution of her use of Spanglish- both spoken and elaborated in *Dominicanish*- and the now non-existent references to Latino cultures, suggest a very disjointed and turbulent existence, and one that becomes increasingly more rooted in the U.S landscape.

### **Nelly Rosario: Invasion and Occupation**

Nelly Rosario was born in the Dominican Republic in 1972 but was raised in Brooklyn. Similar to Josefina Báez, she writes from within the diaspora as opposed to from the Island; a key element in our understanding of the Dominican woman's immigrant experience. Invasions are at the core of an understanding of both the historical and contemporary development of Caribbean society. The Dominican Republic has a history of invasion, and it has been constantly invaded since the first encounter with the first landing of the US Navy in 1916. The bodies that are at the heart of this discussion are undoubtedly marked by these invasions, and function as a way in which to reveal and understand their impact; both in history and in contemporary society.

All three novels discussed in this chapter differ in their approach to the invader, but they collectively show the writers' concern about the ways in which these invasions are connected to different aspects of Dominican history and contemporary realities. This concept of invasion is central to the exploration of Nelly Rosario's *Song of the Water Saints* and as mentioned previously, although dealing with similar topics and experiences, Báez and Rosario treat them very differently. The text itself is written in part like a journalistic

narrative, with flecks of testimonial writing as it is aimed at a predominantly North-American audience. Its aim is to re-inform an international audience, with regards the horrors of the Haitian massacre and the impact of their displacement and dislocation from their cultural, familial, linguistic and geographic “homes”.

The conflictive nature of blackness is central in *Song of the Water Saints*, and it enables Nelly Rosario to engage in a strong exploration of the invasion of the black female body, disease and vulnerability; inseparable from the way in which she sees Caribbean literature. Her position as a Dominican American writer who grew up in the United States, facilitates her own negotiation of race: “*I have the benefit of a movement around race in the United States, having been brought up with a black consciousness, which is something that I can bring to the tale, to my person, in my belief system*” (2004: 72). Her work flags up all the aesthetic questions of blackness and violence, and transfers them onto the black immigrant woman’s body both on the Island and in the diaspora.

In contrast to works by Josefina Báez, Nelly Rosario deals with invasion and the idea of both military and sexual occupation, exploring the concept of the black woman’s body in danger of rape. *Song of the Water Saints* takes place during the US military invasion of 1916-1924, and the reoccurring themes of political and sexual invasions are rife throughout. Rosario uses the novel as a means by which to depict the multicultural nature of the Dominican population with the racialized, eroticized native Dominican woman and her body as a focal point. The Dominican nation is explicitly feminized from the outset, and is therefore openly ruled by male authority. The sexually invaded and eroticized nature of the text is evident from the opening pages, following the approach of the “yanqui” to a young couple; Graciela and Silvio: “The pink hand tugged at her shirt and pointed briskly

to Silvio's pants" (10). The treatment of the body and the significance of corporeality echoes the military invasion during which it is set, suggesting a body politic that has been both invaded and contaminated by the white "yanqui" male.

Both Graciela and her body undoubtedly become "marked" and "invaded" by the *yanquis*, which comes to a head following her fatal contamination of syphilis. Rosario inverts the 'invader', as it the white male who contaminates the young, Dominican woman. Blacks, more specifically Haitian men, are more commonly seen as the contaminators, as evident in the case of her daughter, Mercedes. Mercedes is presented as being inherently racist both during her childhood and as an adult, reiterating the nationalistic idea of contamination of the Dominican Republic, by Haitian migrants: "the Haitians have been polluting us with their language, their superstitions, their sweat, for too long" (181). She is also described as having regarded "[...] dark skin and broad features with disgust" (182).

Leila's character is not only the amalgamation of three generations of women, but is undeniably trapped between the multiple cultures and spaces that they embody and occupy. During her trip to the Dominican Republic, Leila shows evident discomfort within this space and struggles to come to terms with the stark contrast between rural Dominican communities and the vast, urban space within which she has grown up. She is disturbed by the "dust-stirring scooters" which "screeched on the main road" and finds the "unfamiliar insects" relentless (219). She feels no sense of connection nor "home" in the Dominican Republic, unlike her mother and grandmother who are very much ingrained into the heart of the Dominican cultural landscape. *"No way in hell" was Leila going to "leave New York and come and live [...] in a country as boring and backward as this one". She has very much assimilated herself into the New York way of life, slowly but surely almost*

*removing herself from the cultural and geographic space which she used to share with her family, now wearing a “heavily gelled messy bun”, and when her “hair had started to kink up at the roots [...] she cursed her genes again”* (217). It is essential to note that this “kinking” of her hair takes place during her trip to the Dominican Republic, not “home” in New York. This is a reflection of the way in which she suppresses her Dominicaness and perhaps denies her own heritage. The gelling of her hair and refusal to accept its natural state echoes her lack of interest in her Dominican blood, as she attempts to tighten her connections to the United States and leave the “backward” island behind (219).

Rosario’s use of visuals and imagery during this trip is of particular significance as it demonstrates Leila’s ‘removal’ from her Dominican heritage. When looking through family photos, “two years of Leila’s life were missing”. With each frame she “stretched past *feliz cumpleaños* streamers, which became *happy birthday* by the sixth frame”, and with “each frame [...] hairstyles flattened” (212). By drawing on her childhood in order to identify the points at which she loses each element of her Dominican family identity pinpoints different aspects of the generation gap between Graciela, Mercedes and Leila. This echoes Báez’s cutting of her ties to the Dominican Republic in *Comrade, Bliss ain’t playing*, as is to be demonstrated below through the use of language.

## **Language**

Questions of language and the struggle of second language acquisition are also prevalent in Nelly Rosario’s work. She tells of the difficulties she encounters personally: “*I can’t say I’m fully comfortable in either language [...]*” (Flores and Rosaldo, 2007: 156), transferring her own struggles to her writing; evident in her constant references to the 1937 Haitian Massacre, or “El Corte”. In this context, language is particularly significant, as it



was language and not physical appearance that was the deciding factor in the “Parsley Test<sup>4</sup>”. The homogenization of non-Dominicans and the role of language as a form of authentication is a key theme in “Song of the Water Saints”. One of the characters, Mustafá, has Syrian heritage but is in fact Dominican by birth, and very much proud of his connections to Spain. After deciding he is not Dominican (based purely on his failure to clearly pronounce the ‘r’ in ‘*perejil*’, which instead sounded more like an ‘l’ sound), he is branded with an assumed Haitian identity. His character can therefore be considered as representative of the heterogeneity of Trujillo’s victims, making him a particularly identifiable character. As Mercedes says to Old Man Desiderio, “*Lucky for you that your tongue can taste the ‘r’ in parsley [...] otherwise, your blood would have blended with that river just as well*” (182).

The role of language is prominent in the “generation gap” which “caused them to shout across canyons at each other” (205). Leila’s grandmother Mercedes, lived during the height and the consequential fall of Trujillo, with very rigid religious, cultural and political beliefs. On the other hand, having grown up in the United States and distanced herself from her Dominican heritage, Leila did not have even a remotely similar experience. For Leila, Spanish does not come easily, nor does it form a significant part of her everyday life in New York: “the Spanish trudged through Leila’s weak short-term memory and slow hands: a script full of fat spaces and balled dots” (206). It does not come naturally to her and is

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<sup>4</sup> The Parsley Test was used to “distinguish between individuals from two groups that could not otherwise be readily told apart” (see Chancy, 2012). In 1937, Trujillo ordered all workers on sugarcane plantations along the Dominican/Haitian border to be given this test, and those who couldn’t not pronounce the ‘r’, were assumed Haitian and subsequently, murdered. This became known as the 1937 Haitian Massacre, killing thousands of Haitians and dark-skinned Dominicans.

described as being a “process”. This lack of regard and the idea of an imposed identity is comparative to the experiences of migrants upon arrival in the United States. As the United States operates under a binary racial system, she has to negotiate a society that regards her as being black and undeniably Latino. For Leila; a girl who constantly works to suppress her blackness and all things associated with it, negotiating this system would have undoubtedly been a significant challenge. The way in which the Spanish “trudged” through her slow hands further enhances the way in which she has distanced herself from her Dominican heritage,

Nelly Rosario’s *Song of The Water Saints* parallels the discomfort surrounding Hispaniola’s racial history. In the case of Graciela, her race is not made explicit, however she is undoubtedly hypersexualised as a result of her perceived blackness. This is particularly evident in the opening page of the book which describe the image printed on a postcard: “*they are naked. The body cradles the girl. Their flesh is copper. [...] clouds of hair camouflage one breast*”. It reveals the exploitative nature of Peter West and Eli Cavalier. It is at this point that we can draw a clear link between Graciela and Mayra Santos-Febre’s character, Fe Verdejo. As will be explored in the second chapter, Fe Verdejo is a hypersexualised, sensuous mulata woman who embodies the most attractive physical attributes of a black woman twinned with whiteness, indicative of social and class ascension.

## **Borders**

The importance of borders is made particularly explicit in *Song of the Water Saints*, and engages with geographic and geopolitical location in order to do so. Water, the sea in particular, is a dominant theme throughout Latino literatures, and for Rosario, it comes to occupy the role of a traumatic form of nostalgia, and the reoccurring theme of water in the text is very much interlinked with national identity. The sea is deeply connected to both the physical and mental being, and writing from within the diaspora facilitates a more fluid idea of nation and national identity. Rosario's engagement with the Massacre River represents the way in which this water flows around the notion of trauma and violent histories.

The 1937 Haitian Massacre has been seldom addressed in fictional texts. Rosario however, takes this historical event and writes it and its consequences into her work. The "Massacre River" comes to represent both union and rupture as it is what unites Haiti and the Dominican Republic, but also what works to actively divide them both geographically and politically. The text opens with "*Graciela and Silvio stood hand in hand on El Malecón, sea breeze polishing their faces*" (7). El Malecón is the point where the end of the land meets the beginning of the water, and I believe this "merge" of land and sea to be representative of the *convivencia* of Dominican and diasporic Dominican identities. The ever-changing, turbulent Dominican-American identity comes to form an integral part of healing of Dominican national identity. The diasporic voice offers an invaluable contribution to the vision of a contemporary Dominican reality, negotiating complex notions of the idea of home. Myriam Chancy believes that especially in the case of Hispaniola, the notion of home is a "very difficult word to categorize, to define, because

what does that actually mean when you come to an island that is divided in two” (2004: 82). Writing from within the diaspora as opposed to the homeland enables Rosario to voice her rejection of stereotypical norms and to communicate a writing of immigrant identities that embody a multitude of complex subjectivities, all of which reflect the struggles and forced transformations that are encountered in the diaspora in the USA.

Rosario’s lack of particular focus on a Haitian character is not accidental. Her introduction of non-Haitian Dominican, Mustafá and the fact that the novel does not unfold in a border town, but on the outskirts of the capital, extends the pain and suffering of the Massacre to the Dominican population: “*Killings happened within Dominican families with Haitian, part-Haitian or dark-skinned relatives*” (181). I consider Mustafá to be the element that complicates Rosario’s historical representation of the victims of the Massacre: “he explained to Mercedita that Haitians could not be trusted. Animals, he said they were [...], and as the beasts came, with their savage religion and their savage tongue, they took away the honest work from people like his grandfather, a hardworking Syrian who had hailed from the sultans of Spain” (107). The way in which he is assumed to be Haitian, purely based on the fact as he does not *appear* Dominican, can be closely linked to the reception of Dominicans in the United States. Even light-skinned Dominicans may be referred to as being black in this context, contributing to the increasingly complex questions of race and racial identity in the diaspora. His character therefore problematizes race and fuels Mercedes’s existing racism.

This chapter has therefore demonstrated the importance of the body in exploring the Dominican woman’s experience of immigration and border crossing to the United States. As Chomsky (2014) states, U.S immigration law is complex and works to pick out those

who do not 'belong', or as stated by Rosario, those who are 'alien' (Meridians, 2004). The body is essential in understanding the complexity of the impact of these processes and Dominican and Dominican literature and performance by diasporic Dominican women functions as an excellent way in which their conditions can be analysed. The crossing of borders is in fact a very physical concept and the body is involved on many levels, both during the process and following arrival. I have analysed complex notions of race, invasion, borders, second language acquisition within the realms of contemporary politics and current affairs, and conclude that the anatomy of migration is an essential concept if we are to understand notions of diasporic Dominican identity construction. The Dominican woman's immigrant body is stuck in a constant motion of negotiation and inbetweenness, which strikes up more questions of identity than it answers.

As we will see in the following chapter, similar questions of race, movement across borders, identity construction and notions of inbetweenness are all central to Mayra Santos-Febres' *Fe en Disfraz*. Santos-Febres concentrates on the violated body of the slave woman, and uses a contemporary black female academic as a means by which to travel through history to not only experience the pain of the violated slave woman, but also to overturn those experiences. History, archives and writing about the past are essential tools in the exploration of this violated, or 'marked' body. Although Santos-Febres has similar concerns to those expressed by Báez and Rosario, what shows the complexity of black women's experiences in how they write the body, are the literary strategies employed in order to reveal the different aspects of very similar experiences.

**CHAPTER 2: CROSS-CARIBBEAN (RE) NEGOTIATION: SCARS, DESIRE  
AND CORPOREAL MEMORY**

*“No hay tamarindo dulce ni mulata señorita”*

*(Martínez-Allier, 1972: 47)*

*“The notion of black women as immoral, lascivious and diseased has been used to legitimize their subordination since the sixteenth century”* (McGlotten and Davis, 2012: 195). This chapter is rooted in questions about the complex intersections of identity, race, gender, sexuality, embodiment and agency, offering a Caribbean perspective of black and brown women’s diasporic history. These questions are more urgent now than ever, as current issues present on a global scale are undeniably linked to the realities of the past, resonating strongly in contemporary contexts. This chapter homes in on black and brown bodies as intricate sites of both memory and trauma, and aims to offer a contemporary reworking of the role of historically marked bodies. Many stories of women’s lives under slavery remain untold, and this chapter offers a space within which they can be uncovered and rewritten within the realms of corporeal discourse. In the last two decades, Caribbean feminist scholarship has started to turn its attention to the role of the body and sexuality in understanding Caribbean history<sup>5</sup>, and this chapter contributes to the existing discussion. Here, these bodies are used as facilitators of the investigation and re-imagination of history. They will strike up a dialogue between corporeal discourse and scholarship on racialised and sexualised histories in order to demonstrate the ways in which these bodies are sites of racial mixing, pain, pleasure and a national cipher. I will use the inversion of power

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<sup>5</sup> See Chancy (1997) *Framing Silence: Revolutionary Novels by Haitian Women*, Rutgers University Press.

roles, homogeneous views of cross-Caribbean women, sexuality and the challenging of the cultural construction of the mulata to demonstrate the importance of these bodies to the contemporary re-imagining of history and feminist discourse.

In this chapter, I will discuss the marked woman's body as explored *Fe en Disfraz* by Mayra Santos-Febres and *Xica da Silva*, a film by Brazilian director, Carlos Diegues. My analysis will enable me to explain the uses and importance of corporeality to contemporary discussions about how history could be rewritten. This chapter contributes to a growing body of research and scholarship that uses corporeality as a means by which to read the racialised and sexualised woman's body in Caribbean and Lusophone worlds. From an afro-gynocentric perspective, it explores the afro-descendent womanhood of the African diaspora in Latin American and Caribbean landscapes, tracing struggles to negotiate problematic discourses of *mestizaje/mestiçagem*, which work to highlight difference. I will be adding a corporeal dimension to this field of existing research by developing a contemporary examination of the histories behind these women, using critical analysis of literary, historical and filmic representations of the past. This discussion addresses slave women and afro-descendant womanhood with specific reference to Puerto Rico, Brazil, Venezuela and the United States. The primary sources will be read and analysed within the realms of transnational black feminism, and I will develop my argument within the parameters of feminist arguments about the body, race, sexuality and the master-slave dichotomy. I will identify hypersexuality, sadomasochism and masquerade as key themes in *Fe en Disfraz* and *Xica da Silva*, and argue that although there are a number of divergences in the ways in which Fe Verdejo and Xica da Silva use their bodies, they can, and should in fact both be read within the realms of feminist discourse.

Mayra Santos-Febres is an Afro-Puerto Rican writer, and her contemporary neo-slave narrative, *Fe en Disfraz*, builds on the embodied histories of 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> century Spanish and Portuguese colonies, as represented in contemporary Chicago, Madrid and San Juan de Puerto Rico. It draws the histories of slave women into relevant, contemporary conversations about conflictive intersectional identities and constructs a woman-centred history of the Americas. The Afro-Venezuelan protagonist, Fe Verdejo, and her corporeality function as a mediator for this, and as Patricia Hill Collins writes, black feminist intellectuals “*can foster the group autonomy that fosters effective coalitions with other groups*” (2000: 36). Her voice is a collective expression that not only speaks for herself but also for the silenced women who came before her. Exploration of taboos is characteristic of works by Santos-Febres, and similar to her other texts<sup>6</sup>, *Fe en Disfraz* is built on questions of sadomasochism, sexual domination and subjugation, all of which provide a space for Fe and who/what she represents, facilitating the reinterpretation of her past. Both author and protagonist subvert traditional expectations, not just as women, but also as Afro-descendant women.

The subtext behind *Fe en Disfraz* is the history of freed mulata slave, Xica da Silva, who lived during the Brazilian diamond boom. She was renowned for the use of her mixed heritage and irresistible sexuality to become one of the wealthiest women of the period. In 1770, after having freed Xica and fathered her 13 children, diamond mine owner João Fernandes was recalled to Portugal. The residents of Diamantina did everything in their power to erase Francisca da Silva, burning any document or record of her existence. Using the little that remained, scholars and historians have worked to put together accounts and

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<sup>6</sup> Santos-Febres, M. (2000) *Sirena Selena vestida de pena*. Mondadori.



interpretations of what may have been the history of Xica da Silva. Perhaps the most prominent of these is the novel by 19<sup>th</sup> century Brazilian lawyer, Joaquim Felicio, who imagined a femme fatale-like seductress who used her desirability and predominant sexual prowess as a key to social class ascension. His work was followed by Carlos Diegues' 1976 film, *Xica da Silva*, 1990s Brazilian Telenovela, *Xica* and Mayra Santos-Febres' novel, *Fe en Disfraz* (2009). As her history has been pieced together, it is more a complex combination of myth, loose historical fact and cultural expectation, giving rise to a number of contradicting representations of her history and that of black slave women in the Americas. The different interpretations of the history of Xica da Silva have facilitated the contemporary status of women who have been 'marked' by these histories.

The Caribbean and Brazil have the largest concentration of Afro-descendant people outside Africa, as well as a number of complex, problematic social systems. Both landscapes are built upon complex slave societies which formed the bases of the racialised social class system that associated whiteness with power; the Caribbean and Latin America have been characterised for their processes of whitening; *branqueamento* and *mestizaje*. I argue that the body is a living archive, challenging conventional notions of race, sex and dichotomous relationships of power, using the corporeal and the embodiment of history in order to do so. I work to challenge these processes through the analysis of a dominant mulata protagonist whose embodied legacy, knowledge and intellect facilitate her personal and professional development and ultimately, societal role. The racialised and sexualised woman's body is a locus for the exploration of these histories, and Mayra Santos-Febres' novel *Fe en Disfraz* offers a valuable point of departure if we are to work towards a progressive reworking of the existing race and gender hierarchies in the Caribbean and

Latin America. Her work denounces the colonizer's voyeuristic and fetishist behaviour and offers a means by which to counterbalance this view of black sexual politics in Pan-Latin and cross-Caribbean contexts.

A critical reading of *Fe en Disfraz* occupies a pivotal role in the discussion. To date, little critical academic study has been published on this text<sup>7</sup>, and it serves as the perfect opportunity to employ it as a means by which to identify and discuss the elements critical to our understanding of the histories of gender, sexuality and enslavement in the Caribbean and the rest of the Americas. Mayra Santos-Febres's retelling of the story of freed Brazilian slave woman, Xica da Silva, is a problematic Pan-Caribbean reading of history. This text emphasises the concept of fluid boundaries, and Fe's lack of association with any one nation stimulates a reading that goes beyond geographical boundaries and 'problematizes' the construction of nation: "*Mi piel era el mapa de mis ancestros. Todos desnudos, sin blasones ni banderas que los identificaran; marcados por el olvido o, apenas, por cicatrices tribales, cadenas y por las huellas del carimbo sobre el lomo*" (89). This notion of the body as being both a map and a historic archive will be an essential thread which runs through this study, engaging with transnational feminism, embodied slave histories and intersectional identities.

There are very few slave narratives written in Spanish, and those that do exist were written primarily in the nineteenth century. *Fe en Disfraz* draws complex discussions of slavery into a contemporary context: "*en 'inglés existen miles de declaraciones de esclavas que dan su testimonio en contra de la esclavitud [...] en español, por el contrario, fuera de las*

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<sup>7</sup> Rangelova (2012), Pueo Wood (2011)

*memorias del Cubano Juan Manzano o del testimonio Cimarrón de Miguel Barnet, no existe ninguna narrativa de esclavos: menos aún, de esclavas” (22/23)*<sup>8</sup>. There is only one slave narrative in Spanish written by a woman; *Sab* by Gertrudis Gómez de Avellaneda (1841). This must be challenged, and Mayra Santos-Febres tries to build on and correct this gap in what we know, and *Fe en Disfraz* becomes another slave narrative, written in Spanish by a woman. She addresses the issue of bringing the horrors of slavery to consciousness by using a 21<sup>st</sup> century Spanish-language narrative which gives a voice to those whose experiences were never heard.

The text is cross-Caribbean in the most ample sense, drawing Brazil and Venezuela into the complex discourses of the Caribbean. Fe Verdejo highlights the historicizing of the female body as a topic of discourse about Caribbean history and illustrates how these women embody a real history of survival. Paul Gilroy identifies the Atlantic World as being particularly significant as it is the perfect context for the development of multi-layered, hybrid identities as it is a site within which “*movement, relocation, displacement and restlessness are the norms rather than the exceptions*” (Gilroy, 1993: 133). Through historical archives and academic study, Mayra Santos-Febres traces the history of the black slave woman and its trauma by mapping it onto Fe’s body. This gives a rare opportunity and agency to female slaves in the Americas to overcome longstanding historical silences and express their voices. Through the analysis of literature and cinema it is possible to present these histories from conflicting and complimentary perspectives, both of which

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<sup>8</sup> All unreferenced quotes are taken from Santos-Febres, Mayra (2009) *Fe en Disfraz*, Alfaguara, Santillana USA Publishing Company, USA.

offer suggestions as to the possibility of rewriting already written histories of trauma, brutal violence and atrocity.

The concept of 'marked' bodies is what drives this research and I use this term to refer to specific historical bodies and the ways in which they are inscribed into a specific role. I refer to the racialized and sexualised body that is physically and emotionally effected by the scars left behind by a history of violence and abuse in slavery, hard physical labour and motherhood: "*marcados por el olvido o, apenas, por cicatrices tribales, cadenas y por las huellas del carimbo sobre el lomo*" (89). Fe Verdejo refers to her ancestors as all being "*marcados*" by brutal abuse within slave societies, and this chapter explores the somatization of the history of the abuse of black women under slavery and in plantation societies, through the discussion of the complex relationship between pain and pleasure.

### **Constructs of gender in slave society**

The notion of gender in relation to slavery is of paramount importance and this relationship will form the basis of this chapter. Gender played a significant role in the slave experience in the Americas; "*the perception of black women as labouring bodies is what facilitated their enslavement and exploitation, and they could be physically abused as their body was not gendered according to the codes of true (white) womanhood*" (Putzi, 2006: 132). This 'pure' and idealised white womanhood is a "*sharp contrast to the grotesque sexuality, physical ugliness and excessive fertility*" (Jones 2015) that was associated with black women, striking up an essential dialogue between sex and history; they cannot be read independently of each other. If the true concept of what was regarded as womanhood manifests itself in the form of a white woman, then enslaved women were not only stripped of their rights to agency, but also their gender. In many ways, they are 'ungendered'; a

concept coined by Hortense Spillers in her famous work, "*Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe*" (1987), exploring the idea that "before the 'body' there is the 'flesh'" (61).

Gender and ungendering within slavery is highly complex as the body is what prevents slave women from being valued and treated equally to slave men. Although male experiences under slavery are incredibly important to the study of race, power and slavery, this chapter will focus purely on the female experience. Black female slaves were considered equal to men when it came to field work and other forms of physical labour, yet when it came to their bodies and sexualities, they were highly sought after. They were only valued as women for their ability to perform reproductive labour and for their consequent desirability. Slavery is undeniably embedded in wider discussions about gender and power, as the "*slave experience is dictated by both gender and 'ungendering'*". The black male slave was primarily exploited as a labourer in the fields, the black female was exploited as a labourer in the fields, worker in the domestic household, a breeder, and as an object of white male sexual assault" (Hooks 1981: 22). As will be explored further in chapter three, they were valued for their reproductive capacity, as wet-nurses, nannies and for their domestic skills. The marks left behind by those histories and specific gender roles provoke questions of gender, power and agency, resonating strongly in the present day.

Not only were they black, they were also women *and* enslaved, they were "*situated within at least two subordinated groups that frequently pursue conflicting political agendas*" (Crenshaw, 2008: 282). This triply marginalised intersectional identity ultimately stripped them of their right to agency. In this chapter, I show how Mayra Santos-Febres uses her narrative to demonstrate how restrictions have been overcome and how rights to agency

have been regained through the creation and publication of cultural products that rewrite history in their favour. “*Women’s experiences are often significant repositories of oppositional knowledge*” (Mohanty, 1997: 212) and offer a different scope through which to view and understand the past. Through this lens, we can focus on the concept of female corporeal inscription into slavery, abuse and the notion of ungendering, originating from plantation-based economies and the historical relationship between male whiteness and female blackness.

### **Hypersexualisation and abuse in slavery**

Racialized, gendered and consequently (hyper)sexualised bodies are on the frontline of contemporary crises, and contributions to scholarship in this area are more essential now than ever. If we are to work towards a more complex and progressive contemporary view of black and brown women, it is essential to probe their histories in relation to the present day. Contemporary scholarship that centres on this tripartite discussion of gender, sexuality and power facilitates a diverse representation of these intersections within the realm of Caribbeanness. It is impossible to pursue a discussion of slavery without addressing the interlinked histories of sexuality and power, as body, gender and sexuality are all points of power relations that formed a fundamental component of the power that white men had over black women. The body is site of incorporated knowledge, and in texts by Santos-Febres, a living archive. Women’s bodies as repositories of memory are essential to the rewriting of history. Only since the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century have there been real scholarly attempts to write gender into the discourse of slavery, notably Barbara Bush’s work *Caribbean Women in Slave Society*. Although this field of research is still in the process of developing, there is still not enough work in this area. This study

provides a point of departure for future scholarship on the importance of slave narratives in Spanish.

Black and brown women are sexualised, historically, based on their living conditions: “*the image of a libidinous and promiscuous black woman was nurtured by the conditions under which slave women lived and worked*” (Gray White, 1985: 33). The notion of ownership and the buying and selling of black and mulata slave women that was once at the core of plantation and slave societies. Masters saw them as readily accessible sexual partners, as they were renowned for being sexually deviant, justifying maltreatment by their *amos*. There was no question with regards to the sexual relations which they desired and, the female body became dominated, objectified and punitively sexualised. Hilary Beckles states that “*New World slavery led to the legal and customary institutionalism of the slave owners’ right to unrestricted sexual access to slaves*” (22), and in slave societies in the Americas, the ultimate sexualised woman was the mulata. The image of the hypersexualised mulata justified oppression and legitimised exploitation by white men: “*by portraying Afro-Brazilian women as seductresses and sexual aggressors, dominant configurations of race, gender and sexuality suggest that white men have historically entered into interracial sexual relationships unwittingly and unwillingly*” (Caldwell, 2007: 60). Plantation owners maintained that slave women brought it upon themselves, through their own promiscuity and pursuing sex with white men for their own betterment. For slave women and their descendants, like Fe and as can be seen in the case with Graciela in Nelly Rosario’s *Song of the Water Saints*, sex functions as a means of survival: “*ese Martín es quien hoy me hace comprender: la historia está llena de mujeres anónimas que lograron*

*sobrevivir al deseo del amo desplegándose ante su Mirada*” (46). This concept is by no means exclusive to slave societies; it is easily identifiable in the 21<sup>st</sup> century (See page 52).

During her investigation, Fe Verdejo comes across the history of enslaved Petrona, enabling her to delve deeper into the realities of enslaved young women in the 18<sup>th</sup> century, which were dominated by the brutal violation of bodies as a part of everyday life: “*tres gendarmes entraron en María, uno por delante y otro por detrás, mientras otro le ponía su vergüenza en la boca hasta ahogarla [...] de dichas violaciones, resultó que Petrona fuera vendida con hijo en el vientre*” (39). This abuse and sexual violence towards young slave women formed a dominant part of slave society across the Americas, however, these histories have been seldom documented. The archives which Fe discovers during her research are woven in between chapters of narrative in *Fe en Disfraz*, offering a valuable opportunity for the truly harrowing experiences of constant abuse by white men, to be voiced. In response to such brutal violation, Hill Collins states that “*black women were objects to be seen, enjoyed, purchased and used, primarily by white men with money*” (31), and this notion of being used by white men is by no means exclusive to this period. The last few years have seen the publication of a number of anthologies featuring the works of writers pertaining to minority groups across different contexts, in response to the current global status in terms of race and belonging. Claire L. Heuchan’s text, “Black Feminism Online: Claiming Digital Space” has been published in *Nasty Women: A Collection of Essays and Accounts on what it is to be a woman in the 21<sup>st</sup> century*, in which she writes; “Black female bodies are fetishized, treated like public property by the white men who grope us on the assumption Black girls are always up for it” (16). This association is undoubtedly rooted in slavery and the notion of the mystical, sensual black woman who



exists to be consumed. This is a concept that Mayra Santos-Febres turns on its head, as we will see further on.

According to Mimi Sheller (2012), historians looking for subaltern agency must seek out the “*unexcavated field of embodied practices*”, what she terms “erotic agency”. In *Fe en Disfraz*, history flows through blood and sex, and both Fe and Martín function as erotic agents. As sexuality plays such a significant role in discussions about slavery in the context of the Caribbean and the Americas, both eroticism and exoticism are essential discourses within which to approach this analysis, and are present in the novel on many levels: it was both an “*attitude and a set of practices visited upon the Caribbean by Europeans during slavery and in its aftermath, constituting the brown-skinned colonized and enslaved woman, as well as the lands she inhabited as sites for sexual pleasure and fantasy as well as exploitation, enslavement and violence*” (Kempadoo, 2003: 172). This is made most explicit through the image of the Brazilian mulata, which permeates the subtext to *Fe en Disfraz*; the history of freed mulata slave, Xica da Silva.

The mulata is the archetypal eroticized figure whose role drove Caribbean and Brazilian slave societies. Like the notion of exoticization, it is a problematic construct, characterized by the 20<sup>th</sup> century woman who was seen to be the embodiment of Brazilian national identity and almost an advert for the so-called racial democracy, *mestiçagem*. Her mixed heritage fuelled the way in which she was idealized, embodying the elements of true beauty that were characteristic of both sides of her heritage. Not only did she carry connotations of white power, status and femininity, but also the hypersexuality, desirability, magic and mystery of the black woman. She was “*the woman to desire and fear, the temptress of all white men*” (Stinchcomb, 2004: 79). The term *mulata* has at times been used

synonymously with *prostitute*, *sex worker* and other denigrating terms. It carries with it the limited nature of both social and economic opportunities that were accessible to black and mixed-race women in Brazil. These attributions reflect the way in which the postcolonial “Others” are desired for the way in which they are different from the “unmarked” members of the white dominant society. This is another rather potent and controlling image that uses the body as a tool for both racial and gender persecution, giving rise to the popular Cuban phrase, with which I opened this chapter: “*No hay tamarindo dulce ni mulata señorita*”.

The hypersexualisation of the contemporary mulata functions in a very similar way, and the mulata image in modern day Brazil is overrun by colourful and exotic carnivalesque ideas of seductive, sexual mulata temptresses. The mulata is the ultimate image of the desirable woman, which is most often associated with white femininity, as “*within this interpretative context, skin colour, body type, hair texture and facial features become important dimensions of femininity*” (Collins, 2004: 194). The mulata image is undoubtedly linked to the body as a site of sexual objectification; an extremely reductive concept of womanhood that the mulata has been used to embody, in addition to being a image that is unquestionably linked to the sexual objectification and subjectivity of mixed-race women in contemporary Brazil. Unlike white women who were idealised for their beauty and dominant femininity, mulatas were attractive for their inherent promiscuity and provocative nature. This cultural construction makes it evident that black and mulata female sexuality and narrations of problematic questions of race, gender and sexuality within the Caribbean must be challenged.

Santos-Febres' treatment of Fe Verdejo works to achieve just this. Fe challenges traditionalist views of women, specifically hypersexualised afro-descendant women, through the treatment of the body as a site of incorporated knowledge. Questions of power, intellect and the erotic, amongst others, are of great significance here. There is an explicit discourse between the erotic and the historic, with sexual encounters between and Martín functioning as a means by which to manifest and call into question key historic moments, rearticulating them through the body. For Santos-Febres, history flows in blood, and sadomasochist rituals are just one of the ways Fe manages to invert historical power roles that are ingrained in both historical and contemporary cross-Caribbean contexts.

Here, Fe plays the role of the dominant black woman, and the silenced, white victim is Martín. Her body and erotic rituals, to which he succumbs, come for form one of the most important aspects of the entire text, and the complex history behind it: *“no es curioso que ofrezca mi carne a su extraño rito. Que hoy le ofrezca a Fe la carne de Martín Tirado, historiador, quien intentó decifrar, cada vez con menos éxito, los signos de esta historia de la cual quiero dejar constancia. Mi historia quedará como testimonio, por si acaso no regreso de esta Víspera de Todos los Santos. O por si no regresa Fe Verdejo”* (14). During these rituals, he is completely controlled by her, and what she asks him to do, to prepare himself for her, is in fact similar to what would be, stereotypically, a woman's beauty regime. Here, she toys with his masculinity; perhaps to reduce him as her ancestors were reduced: *“no puedo disfrazar mi olor con colonia ni afeites. Fe es pulcra, a Fe no le gustan los humores [...] debo despejar mis partes privadas de cualquier vello tupido”* (15). She is extremely demanding and meticulous in terms of how *she* wants Martín. She has the power to completely invert power roles and she dictates the terms on which the white man

presents himself for her consumption, wielding power in both the professional and private sexual realm. These moments work in order to liberate her from the oppressive notion of exoticism that was so prominent in these societies. These encounters enable her to experience the pain and desire felt by the women she studies.

Fe is highly subversive; not only is she black, she is also an academic who is a product of the history to which she is dedicated to studying. Perhaps the most transgressive aspect of her character is her power of knowledge, and how it is located within her racial and gender identities. She is in charge of the knowledge behind the historical investigation that she and Martín have been hired to undertake, and as he states; “*no son muchas las estrellas académicas con su preparación y que, como Fe, sean, a su vez, mujeres negras*” (16). It is essential to highlight the fact that he has been employed specifically to assist her. She totally subverts the norm and expectations of the subaltern and the supposedly uneducated black woman by doing much more than just writing back and contesting the positions which history has assigned to her: domestic roles and motherhood; “*es más que eso*” (Mayra Santos-Febres). In assuming a position of both intellectual and academic power, she resonates with the way in which “*Xica stood out for having escaped the fate reserved for women of her race*” (Furtado, 2009: 297), in many ways, was able to almost *escape* her own blackness. Unlike Xica da Silva who works to escape her blackness in order to achieve social and economic mobility, Fe celebrates her blackness. This is what is most radical about the book; she celebrates her blackness on a different set of terms; power and sensuality. Her research and exploration of historical archives provides a space that offers an example of how history might be rewritten by her. She becomes the author of a history that has always been told by white men; the author of her own past, revealing the

horrendous rape and brutal sexual violence that was part of everyday life for slave women in the Americas. *Fe en Disfraz* works as a laboratory in which questions of power and inversion are explored, establishing ethical connections to the past. This functions explicitly as a tool of feminine liberation, dominance and agency as a direct result of her power and knowledge.

In addition to embodying a power of knowledge, Fe is at the heart of a tripartite discussion of power. It is impossible to pursue an exploration of questions of slavery without addressing interlinked histories of sexuality and power, as race, gender and class are all points of power relations that formed a fundamental component of the power that white men had over black women. Race, class and gender are representative of the relations of power within which the sexual subject can be explored. The articulation of the transferal of power In *Fe en Disfraz* uses sex as a means by which to construct a power argument in Caribbean and North American contexts, as well as power dynamics between black women and white men, or *amo y esclava*. The redeployment of power is central to these arguments as black women's bodies function as mechanisms for the reinvestigation of history. The way in which power is transferred through sexual relations between master and slave carries gender significance in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, as echoed by the relationship between Martín and Fe. Slave women are fundamental to understanding the present status of black and mixed-race women.

### **Disguise and masquerade**

Key to the discussion of power roles and the way in which they are transferred, is the function of disguise, read alongside questions of masks and mimicry. Not only do they call into question the disguising of many complex and at times, problematic identities, they aid

the documentation and repetition of history. Masquerade is a “*characteristic motif in Latin American literature that typically serves either to aid in the fight for social justice or to expose the lack of social justice in Latin America*” (Weldt-Basson, 2017: 1). If disguise and masquerade in the context of Latin America works to contest problematic socio-political conflicts and questions of justice, then in wearing this dress, both Xica and Fe contest the realities in which they live. However, they both wear the dress very differently.

The politics of clothing is key to discussions surrounding the theme of disguise and masquerade. The *traje* which Fe discovers during her investigation was worn by freed slave, Xica da Silva, to insert herself into white elite society. Robert DuPlessis (2016) writes that clothing can “*denote an individual’s personal style of participation in a groups fashion, declare autonomy or exhibit conformity of subordination [...] or attainment of wealth and status. What one wears may announce deliberate syncretism or simply reflect the selection at hand, manifest an eager social assimilation or a scornful rejection of norms, disclose one’s identity, or disguise it*” (DuPlessis, 2016: 4-5). For Xica da Silva, this dress functions as a way in which to assimilate herself into a part of society that would have ordinarily rejected her. In order to gain economic and material wealth, Xica da Silva disguises herself and her blackness.

Xica da Silva “*dominated the politics, economics and fashion of the region*” (Johnson, 1980). This performance of whiteness enabled her to occupy a role in society that a black woman, freed or enslaved, could never have dreamed of. Her use of fashion as disguise deconstructed the hierarchy that was already deeply ingrained in society and echoes the way in which race and status in Brazil are dictated by appearance. By wearing clothes originally worn by the ruling classes in Diamantina, Minas Gerais, Xica tried to equalize

her power and status to that of a white woman. Not only did the dress expose her links to these women, in blood, as it was her skin colour that ultimately denigrated her, she used clothing to hide this inferiority that was emblazoned permanently upon her. However, these women formed such a powerful part of her history that “*ninguna tela que cubriera, ni sacra ni profana, podría ocultar mi verdadera naturaleza*” (89). Her extravagant dress and accessories mask the lack of racial equality to the colonial white elite: “*the black femme fatale subverts the behavior that white patriarchal society dictates as the norm to a black woman within this environment*” (Márcio da Silva 2004: 45). It was this disguise twinned with her extravagant behaviour that enabled her to become one of the most powerful people in the state of Minas Gerais, and the only freed slave woman to ever be afforded such privilege and status.

Layers of racialized sexuality facilitate a discussion of current black sexual politics, as demonstrated by Fe and Martín. Disguise works to establish statement and visibility in a sociohistorical context that overlooks minority and marginalized identities, and according to Homi Bhabha, “*it is a form of power that is exercised at the very limits of identity and authority in the mocking spirit of mask and image*” (1994: 121). Fe is a multi-layered character and uses disguises on many levels: while working in Chicago, she maintains a professional and private persona, her hair “*siempre recogido en un moño apretado*” and “*blanco y negro era su hábito, como el de una monja. Esa fue su primer disdraz que le conoci. Disfraz de historiadora*” (34). This provides a strong contrast to the *traje* which she wears during her erotic encounters with Martín. Her research leads her to discover Xica da Silva’s antique dress, and although warned not to, she puts it on. This dress traces the movements of the impact of slavery through its travels as well as echoing the way in which

Fe is intimately connected with multiple nations. Both Fe and the dress itself were “exported” across the Americas. It ultimately draws the conflict of the past and present of the mulata in the Americas, to the forefront, and Fe constitutes the point at which they merge. This is where her body meets that of her ancestors, reunited through the notion of pain; a punishment inflicted on the body in order to move beyond where society had placed her. The pain she experiences when the harness pierces her skin enables her to feel the pain that was felt by her ancestors as their masters abused them.

However, when it is worn by Fe, it sexualizes her already hypersexualised body, through which she obtains even more power, leaving Martín helpless: “*Leo. Al lado del escritorio, la puerta de espejos del armario repite mi imagen leyendo. Releo lo escrito (otra imagen). Me observo pálido, más pálido que nunca. De mi piel ha desaparecido todo indicio de color. Distante sol del caribe me encuentro de una blancura que es mi herida. Fe me lo ha hecho ver, la herida que habita en mi piel*” (20). Her sexuality weakens and victimises him and the dress therefore facilitates a huge power inversion through sex; a thread that we see running throughout these histories. The *traje* plays a key role in the erotic nature of the text: “*con una mano Fe apretó las correas del arnés contra su carne [...] un golpe de sangre hirvió entre mis piernas. Fe apretó aún más el arnés y echó un poco la cabeza hacia atrás, mordiéndose los labios. Las varillas se hundieron en su carne. Asomaron los primeros abultamientos, las primeras gotas de sangre [...] en aquella sala vacía y con aquel extraño traje puesto, Fe Verdejo pagaba en sangre el placer de darme placer*” (57).

Here, Mayra Santos-Febres demonstrates her construction of the narrative through a detailed focus on the body, pain, blood and sadomasochism. Fe’s exposure to this connection in blood, pain and dominance is what enables her to offer herself as an author



of history. The way in which she bleeds upon the dress, just like Xica, writes these histories even deeper onto her body: “*el cuero frio se bebió el líquido rojo, gota a gota y se tensó como si recobrara una esencia primigenia que hacía tiempo echaba de menos*” (25). The point at which the dress ‘drinks’ her blood merges her with her ancestors and the slave women whose lives she researches and when Martín states that “*la sangre de Fe sabía a minerals derretidos*” (24), he locates her even closer to them.

Fe’s use of her research into slave women as a means of establishing an ethical connection to the past is a tool of feminine liberation, empowerment and agency. As soon as she fastens the *arnés*, she has complete control over Martín and her sexuality and ultimately inverting the colonizer-colonized relationship: “*Fe me atraía y me intimidaba*” (34). This dress enables Fe to experience how Xica da Silva wore it to insert herself into the white elite society that historically rejected her, offering a “performance” of whiteness. Parallel to the moments when Xica wore the dress to become part of a society to which she did not “belong”, when Fe puts it on, she gains the ability to completely dominate Martín.

The *traje* traces the development of history from Xica da Silva to Fe Verdejo, and therefore plays a very significant role in how histories and legacies are embodied. For Xica, it acts as a means by which to ‘perform’ whiteness; for her, it was the key to upward social mobility. For Fe, it is a key part of her investigation of both the slave women, and herself. The dress enables her to inscribe their histories onto her own body, drawing her even closer to them.

Xica da Silva is ultimately a symbol of Brazil’s racial democracy and the roots of its racial mixing. This image and symbolism, however, has been both questioned and problematized. Brazil promotes itself as a unique, multicultural nation that is free of the

racism that is so ingrained in the US. However, the reality is that questions of race relations in Brazil are far more complicated than the ongoing debate about whether Brazil is racist or not. In general, attitudes towards blackness are very problematic in Brazil; the last country in the new world to abolish slavery. After it was finally abolished in 1888, many intellectuals did not believe that Brazil could become a civilized country without first undergoing a process of *branqueamento*. With this process came more than 4 million Europeans in the hope that they would outnumber the black Brazilians, ultimately enforcing a process of whitening, and persecuting African cultural practices such as capoeira and Candomblé in an aim to filter this blackness<sup>9</sup>.

Despite the fact that the current focus is on the 19<sup>th</sup> century, in many ways, things are not dramatically different today. Even in 2017, Brazil is still in the process of ensuring equality for blacks. There is still a very present hierarchy based on facial features, skin colour and hair texture amongst others. As will be explored in chapter three, racial identification is based on physical appearance. Actress Zezé Motta played *Xica* in the 1976 film, *Xica da Silva*. She has stated that initially, the producer didn't want her to play *Xica* because he considered her to be too ugly and androgynous to play the part. She soon learned that the ideology of Brazil being completely free of racism, embracing its racial democracy, and taking on the image of harmonious 'melting pot' of colours, religions, etc., was in fact a lie. One of the most significant aspects of her being cast as *Xica* is how her life changed following the success of the film. At this time, there were no black faces on the covers of Brazilian magazines, as they would not sell. Instead, the image of the truly feminine, white Brazilian woman, or the desirable mulata, covered the front pages. As *Xica da Silva* had

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<sup>9</sup> See Yates Jr. *Black in Latin America*

turned her into a national sex symbol, Brazilian magazine, *Ícaro*, gave her the front page. This made her the first black woman to be photographed as a cover girl. The question that need to be asked here is, if she had not been sexualised by her appearance in the film, would she have been on the front cover of a mainstream Brazilian magazine? Sadly, the answer is no.

It is evident that sex plays a huge role in the film, which has at its core, the notions of pleasure, psychosexual and material, from the inversion of power roles. Desire is a pervasive theme and she is without a doubt, a seductress who uses sexual prowess to climb the social ladder, creating an image that both embodied and enhanced the already existing stereotype of the exotic, sensual mulata woman in Brazil. The film however, provides a strong contrast to *Fe en Disfraz*, as although they are both centred on black sexual politics, they are divided into questions of power and pleasure. In *Xica da Silva* (1976), Xica appears to gain pleasure from her sexual encounters, as the only means by which she can gain and/or exercise power. Her body is presented as the key to social and self-betterment and is what enabled her to climb the social ladder. Fe on the other hand engages in research and exerts herself intellectually as a means by which to dominate. Although she uses her corporeality, it is not for her own pleasure but instead to dominate Martín and draw his embodied legacy – Don Juan – to the surface. It is her role as a historian that enables her to read him in this way.

It has been said that *Xica da Silva*, in many ways, functions as more of a reflection of the Brazilian nation itself. As it was created during years of dictatorship and repression, Carlos Diegues used the film as a means by which to communicate his criticism and ideas that would have been prohibited, such as criticism of the Church. Gordon argues that Diegues

uses Xica da Silva to depict a “defective and precarious Brazil” (2005: 54) and centres more on the corruption of the Portuguese and colonialism than on Xica’s hypersexuality and the power she achieves as a result of this. Diegues’ use of Xica’s character as a means by which to question the system and institutions has meant that his work has often been deemed problematic. His use of the carnivalesque enabled him to create a comedy that used an overly dramatic representation of Xica da Silva to communicate his feelings towards a corrupt, controlled and problematic Brazil. However, I see Xica’s corporeality and the power which she gains through the use of her body as essential to any analysis of her history. Robert Stam argues that some feminist analyses highlight “less progressive aspects of the film”, focusing on Xica’s power as “corporeal – consisting of the body itself and unspecified sexual manoeuvres – rather than moral or intellectual” (293). I see the use of her body and most explicitly, her sexuality, as a means to obtain power not only as an act of resistance but also as an act of feminism.

Xica is an undeniable symbol of resistance and of survival, and it was this film that transformed her into a national Brazilian figure. As Diegues used the film as a means of socio-political comment, his construction of Xica’s character is by no means presented as the idealised woman. The dominant voice is that of sexual power, and right from the outset, her sexual prowess is made evident. We hear Jose call out to her as if she were an animal: “*Xic-, Xic-, Xic-, Xica*” to which Xica responds by running over to him, smirking. She locates herself in a position of power and influence over the action of others, relying on her vindictive behaviour and supposed sexual powers that no man could resist. According to Aruajo (1992), Xica da Silva’s social class ascent and material privilege were gained through sexual power, which ultimately binds her into her role and situation in the structure

of colonial power. However, the inversion of power roles because of this, places her in a superior position and fits within a feminist discourse in the sense that she is not afraid to impose her willingness to initiate sexual power. In many ways, she is located at the join of multiple spheres of power. This provides a contrast to Mayra Santos-Febres' protagonist, Fe Verdejo, who unlike Xica acquires power because of her knowledge and intellect. However, although the ways in which they progress and resist contrast each other, I see both Fe and Xica as fitting within feminist discourses.

Fe can be located within feminist discourses as she gains power through knowledge, and her role as a historian and research into the history of her ancestor's further ingrains and writes these histories onto her body. Her journey through the histories she discovers are what facilitate her power of knowledge; the power that enables her to invert the power roles that history has emblazoned upon both her and the slave women she is researching. She uses her embodied history to destabilize the already existing structures of power and to invert the consequential racial and gender hierarchies. The histories that she explores reveal the extent to which female slaves were subject to physical and sexual violence, enabling Mayra Santos-Febres to use Fe as a vehicle to work towards a rewriting of these histories and a repositioning of societal roles. The laboratory that I mentioned earlier in this chapter provides a space for Santos-Febres to explore this potential. Fe is employed specifically to take charge of the investigation at the University of Chicago, just as Martin Tirado is employed specifically to assist her. Her role as leader of this line of academic work automatically gives her the upper hand in terms of being the driving force of the historical investigation, in addition to embodying a sense of freedom that enables her to achieve such a significant inversion of power roles.

Although it could be said that Xica's rise to power is limited to her desirability, it is essential to note that there are alternative views that do not denigrate the use of the body for self-betterment or empowerment, consequently locating Xica within feminist discourses, too. Although Xica's use of her sexuality as a means by which to climb Brazil's social ladder can be seen simply as taking advantage of her desirable mulata identity, there is also scholarship which argues that prostitution is in fact a feminist act and a form of both liberation and empowerment, such as Kamala Kempadoo's *Global Sex Workers: Rights, Resistance and Redefinition* (1998). This is an anthology comprised of reviews and discussions by feminists and activists, who examine the implications of the law, theory and policies for global sex workers. Kempadoo's work offers a "*glimpse into the priorities, hardships and resistances of people who are marginalised and outcast in many societies today*" (1998: 3). She argues that given that she writes in an "*era where women can no longer be defined exclusively as victims, where Third World women speak for themselves in various forums, where increasingly analyses have shifted focus from simple hierarchies and dichotomies to the problematization of multiple spaces, seemingly contradictory social locations and plural sites of power, it would seem that experiences, identities and struggles of women in the global sex industry cannot be neglected*" (1998: 14). Xica gets pleasure from sex and enjoys the power that it gives her; not only does she achieve social class ascension in a society where a slave woman would never achieve such status, she used her body as a means by which to liberate herself, subsequently becoming one of the most powerful women in society. Xica da Silva and the use of her only resource; her body, can therefore be read within feminist discourse.

She represents the freed slave woman that only had her sexuality and corporeality at her disposal if she were to gain any kind of social status. Fe, on the other hand, defies expectations, as does Santos-Febres herself, and shows the power of black women in positions of knowledge and intellect, in an academic setting. The relationship between Jose and Xica works to demonstrate that although her sexual prowess facilitates her temporary dominance and ascension, that alone is not sufficient to call into question the repressive, colonial society within which she lived. Although they can both be read within feminist discourses, the divergences between Fe Verdejo and Xica da Silva are what really makes *Fe en Disfraz* an essential contemporary cross-Caribbean text, offering the suggestion of this possibility for black and brown women, and striving for change and the challenging of a system that continues to repress minority groups. Fe is not used sexually but instead, uses her sexuality as a means by which to invert power roles, becoming the dominant and Martin, the dominated. He becomes a slave to his own body, representing the historical legacy of the Don Juan that flows through his veins. Santos-Febres continuously presents his whiteness as a disadvantage and his *pálidez* haunts him: “*Martín Tirado historiador, quién intentó decifrar, cada vez con menos éxito, los signos de esta historia de la cual quiero dejar constancia. Llevo días sin dormir, amanecido. El tiempo se ha detenido. Mi historia quedará como testimonio*” (14). It is the cause of his pain.

Fe’s now dominant blackness is what makes him yearn for her, but through the assumption of a superior role, she takes and maintains control. This contemporary play out between the freed slave woman and the Don Juan character turns history on its head and challenges the system that imposed their historical roles. The power of knowledge is presented as having the potential to overpower systems of oppression, sexual violence and deconstructs

historical narratives of power. Fe is a progressive protagonist who not only presents the future possibilities of black and mulata women in a contemporary context, but also works to suggest ways in which these histories could in fact be rewritten in their favour. Santos-Febres is doing far more than just writing back against this system. She offers a powerful, progressive and contemporary lens through which to rewrite history and offers a space within which to give voice to otherwise silenced histories.

Although Mayra Santos-Febres' novel uses an active, academic, woman of colour in order to make suggestions about what history *could* have been, Carlos Diegues' film certainly deserves credit for the way in which he challenges the system and criticises racism. In his eyes, Xica is creative, resourceful and uses the only thing she has in order to gain respect, class and dominance: her body. These three aspects are elements that would never have otherwise been afforded to a black slave woman. His interpretation of the fragmented history of Xica da Silva perhaps compliments Mayra Santos-Febres's more progressive challenging of colonial Brazil and the rest of the Americas. By analysing two female figures, both of whom can be read within distinct feminist discourses, it is possible to contest the roles which are automatically prescribed based on race and gender. Being black or mulata undoubtedly limits access to dominant ideologies of what is considered "woman" and "femininity" within more dominant cultures, and the body is essential if we are to work towards relocating these concepts. Santos-Febres's and Carlos Diegues' responses to the nonlinear and fragmented interpretations of the history of Xica da Silva have paved the way for future readings of black and mulata bodies within the realms of feminist discourse and the contemporary status of diasporic black and brown women. These contested bodies read within such diverse and challenging contexts exemplify



different means of achieving both power and liberation, inverting the racial and gender hierarchies that form a significant part of the global black consciousness.

Strength, resourcefulness and corporeal protest are just some of the reasons why Chica da Silva is not only a specific but also a very significant woman in Brazilian history. Not only did she contest her rights as a black woman in slave society and challenge boundaries of race, sexuality and colonialism in Brazil, she used her body as a means by which to regain agency and rewrite the hierarchy of society within which she lived. Both *Fe en Disfraz* and *Xica da Silva* use her as a point of departure, and embodiment is intricately linked with the history of this very celebrated mixed-race woman in Brazilian history.

The writers who I will go on to discuss in chapter three draw on very similar experiences, and show the continuity of that historical moment with different periods in the 20<sup>th</sup> century of how black women experience embodiment. As we will see, the experiences revealed in the poetry and short prose addressed in chapter three repeat experiences that have been lived and relived through the figure of Chica da Silva, but also inscribe new struggles that black women experience and overcome in Brazil. Chica da Silva is a marker in black women's history and the conditions which she contests are very much present in more contemporary Afro-Brazilian literary products.

**CHAPTER 3: O CORPO NEGRO FEMININO: RACE, AFRO-AESTHETICS AND  
ACTIVISM IN BRAZIL.**

*“Quero falar de “nós” porque o tempo sempre nos  
deixou atrás as cortinas, camuflando-nos  
geralmente em serviços domésticos”*

***Esmeralda Ribeiro***

To conclude this panorama of Caribbean and Lusophone women’s experiences and cross-cultural voices, the primary focus of this chapter will be the ways in which black Brazilian women writers offer contesting, political articulations of black female identities and subjectivities whilst navigating across the complex intersections of gender, race and national discourses. Through the exploration of the concepts of *aparência*, Afro-aesthetics and the colour continuum, using a select corpus of works by Miriam Alves, Célia Aparecida Pereira<sup>10</sup>, Esmeralda Ribeiro and Conceição Evaristo, it will examine the use of poetry and short prose as a means of articulating and redefining black Afro-Brazilian women writers across class, literary, national, racial and gendered boundaries. The ways in which these bodies perform identity and subjectivity will be read in terms of politics, as a means of situating these black Brazilian women writers within the context of Brazil following its transition to democracy in 1985. Locating them within this context facilitates the delineation of the socially-constructed paradigms of Afro-Brazilian women as *mães pretas* and *mulatas*. The function of writing as activism and

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<sup>10</sup> Célia Aparecida Pereira – pen name ‘Celinha’ and referred to from hereon as Celinha.

resistance and the use of literature as an instrument of politics occupy an essential role, as these writers draw language into a highly political discourse. In doing so, they follow on from Josefina Báez and Mayra Santos-Febres, highlighting the ways in which (Afro-Brazilian) women can address invisibility, and potentially reclaim authority over their bodies.

As the first two chapters of this thesis have demonstrated, the body is a topic that is generating increasingly exciting new research in many different contexts and it is for this reason that I will continue to read and analyse the selected works through a corporeal lens, engaging in questions of the politicisation body and voice. Studying these political literary works through a corporeal lens will facilitate the exploration of the significance of racial discourse and impact of contention with regards to questions of racial identification and appearance or ‘Afro-aesthetics’ (Pinho, 2006) for Black Brazilian women in contemporary Brazil, tracing the quest for a visible black female identity in the works by Afro-Brazilian writers. I will then examine how these are articulated through body and voice, shedding light on 21<sup>st</sup> century black women in Brazil and the diaspora. I have previously discussed the Dominican woman’s immigrant body and the marked cross-Caribbean female slave body and I will now conclude this thesis with a focus on the politicised Afro-Brazilian woman’s body in terms of Afro-aesthetics.

Scholarship on Afro-Brazilian women and their role in contemporary society has increased over the past few decades, with a number of scholars<sup>11</sup> researching both their literature and its function as a form of resistance, creating “*a booming corpus of intellectual and critical*

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<sup>11</sup> Reiter and Mitchell (2010), Caldwell (2007), Oliveira (2007)

*investigation*” (Tillis, 2012: viii). Increased academic research has revealed Afro-Brazilian women writers to be marginalized figures in canonical Brazilian literature, and the publication of their work contributes to their ongoing fight to become a subject as opposed to an object. Alves, Celinha, Ribeiro and Evaristo have all been read relatively widely in terms of their writing as a means of resistance (Duke 2003; Ferreira 2008; and Oliveira 2007) However, there is a gap in the study of this corpus of Afro-Brazilian literature read comparatively with the Caribbean and as intersectional of both race and gender. In order to fill this gap, I will be drawing on studies by scholars including Carole Boyce Davies, Kobena Mercer, Shirley Anne Tate, Bell Hooks, Kia Lilly Caldwell and Silvio Torres-Saillant, amongst others, to facilitate an exploration of the use of female corporeality as a way in which to resist pre-ascribed identities in contemporary Brazil. I will argue that the interconnectedness of the politics of Afro-aesthetics, prejudice and protest are essential if we are to look towards the relocation of Afro-Brazilian women in official discourses of Brazilian national identity.

The criteria for the selection of this particular corpus is framed by the politicized nature of the texts, as all four writers identify themselves as being black Brazilian women and their literature works to elucidate *a questão da mulher negra*. They also form part of the *Quilombhoje* group, which they formed alongside other writers in 1980<sup>12</sup>. Alves, Evaristo and Ribeiro are now well-known writers and are very much on the Brazilian literary map.

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<sup>12</sup> *Quilombhoje* was created with the aim of “discussing and deepening the Afro-Brazilian experience in literature”. It facilitated opportunities for Afro-Brazilians to become active agents through writing and engagement in black cultural resistance and activism. Both as individual writers and as a collective unit, *Quilombhoje* has increased the consciousness of Afro-Brazilians on their own racial identity as it has developed a tendency towards creativity [...], through which the African population in Brazil has been able to articulate itself, resist dominance and maintain a very healthy African-based cultural, religious tradition. (Carole Boyce Davies – “Caribbean Spaces: Escapes from the Twilight Zones”).

Celinha, however, may be lesser known, but her poems *Cantiga* and *Negritude* offer a valuable contribution to the discussions of black womanhood and Afro-aesthetics. At the core of the selected works is the concept of appearance or Afro-aesthetics, as it is known in Brazil (Pinho, 2006). If, “*the most important factor for the adoption of Afro-aesthetics is black political activism and social engagement* (Pinho, 2010: 126), when discussed in terms of Afro-Brazilian women writers, it is particularly relevant. Miriam Alves, Celinha, Esmeralda Ribeiro and Conceição Evaristo have all engaged in various aspects of political activism both before and during their literary careers, and this activism twinned with their writing facilitates their exploration of *a questão da mulher negra* (Caldwell, 2007: 157). As activists, their writing is very much informed by their own engagement with politics, and works towards the unveiling of a collective voice that has long been both silent and invisible. As members of *Quilombhoje* they sought to challenge the Brazilian canonical literary tradition in order to create a visibility for literature that included both a racial and political discourse as a means by which to subvert the existing attitudes towards *mulheres negras* in Brazil, most of which have been based on stereotypes. This group has given rise to a critical approach to the discussion of both race and gender in Brazilian literature, with Afro-Brazilian women at the core. These writers have a “*political perception of literary creation*” (Oliveira, 2007: 104), and it is this combination of politics and literature that has contributed to their work as activism, resistance and a means of contesting literature as an expression of white dominant ideology. They used literature to voice concerns regarding negative stereotypes as *mães pretas* and *mulatas*, generalised invisibility and the inherent lack of control Afro-Brazilian women had over their sexuality and reproduction.

Through a comparative and transnational approach, I locate the selected writers within discourses of global blackness as a way in which to divulge how they openly challenge and contest these identities, giving way to an investigation of their work and the context within which it was written, in addition to providing a basis for comparison. I will interact with Lélia Gonzalez's notion of "*tripla discriminação*" to facilitate an understanding of how these multiple and conflicting identities are negotiated and performed through the body: "*ser negra e mulher no Brasil, repetimos, é ser objeto de tripla discriminação, uma vez que os estereótipos gerados pelo racismo e pelo sexismo a colocam no mais baixo nível de opressão*" (Gonzalez, 1982). Gonzalez's notion of triple discrimination provides a foundation for analysing works by Alves, Celinha, Ribeiro, Evaristo, as addressing the aforementioned intersectional identities will work towards black Afro-Brazilian women being able to reclaim their place within Brazil's national identity.

Racial dynamics and contesting notions of racial identity have both occupied Brazilian discourse at all levels for the most part of the twentieth century. The problematic nature of race in Brazil has always been at the forefront of discussion, and its relationship to both class and gender is what drives this chapter. I have chosen this particular selection of writers and works as they offer many opportunities for comparative discussion, in addition to scope for achieving my aim of a transnational, panoramic view of Caribbean and Lusophone women's experiences. Not only do the selected texts draw upon the key problematic questions and predominant issues that occupy contemporary Brazilian national discourse, but they also provide a strong basis for an understanding of the struggles of Afro-Brazilian women's activism. I have intentionally chosen writers who

both accept and disclose their blackness as a way in which to explore their lived experiences and how they are communicated through the body and voice.

However, it is essential to highlight the fact that this chapter does have certain limitations, for example, lack of visibility for Afro-Brazilian women within the Brazilian literary canon in addition to a general absence of theoretical study and critical analysis available for the examination of their writing. Afro-Brazilian women's writing has historically been absent due to the critical establishment's failure to include their production in the mainstream literary canon (Lima, 18). I will be surveying ideas on Afro-Brazilian female writing in relation to race, gender and political activism, as presented in the works of Alves, Celinha, Ribeiro and Evaristo which were published in the 1994 bilingual anthology of Afro-Brazilian female poetry, *Enfim Nós...Escritoras Negras Brasileiras Contemporâneas*. I will also be analysing *Ogun*, a short story by Esmeralda Ribeiro. Although there is not a significant amount of criticism surrounding works by Afro-Brazilian women writers, I will be using this to encourage literary analysis and scholarship in this area. Some of the works which address the impact of Afro-Brazilian female writers who formed part of *Quilombhoje*, on 20<sup>th</sup> century Brazilian society are particularly relevant to this chapter include; Caldwell's *Negras in Brazil: Re-envisioning Black Women, Citizenship, and the Politics of Identity* (2007), Oliveira's *Writing Identity* (2007), Alves' and Lima's *Mulheres Escre-vendo: Uma Antologie Bilingue de Escritoras Afro-Brasileiras* (2005) and finally, Alves' and Durham's 1994 anthology, *Enfim...Nós/Finally...Us* (1994).

Lélia Gonzalez is an Afro-Brazilian feminist and a major reference in Brazil's *movimentos negros* and *movimentos femininos*, addressing a number of conditions; on being a woman, feminist, black and Brazilian. Her engagement in academic work and writing meant that

she pertained to Brazil's middle class – something that was very rare at this time. Questions of race came to form a part of feminism in Brazil in the 1980s; however, it remained a complex field. Black women were not given much attention in the *movimento feminista*, and gender was excluded from the *movimento negro*. Consequently, Afro-Brazilian women were underrepresented and were invisible within the realms of feminism. Brazil's six-year process towards *Abertura* (1979-1985) offered the opportunity to create new spaces where groups who would have been previously excluded from dominant power structures, voiced their concerns. This gave rise to a number of *Movimentos Negros Femininos* and an increase in scholarship on the lived experiences of Afro-Brazilian women, promoting a “*revalorização racista, assim como por seus valores estéticos europocentricos*” (Mulherio, 1982: 3). Gonzalez undoubtedly stands out for pertaining to a minority group of Afro-Brazilian women who have an international scope for communicating views of racial and gender discourse in Brazil during the 1980s and 1990s, with the emergence of a feminist movement that embodied “*uma pluralidade etnica, cultural e de classe*”. The lack of representation within the Brazilian Feminist Movement and the Black Movement, “*foi crucial para que as ativistas negras brasileiras se mobilizassem e fundassem um movimento proprio, denomidano pore las mesmas de “Feminismo Negro”*” (Damasceno, 2009: 59).

Classification of race in Brazil differs greatly from the United States. In the U.S, even light-skinned Afro-descendants are classified as black; a consequence of the “one drop” rule, whereas Brazil's system of classification is exceedingly more complex. In Brazil, blackness is a question of two extremes. In general terms, on the one hand it is a concept that is socially ascribed through the appearance of physical characteristics such as skin



colour, hair texture and facial features. On the other, when officially recorded, it becomes restricted into pre-existing categories, and, ignores many members of Brazilian society. However, they are comparable through the way in which “*while Latin American racism is different from that in the US, it still operates to create significant disadvantage for indigenous and black people as collective categories*” (Wade 2008: 182). Despite Gilberto Freyre’s notion of *racial democracy* as seen in *Casa-grande e Senzala* (1933), it is evident that issues related to racism and inequality in Brazil play a dominant role in everyday life. Like Brazil, the Dominican Republic also centres of phenotype and colour and like Brazil, “Dominicans describe race with a plethora of colour-coded terms: ‘*coffee, chocolate, cinnamon and wheat*’” (Howard 2001: 3), with *indigeno/a* being preferred as a means by which to avoid *mulata* and *negra*. This is a product of the overarching Anti-Haitian sentiment and the negation of blackness that is so dominant amongst Dominicans. The complexity of racial dynamics in the Dominican Republic contributes to its problematic and somewhat perplexing nature, providing fertile ground for a comparison with Brazil. Torres-Saillant (1999: 27) has described the Dominican concept of race as having a certain “elasticity”, which sums of questions of racial identification in both Dominican and Brazilian terms, perfectly.

Afro-Brazilian female identity is exceedingly complex and is located at a complicated intersection within the Brazilian colour continuum. Ethnographic data has been collected in order to survey the question of racial classification and identity in Brazil, however, it must be done in a way that facilitates the open discussion of self-identification, and challenges the pre-ascribed identities from which people are to choose. Previously, the Brazilian government has collected data based on colour and gender as separate entities,

ignoring them as two elements that are not only intersectional, but also dominant contributors to the experiences of Afro-Brazilian women and the ways in which they choose to identify themselves. At this time, black women in Brazil remained relatively invisible in terms of its official data, as their status was only partially documented. Afro-Brazilian women's writing functions as a platform for the re-evaluation of collective and individual elements of multiple Black female identities in the African diaspora in Brazil. Through poetry and prose, Black Brazilian women writers have created a weapon against marginalization based on their diaspora, gender and racial identities, all of which contribute to their pre-ascribed subaltern positions in society. The reconfiguration of body and voice as a way in which to reclaim the Afro-Brazilian woman's place in the official history of Brazil is central to the selected corpus of works.

It was only in the 2010 census undertaken by the Instituto Brasileiro de Geografia e Estatística (IBGE), that Afro-Brazilians were seen as the majority for the first time, with 50.7% of the population self-identifying as being black or mixed-race. The complexities of race in Brazil are further enhanced by the way in which when asked how they would classify their skin colour or race, (without being given categories to choose from), there were approximately 134 different classifications recorded. However, the intricacy of questions of race extends beyond what is demonstrated through the Brazilian census, as terms such as *negro/a* are in fact excluded. This demonstrates a continuation of the reluctance to identify oneself as *negro/a* as a consequence of the negative connotations that it implies, reinforcing the significance of all four writers self-identifying as *mulheres negras*. They ignore classifications such as *preta* or *parda*, which would have been the options from which they had to choose. The notion of becoming a *mulher negra* therefore

involves a subjective process of accepting blackness, avoiding engagement with practices of racial dis-identification.

The notion of black consciousness is a concept that is experiencing ongoing growth in Brazil, despite its status as a country that has historically taught *afro-descendentes* to negate their African ancestry and to avoid identifying themselves using terms indicative of mixture, such as *moreno/a* or *mulata*. Writers like Miriam Alves, Esmeralda Ribeiro and Conceição Evaristo are now considered mainstream Afro-Brazilian writers, and are consequently contributing to an increase in the acceptance of African heritage through political literature which engages with the intersectionality of gender, race and class. Alves states that before anything else, black literature “*valorizes the actions of the anonymous Brazilian...removing the mask of invisibility from her existence*” (*Enfim..Nós*: 18). Consequently, the selected works act as a form of political protest that brings the reality of *a questão da mulher negra* to the forefront and affirms visibility for Afro-Brazilian women of the past, the present and the future.

Here, we can draw direct parallels to attitudes towards Dominican blackness, as “*Dominican society is the cradle of blackness in the Americas*” (Torres-Saillant: 1). As discussed in chapter one, European and indigenous heritages in the Dominican Republic are preferable, and Dominican nationalism and questions of race and nation are constructed with respect to Haiti. They are built upon a profound rejection of both *negritud* and African ancestry. The Dominican Republic is also characterized by a very complex and contradictory racial imaginary, enabling us to draw almost identical parallels to Brazil. The Dominican continuum of skin colour does not fall into clearly divided categories either, and is further complicated by the way in which the colour aesthetic is dominated by a white

bias, indicative of positive characteristics which are then juxtaposed with the underlying negative portrayal of blackness. In the Dominican Republic, the categorization of colour is very much a question of subjectivity. Each individual has their own way of categorizing people by colour, which ultimately contributes to the multiple nature of ideas in terms of who is *branco/a*, *mulato/a* or *negro/a*. Without a clear means of categorization, race, when discussed in terms of aesthetics, perhaps provokes more questions than it answers. This is unquestionably linked to the negation of blackness in Brazil we have seen previously.

Afro-Brazilian identity is not only complex but also both multiple and contestatory. The ways in which it is performed by the Black Brazilian woman's body and transferred through her voice in an attempt to relocate herself and rework her place in the official history of Brazil will be explored through literary analysis. As highlighted by Spellers (2003), in assuming agency, these women writers "*create an opportunity for our stories to be heard and to be meaningful in a context that has traditionally negated their significance*" (240). Before discussing the complexity of Afro-Brazilian female identity construction, it is essential that we situate this identity within the notion of blackness, or *negritude*, in the US, Latin America and specifically, Brazil. "*Although Brazil has much more in common with other Latin-American countries, such as Cuba and Venezuela [...] Brazilian racial politics is still predominantly compared to that of the United States*" (Pinho, 2006: 2). Race in Latin America has almost always been defined in opposition to the ways in which race is seen, understood, classified and experienced in the US. The US notion of the "one drop" rule is most definitely not applicable to Latin America, in particular Brazil, where as seen previously, race is an exceedingly complex concept, based on a constant conflict between ideas of *mestizaje* and *racial democracy*.

A number of scholars (Hale 1999; Wade 2004) are aware of the coexistence of racism and *mestizaje* in Latin America (or *mestiçagem*, in Brazil), as a ‘third space’ (Bhabha, 1994). It is within this space that these texts will be situated and analysed. Not only is the notion of *mestizaje* or *mestiçagem* key to the understanding of Latin American concepts of race, it is also existent in the Caribbean and manifests itself in the notion of *creolization*. This mixture is very complex and is made up of two distinctive ideas. *Mestizaje* functions as more than just a “nation-building ideology” (Wade, 2005: 239), and its specificity marks it as the dominant racial discourse. This contributes to the devaluation of both blackness and indigenusness, in addition to offering a space within which blackness and indigenusness can be reaffirmed and traditional notions of racial categorization and distribution of power can be deconstructed (Wade 2008; Goldberg 2009). This “third space”, developed by Bhabha (1994), as discussed with referencing to the merging and clashing of Dominicanness and Americanness in chapter one, ultimately disturbs already established colonial binaries of power and the means of racial categorization. At the same time, it destabilises traditionalist and stereotypical ideas about race, facilitating the repositioning of black women in contemporary Brazil.

From the 1980’s onwards, along with the emergence of a feminist movement in Brazil, these Afro-Brazilian women have resisted the concept of racial democracy by their emphasis on existing imbalances and marginalization of Black women in Brazil (Rinhaug: 2012). As stated by Báez (see chapter one), “*I am Black, Black is my colour*”. This is vital to the discussion of racial identification, in this context self-identifying as black as a form of resistance. These Black Brazilian women writers offer a new site of exploration of self-identification, self-affirmation and the relationship between the body and belonging. This

concept will come to form a major part of this discussion, as citizenship because of race and phenotypical traits is essential to the understanding of contemporary Brazilian society and politics. Alves, Celinha, Ribeiro and Evaristo use their writing as a way in which to demonstrate alternative views and responses to oppression in addition to challenging the conventional and homogenous passivity that has long been attributed to Afro-Brazilian woman. Ultimately, their writing becomes the aforementioned ‘third space’ within which the black female diasporic subject comes to renegotiate and reimagine her multiple and conflicting identities.

### **Afro-aesthetics**

“Theorising gender and beauty always requires attention to the central role of notions of ‘race’ in framing how beauty is understood and experienced” (Figueroa and Rivers-Moore, 2013: 131). A focus on this understanding is essential to the study of Latin America and the Caribbean, in addition to its formation as an underlying socio-political framework. *Afro-aesthetics*, a term employed as a way in which to describe a number of elements that come together to produce a black beauty that is based on an ideal of Africanness as opposed to Eurocentrism, occupies a central role within discussions of beauty, black bodies and black consciousness. In Brazil, it occupies the role of creator of a black culture, politics and aesthetics based on the black body that are all specific to the nation. Eurocentric aesthetic standards have permeated Brazil and Afro-aesthetics provide scope for challenging and deconstructing this. Not only is it a means by which to encourage ideas of positive black beauty, but also “*a realm for protesting racism and displaying black consciousness*” (Pinho, 2010: 126). This reinforces the notion of “becoming black”

(*tornar-se negro*), as being a process of identity construction of manipulation, as will be discussed later in this chapter.

*“The idea of racial fluidity in the colour continuum as a way of identifying racial groups as colour categories is an important point of contention in studies of Brazilian race relations”* (Farfán-Santos, 2016: 63). Appearance is not only a principal dictator of race in Brazil, but it evidently has great implications for Afro-Brazilian women’s processes of identity construction. As we have discussed with reference to the Dominican Republic, physical appearance is favoured over ancestry or lineage in terms of defining and identifying who is black in Brazil. We must acknowledge the complexity of having to survive oppressive structures of race, class and gender at the same time as transcending them. It can be observed that opposed to identifying with racial and ethnic groups, many Brazilians in fact dis-identify with them in an attempt to avoid classifications that carry connotations indicative of inferiority; most commonly the negation of African heritage and blackness. This is a result of the fact that in Brazil, race structures social relations of power. The way in which the selected authors openly identify themselves as *mulheres negras* is of great significance. The idea of the construction of the *mulher negra* in Brazil raises key questions with regards to the acceptance of blackness. Appearance is indicative of the continual invisibility of Afro-Brazilian women in Brazil and forms a major part of Brazilian class and social constructs. *“The Brazilian notion of tornar-se negro represents the need to gain awareness of one’s black identity by assuming an attitude of pride towards an African inheritance, and refuting the dishonour associated with blackness”* (Nuttall, 283). As explored by Josefina Báez in chapter one, the notion of becoming is most

definitely an ongoing process and in many cases, may never resolve itself. Afro-Brazilian poetry and short prose written by women works towards this resolution.

Performances of femininity are further complicated by the racialized body and negative racial perceptions of skin colour, specifically those considered to be *negras* or *pretas*. Following the establishment of a stronger black women's voice and more effective activism, Brazilian society began to offer products which were labelled specifically for "Afro" hair and skin, alongside clothes and accessories that were described as "Afro", contributing to an evident change in self-image and for many people who had been taught that they should be ashamed of their bodies. This marked a turning point in terms of self-acceptance and dignity. This notion enabled Afro-Brazilians to gain a certain element of "control" of their blackness and has contributed to the visibility and influence of afro-aesthetics in everyday life.

This encouragement of feelings of positivity and acceptance is mirrored in the 1960s "Black is Beautiful" movement, in America. The "Black is Beautiful" dictum functioned as a means by which to dispel the engrained ideas that natural black features such as hair texture, skin colour, nose and lip shape, are inherently "ugly", working towards educating blacks about their own place in society. The overall aim was to combat the sense of internalized racism that dominated the lives of black people, women in particular, as a result of the way in which society condemned blackness as being dirty, ugly and repulsive. These movements can be linked to the Brazilian *Quilombhoje* group which offered black women the opportunity to express their learned sense of freedom, self-acceptance and natural beauty through engagement in political activism, literature and the publication of *Cadernos Negros*.



By inserting questions of identity, processes of identity construction and body aesthetics into wider questions of justice and citizenship we can begin to develop an understanding of the positive correlation between physicality and national belonging in Brazil. “*In Brazil as in many other nation-states, individuals whose bodies deviate from the body type of the ideal citizen-subject are commonly forced into a position of subaltern citizenship*” (Caldwell, 2007: 106). This society revolves around ascribed identities, class, race and social classification. The body and its inscriptions are at the heart of the way in which this society works, deeming it impossible to address Brazilian social or political constructs without involving or provoking questions of corporeality. As Brazilian society privileges whiteness, politically and intellectually, black bodies are generally written into inferior positions. Celinha’s poem, “*Cantiga*”, is essential to the discussion of the black Brazilian female body in history as it examines the condition of the ex-slave, trapped by ‘*as cordas, as correntes e os açoites*’, whilst acting as a means of recovering the memory of the oppression and abuse experienced by slaves through the metaphorical act of braiding hair:

*“Trançar teus cabelos negra, é / Recordar canções / Ardentes dos dias de sol e das frias Noites nos tempos. Tran / çar teus cabelos tal qual / As cordas, as correntes e os açoites, é / Sentir nas mãos o acalanto do vento. / É traçar as linhas / do mapa de uma nação / É escrever em tua cabeça / uma negra canção”.*

Hair is never a straightforward biological ‘fact’ because it is almost always groomed, prepared, cut, concealed and generally ‘worked upon’ by human hands. (Mercer 1994: 34). Hair is inextricably linked to *identidade negra*: “*O uso de tranças é uma técnica corporal que acompanha a história do negro desde a África*”, and many women “*fazem-no na tentativa de romper com os estereótipos do negro descabelado e sujo*” (Gomes, 2017).

Black hair is one of the multiple inscriptions that can be found on the black female body and complicates the notion of black beauty. Not only is hair central to questions of racial classifications and expressions of blackness in Brazil, it is also both highly visible and highly political. According to Kobena Mercer, “*Black people’s hair has been historically devalued as the most visible stigmata of blackness, second only to skin*” (1994: 101), and contributes to their historical degradation and invisibility. In *Cantiga*, the significance of the metaphorical act of hair braiding functions as a means by which to remember ex-slaves and to rebuild her connections to the past, and it is evident here that hair is indicative of deep questions of race and ancestry, tracing the “*mapa de uma nação*”. This moment of hair braiding resonates with the marked bodies that I discussed in chapter two, as Fe Verdejo is a living archive whose history and ancestors were mapped onto her body. Hair in this context is indicative of origin and place in history and I will use this thread in order to explore the significance of the politics of hair for Brazilians; women in particular. Mercer (1994) identifies black hair styles as political as opposed to situating them within the dichotomy of good/bad hair. This poem explicitly locates the cultural act of braiding hair within both the historical context of slavery in Brazil, and the notion of *Beleza Negra*. Mariane Ferme (2001) associates the cultural practice of plaiting hair with historical moments in Mende culture in West Africa, stating that: “It inscribed the history of the moment of women’s bodies, as styles took on the name of events or popular icons on the national or global scene” (58). She observes that the process of plaiting hair between women is a cultural practice that can be observed on a daily basis in public places and identifies hair as a means of “concealment and elaboration”. Not only could women braid things into their hair, they could also use it to hide the aforementioned sense of so-called

“ugliness”. Traditionally, these styles were hidden underneath a type of hair wrap, which also doubled-up as a means by which to hide their hair when it was left ‘natural’ and un-styled, as this was deemed unacceptable. Today, weaves and extensions are frequently used to add length and shine to hair that does not conform to the images that are seen as “good hair”. These practices of hair styling would perhaps be considered as more ‘unnatural’.

In the discussion of black hair and Afro-aesthetics, Shirley Anne Tate identifies race as being “performative” (2009: 7); an idea that forms an ongoing thread throughout the poems and texts studied throughout this dissertation. Evidently, a number of competing definitions of what is “beautiful” are played out through black hair, skin and facial features, all of which can be manipulated or “performed” in a variety of ways by the individual. Hair is one of the many inscriptions on the black body that contribute to the complexity of *Beleza Negra* and, challenges the normalizations of beauty. It is stylization that makes black beauty performative (Tate, 2015). “*Trançar*” is an act of styling that Celinha uses not only as a cultural reference, but also as a means by which to ‘act out’ or ‘perform’ notions of black beauty. The debates between the concepts of “natural” and “unnatural” beauty were charged by The Black Power Movement, which introduced a redefinition of blackness in the 1960s and 1970s. “Afro hairstyles (‘the natural’) became associated with political change and Black self-love/knowledge” (Weekes, 1997).

“*The only authentic black hairstyles would be dreadlocks, afro, cane-row and plaits*” (Tate, 2007: 303), as they are the only styles recognised as natural. That is to say, without the use of synthetic hair or practices such as straightening, perming or relaxing. *Cantiga* discusses the ‘natural’ stylization of and performance of blackness in referring to the

cultural practice of *'trançar cabelos'*. Celinha associates this metaphorical act with the history of her ancestors, during which hair and the aesthetics of beauty were of great social significance. In 15<sup>th</sup> century Africa, black hair and the ways in which it was styled was indicative of social class and occupation. For example, slaves working on plantations or undertaking other manual labour tasks; 'field slaves' would most commonly hide their hair, whereas house slaves would wear wigs similar to their owners (Thompson, 2009). Hair is therefore a signifier of superiority/inferiority and is key to the discussion of class and belonging.

Questions of hair, skin and *Afro-aesthetics* are also predominant in Alves's *Trapos e Nudez*, as it is when the poetic voice states that her *negritude* '*inteira*' reveals her '*pelos*' and '*pele*', exposing her and '*chocando o mundo*'. The way in which she has lost her '*farrapos*' (as demonstrated below), is representative of her being stripped of her defences and means of resistance, leaving her '*desnuda*' and in turn, '*muda*'. In losing both '*roupas*' and '*farrapos*', all that is left is her natural self; a woman that she no longer recognises because of how long she has spent in 'disguise'. This lack of connection to her natural being is essential the discussion of the complexities of identity formation for Afro-Brazilian women as it is demonstrative of her weakness without a means of resistance and the extent to which many black women go in order to conform to the Eurocentric ideals of beauty that have dominated Brazil for decades. Here, the use of hair styling acts as a form of protection from a society that generally looks down upon the wearing of natural hair. The poetic voice is 'shocking' the world as her disguise has been torn from her, and what is left is the truth. The clothing and stylization that she used to disguise her blackness are no longer and her natural self has been revealed. This loss reinforces the cultural and

political significance of hair and skin, which resonates even more strongly in a Brazilian context.

Miriam Alves' poems, alongside those of other women writers who joined her in forming part of *Quilombhoje*, work to deconstruct and redefine this "locus" in order to reposition black Afro-Brazilian women in contemporary society. This desire for change is evident in the repeated use of: "*Recomponho-me*". *Compor, decompor, recompor* perhaps reveals a more vulnerable and sensitive side to this female collective as the poetic voice looks for reconciliation for her conditions as female and black. She observes the ways in which these bodies were not only abused and mutilated during slavery, but also identifies elements of what can be described as a form of self-mutilation, that also exists and is predominant in the present day; "*para aproximá-la da estética branca alienígena à sua feição natural*". She engages with the way in which black Afro-Brazilian women are very much on the margins on society and consequently, excluded from the national aesthetic. They do not comply with the desired body aesthetic, as discussed by Caldwell (2007), and her works work to challenge this aesthetic and ultimately relocate Afro-Brazilian women within dominant discourses of beauty.

Studying the black female body comparatively in both Latin America and the Caribbean offers a fruitful opportunity to explore the significance of the intersection of gender with race, class and nation. To enhance the discussion further and complicate notions of racial identity for these women, Esmeralda Ribeiro's short story *Ogun* provides an excellent point for both contrast and comparison. *Ogun* addresses the dual impact of race and gender through the introduction of a mulata protagonist, who whole heartedly denies her blackness and the social conditions that come with it. Ribeiro utilizes her protagonist, Mariana

Cesário, to engage in a discussion of the embodiment of doubts, denials and identity crises that are very much present in the lives of many young Afro-Brazilian women. Mariana is an archetypal Brazilian woman, caught up in an internal conflict with her own blackness, but consequently gaining social mobility and to a certain extent, social acceptance. This short story reminds the reader of the consequences of racial stereotyping in terms of it being a contributing factor to the extent of the failure to mobilize black political activism. Initially, she rejects the black identity that she embodies but comes to accept her “ugly” and supposedly undesirable features.

*Ogun* provides a number of rich points of contrast and comparison with works by Alves, Celinha and Evaristo. Ribeiro discusses the status of Afro-Brazilians and uses Mariana as a way in which to enhance the discussion of questions of blackness and acceptance, enabling the reader to engage with a literary representation of the effects and consequences of “non-existent” racial classifications and skin colours. Her engagement in the manipulation of her own blackness and black aesthetics plays into the hands of one of the principal questions addressed in this chapter and is communicated through the political notion of black hair.

Hair occupies a central role in *Ogun* as it is ultimately what leads Mariana to physically and aesthetically confirm the denial of her blackness. The denial of her own African heritage is the result of the inherent rejection of blackness by her loved ones, most notably her boyfriend, her brother and her parents. It is her family and the society in which she lives that influence her choices and feelings towards herself. This ultimately leads to her self-identification as occupying the role of the “ugly” black woman, emerging from comments made by her family about her *cabelo ruim*. This leads her to take it upon herself

to straighten it in an attempt to disassociate herself with her black heritage; something that is still very prominent for the same reasons: “*when she was a teenager [...] her mother would grab her hair so strongly as if trying to pull it out, and would shout at her: “Fix up this ugly hair. And stop trying with this business of black hair”*”. Her hair then became “*long, smooth*” and “*enviable*”. Ultimately, this becomes the root of her issues with her own blackness, and the evident rejection by both her family and society itself provokes questions with regards to the Other. As she does not and cannot comply with Eurocentric beauty ideals, she learns to hate her condition as a black woman as for her it means rejection, inferiority and ugliness. As a means by which to combat these issues she takes to styling it as close as possible to European ideals in order to feel accepted and somewhat acceptable.

There is not a straightforward *happy ending*; an element of Ribeiro’s writing that is indicative of the never-ending process of identity formation that has been discussed previously, and the issues that come hand-in-hand with the concept of *tornar-se negro/a*. This phrase is about gaining awareness of one’s own black identity through pride of their African heritage. Pinho (2006) sees the creation of an afro-aesthetics in Brazil and other Black Atlantic diasporic communities as a major component of the movement in which blacks took control of the production of blackness. The identity of Ribeiro’s poetic voice is at its most complete through the acceptance of her own blackness and engagement with black aesthetics, but remains turbulent and conflictive. She uses aesthetic manipulation in order to achieve upward social mobility, having “*straightened her hair as never before*” and “*followed strict diets to keep thin*”, in order to improve her chances of being selected as the successful candidate for a new job. Ribeiro uses the challenges associated with black

aesthetics as a means by which to engage in questions of blackness, acceptance and social mobility for Afro-Brazilians, confirming that it is not only traumatic, but also emotionally scarring.

As explored in the previous chapter, pain, whether it is metaphorical or symbolic is integrally connected to the body and has been inflicted on these particular bodies for many years. When discussing the Black woman's experience in Brazil it is impossible not to address this question as it forms an inherent part of their history. This section will address Celinha's *Negritude* and *Fumaça* by Miriam Alves, exploring the ways in which pain is written onto the female body in these works. Alves's *Fumaça* presents *o corpo negro feminino* as a territory within which concepts of identity and representation are inscribed. The body that this poem presents is one that incorporates the notion of pain as both a physical or perhaps biological trauma as well as a metaphoric and symbolical pain felt by Afro-Brazilian women and their histories. In writing the body as a site which embodies both *dor* and *luta*, Alves not only challenges historical ideals about the black female position in Brazilian society but also presents them as "*colocando-se como vozes autorizadas para falar de suas sensações e percepções*" (Souza, 2006: 340). Although "*doem as pernas, os pés*", reflecting the forced physical labour to which her enslaved ancestors were subjected, the use of *voar* and *indagar* is representative of the black woman's body that can at last live freely. The suggestion made by the ending of the poem: "*Indago, mas não estou escutando / a pergunta anda solta / e ninguém explicou / que a resposta sou eu*", indicates that in order to achieve a change in perspective, albeit cultural, social or political, it is the poetic voice, indicative of Afro-Brazilian women as a collective



that will have to fight for it. This collective tone dominates throughout the poem and the establishment of *movimentos negros feministas* in Brazil is also a step in this direction.

**Stereotypes: *mães pretas e mulatas***

Black women in Brazil have long been written into roles of mothers, wives, *mães pretas* and *mulatas*. Literature by Afro-Brazilian women writers actively fights to combat this, with the aim of rewriting these women into official Brazilian history.

*“De mim  
parte um canto guerreiro  
um voo rasante, talvez rumo norte  
caminho trilhado da cana-de-açúcar  
ao trigo crescido, pingado de sangue  
do corte do açoite. Suor escorrido  
da briga do dia  
que os ventos do sul e o tempo distante não podem ocultar”.*

Celinha’s *Negritude* calls for the collective black consciousness that has long been absent in Brazilian society, retracing the physical suffering of black people in the Sugar Cane culture, through the use of a dominant tone of protest.

A link can be drawn back to the discussion of the significance of gender and the importance of being a woman in a society like that of Brazil, which has almost always been dominated by debates about race and identity. The concept of physically giving birth to the notion of *negritude* contributes to the deconstruction and challenging of essentialist ideas of a monolithic black identity and consciousness. Here, the concept of black maternity can be drawn into the discussion through the use of the role of woman as generator of life and the

ongoing theme of maternity as dominant themes in Evaristo's writing. Her poem *Eu Mulher* subverts the image of the Brazilian *mãe preta* or "Mammies" (U.S) of Brazil. The doubly-marginalized position of being both Black and a woman in Brazilian society is addressed by Patricia Hill Collins in her 1990 study, *Black Feminist Thought*, in which she states that "*ideology represents the process by which certain assumed qualities are attached to Black women and how those qualities are used to justify oppression. From the mammies, Jezebels, and breeder women of slavery [...]*" (7). Although she is discussing this issue in a U.S context, it resonates with contemporary Brazilian society, but is rather more complex. The way in which this ideology has maintained these views today has driven Afro-Brazilian women to challenge it, and consequently, their literature comes to form a platform upon which they can do so.

The *mãe preta* was representative of fraternity between blacks and whites in Brazil and consequently, occupies a significant role in terms of the black woman and her (in)visibility. In *E a Trabalhadora Negra, Cumé que Fica?*, Lélia Gonzalez explains that during the early years of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the images of the *mãe preta* and the *mulata*, both of which extend from slavery, inscribed two fixed roles for Afro-Brazilian women into society: as servile domestics or as hypersexual enchantresses. She states that such images as these ensured that black Brazilian women remained in socio-economic positions that were deemed accessible to Brazil's growing white elite. They should therefore be "hidden, invisible, in the kitchen" (Gonzalez: 9); exactly the stereotype that these Afro-Brazilian women writers work to actively contest.

*“De mim*

*Parte N E G R I T U D E*

*Um golpe mortal*

*Negrura rasgando o ventre da noite*

*Punhal golpeando o colo do dia”*

Here, Celinha’s reference to ‘*o ventre*’ further enhances the gendered dimension of the poem as it perhaps suggests that the poetic voice, or the writer, physically gives birth to this ‘*Negritude*’. This also strikes up questions of motherhood, as often, black women were not only responsible for taking on the role of mother to their own children. Instead, the *Mães pretas* were considered no more than servile domestics, a stereotypical role that has been carried from slavery, to the present day, ultimately hindering economic and social opportunities for Afro-Brazilian women. These same stereotypes imposed themselves on the lives of black women in general, rendering them only useful for domestic and labour roles. The consequent racial discourse of the nation placed the Afro-Brazilian woman as the mothers of the Brazil nation. Their role was to be carer to the children of white elite families, however, they also had to be mothers to their own children: the black woman’s “double workday” (Gonzalez 1982: 98). These *mães pretas* ultimately took on a role as surrogate mother, carrying out tasks that would normally be associated with white motherhood. This role is one that is inevitably marked by race, with the stereotypical *mãe preta* being one of undeniable Africanness: dark-skinned, kinky-haired and flat-nosed.

This body is therefore representative of the inherent power of womanhood and maternity, drawing on her multiple identities and triply-marginalized position as black, poor and female. Conceição Evaristo explores the discovery of strength through resistance to

injustices and affirms the possibilities and capabilities embodied by her protagonist, through her identity as a woman. She goes on to challenge the way in which society has written her into this role, and consequently, written her out of society. The poetic voice affirms the Afro-Brazilian woman's black identity and facilitates the redevelopment of Afro-Brazilian womanhood. The black female body plays a vital role here as it facilitates the exploration of this identity:

*“Uma gota de leite / me escorre entre os seios. / Uma mancha de sangue / me enfeita entre as pernas”*. Not only does she occupy an omnipotent role: *“Antevejo. Antecipo. Antes-vivo”*, she also identifies herself as being the *“força-motriz [...] moto-contínuo do mundo”*.

She openly contests the way in which she has been denied her womanhood and sense of maternity and reasserting her essential role as a woman. She tries to reclaim her body and role as a mother, but evidently as mother to her own children, not to those of the white elite. The *“gota de leite”* that she describes as running down her chest emphasises the extent to which the role of the black woman as a wet nurse, servile domestic and *mãe preta* and reasserts her female physicality:

*“Para que a escrava se transformasse em mãe-preta da criança branca, foi-lhe bloqueada a possibilidade de ser mãe de seu filho preto [...] a escrava transformada em ama-de-leite conhece na negação de sua maternidade, a negação de sua condição de mulher. Por paradoxal que pareça, é sua fisiologia feminina- capacidade de lactação- que a contrapõe a realização de sua potencialidade materna”* (Giacomini, 1988: 57-58).

The female voice, silent but very telling, is intrinsic to the discussion of pre-ascribed social roles and feelings of belonging and not belonging. For scholars like Bell Hooks, the voice has a decolonizing function, aiding the process of transformation from object to subject: “*Only as subjects can we speak. As objects we remain voiceless-our beings defined and interpreted by others*” (Talking Back, 12). The voice is central to the discussion of black female processes of subjectivity. Struggle to gain voice is a struggle to gain visibility; a question that is still very much present in Brazil today, where the black population still remains relatively invisible and is negatively stereotyped. Miriam Alves takes this silence and transforms it into a weapon of resistance. Her poem *Trapos e Nudez* challenges pre-ascribed identities and imposed discourses within society through the use of silence as a way in which to resist. Her voice is ‘*rouca*’ and ‘*muda*’ and when she goes to speak, the ‘*coisas tolas [...] caíram no vazio sem eco sem resposta*’. This final stanza reflects the complexity and potential impossibility of voice and articulation as a woman. Her ‘*nudez*’ brings her feelings of shame; often discussed in relation to blackness, further highlighting her invisibility and non-existence. The poetic voice endeavours to use this imposed silence in order to resist the dominant racial and gender discourses that defines her condition as a black woman.

The *roupas* that she refers to throughout the poem are representative of the pre-ascribed identities and discourses to which Afro-Brazilian women were expected to conform. Her resistance and non-conformity and to these oppressive discourses is shown through her *farrapos*, reflecting her refusal to be defined by the institutions and social norms that bind her. The poetic voice is ashamed of her ‘*nudez*’, and the last stanza describes her *negritude* as being “*chocante*”, assuming the role of the exposed body that has been discussed

previously- the body that does not conform to societal expectations or the existing anti-black aesthetic standards. Her struggle to comply is further enhanced by the “*estranha figura decomposta*” that looks back at her in the mirror. The metaphorical significance of this reoccurring mirror is perhaps representative of the difficulty and pain that is endured by Afro-Brazilian women in order to try to engage in a process of identity construction. Here we see the complexity of her condition, magnified: “*Olhei no espelho e não vi meus olhos*” Even to her, the woman that she sees in the mirror is unrecognisable, perhaps because in stripping her of her *farrapos* she looks like a stranger, even to her own eyes. Without these, she is forced to accept pre-ascribed identities and existing stereotypes.

Evaristo’s *Vozes Mulheres* uses these voices as a way in which to communicate collective memory, marked by the embodiment of history and ancestry. This poem uses the past, the present, and the future as a way in which to discuss the status of black Brazilian women- what was the case in the past, is very much the same in the present and potentially the future. “*A voz de minha bisavó/ecoou criança/nos porões do navio*”. The voice forms a central part of the discussion as she combines the personal and collective nature of the Afro-Brazilian woman’s condition. Although addressing the recovery of her own family history, the poetic voice is symbolic of Afro-Brazilian women as a collective. She starts with her great-grandmother, reliving the moment she was brought to the New World as a slave woman, whilst mourning “*uma infância perdida*”, followed by her grandmother, also enslaved, “*ecoou obediência*”, tending to her white master’s every need.

Evaristo contributes an element of socio-economic commentary within her poetry. She herself was born into an impoverished favela in Belo Horizonte, and weaves the challenges that she encountered as a child into her writing. The mention of the *favela* in *Vozes*

*Mulheres* raises the question of: “where else?”, indicative of the inferior status that was automatically written into the lives of Afro-Brazilian women. They would not usually have the financial means to be able to live anywhere else. It can be argued that for Evaristo, the favela could represent a modern-day *senzala*- dirty, impoverished and dominated by injustice. The way in which the poetic voice’s mother whispers “*no fundo das cozinhas alheias/ debaixo das trouxas roupagens sujas dos brancos*” is once again representative of the stereotypical role of the servile domestic that is inherent in the image of the black woman, her voice still “*baixinho*”. Finally, the *filha* embodies all of these silent voices: “*mudas caladas / engasgadas nas gargantas*”, and will ultimately use them and the collective female voice inside her, to contest the oppressive nature of Brazilian society and to fight for her freedom in hope of a future Brazil that will not condemn her for the history that she embodies, nor the colour of her skin.

This chapter has situated the political body as written by Miriam Alves, Celinha, Esmeralda Ribeiro and Conceição Evaristo within the context of Brazil, engaging with ideas on the politics and classifications of race and Afro-aesthetics. Through the application of the concept of Brazilian Afro-aesthetics and the body politic, it has analysed the way in which the selected corpus of Afro-Brazilian poetry can be read through the body in order to address complex questions of identity construction. By cross-referencing the Caribbean and a diverse selection of writers within the Brazilian context, I have ensured that this chapter has taken both a comparative and transnational approach. It has demonstrated that questions of racism are still very much present in modern day Brazil, as well as exceedingly complex notions of racial identification based on physical appearance. Although there has been an increase in the number of people that identify themselves as

being Afro-Brazilian, there is still a significant amount of stigma surrounding racial self-identification. Through the analysis of works by black Brazilian women writers, this section has established the continual importance of the black female body, black looks and black women's literary production as a means of resistance. The Afro-Brazilian woman's body has been identified as both encompassing the multiple conflicts that have contributed to their invisibility, in addition to embodying the strength and intellectual ability to combat this. This body reasserts itself through literature and political activism, succeeding in its attempts to reposition itself in the history of Brazil.



## CONCLUSION

The main source of oppression for both black and brown women is their bodies. Through the examination of the black experience in the Hispanic Caribbean, Brazil and the diaspora in the United States, it is possible to relocate black women within dominant identity discourses. This thesis has contributed to a dynamic field of research which aims towards a new cross-Caribbean feminist consciousness that locates black and brown women within official histories. I have examined literature, film and performance texts by black and mixed-race writers as vehicles for the redefinition of migrating, marked and politicised bodies, all of which offer an essential contribution to the exploration of the overall question of the black experience.

The main purpose of this thesis has been to show the means through which women's bodies serve as both a site of oppression and an opportunity for resistance. I have drawn Hispanic Caribbean and Brazilian cultural products into feminist discourses, and demonstrated the ways in which the corporeal works towards suggestions of how history could be rewritten. In drawing these contexts into feminist discussions, my thesis has filled a gap by striking up a discourse between black feminism, the Hispanic Caribbean and Brazil. The female black experience is often discussed with reference to the United States and the Anglophone Caribbean, but I identified a distinct lack of scholarship that locates the Spanish-speaking Caribbean and Brazil in the same discussion. Although these contexts are not often studied alongside each other, I saw this as an opportunity to develop a panorama of Caribbean and Brazilian black experiences and to open up a place for these experiences as generators or embodied knowledge.

Questions of migration, race and gender politics alongside power relations have been shown to play a dominant role in contemporary society on a global scale, and scholarship in these areas is more relevant than ever. By taking abused bodies and marginalised identities and giving them a voice and a space within which to express or “write” themselves, I have demonstrated the necessity for a new cross-Caribbean feminist consciousness if we are to achieve a writing of these bodies and identities within progressive discourses of power. In contexts where race is an exceedingly complex issue, feminist scholarship offers an intricate analysis of the different possibilities of body use, and makes suggestions as to how history could be rewritten.

Each chapter has mapped a different point across the Caribbean and Brazil in order to reveal and examine the ways in which black and mixed-race bodies can be inserted into dominant national discourses of race, gender and sexuality. Displacement, border crossing and both the physical and psychological negotiations that come hand-in-hand with them have been identified as central to the experiences of black women and their embodiment of history and legacy. Literary analysis has facilitated an exploration into the realities of notions of exclusion, home and inbetweenness across the Caribbean and Brazil, locating migrating, marked and political bodies at the core of the black experience.

Questions of sexuality have been paramount in presentations of embodiment and black and mixed-race women’s sexuality has been presented in several different forms; showing the abuse of women’s sexuality in moments of slavery, in addition to women using their sexual potential as a means of self-empowerment. These different images and presentations of sexuality have been identified as a means by which to locate sexualised black women within feminist and black feminist discourses for various reasons which do not always

complement each other. Sexuality and the corporeal have been demonstrated as essential to the study of transatlantic women's histories, and function as a vehicle that will drive future scholarship in this area.

The tone of collective protest that runs throughout all the works that have been discussed in this thesis has been key to the challenging of systems which write black and mixed-race women out of dominant and official national histories. Each of the writers, performers and director have brought questions of visibility/invisibility to the surface and worked to reveal the ways in which they can be challenged. The body has been at the heart of the select corpus of works and not only has it relived experiences of displacement, violation and political protest, it has used the different forms of the embodiment of history to offer several suggestions as to how history could potentially be rewritten.

The corporeal is an invaluable lens through which to examine complex and conflictive histories of race, gender, sexuality and slavery, and by exploring how history is embodied across time and place, we can relocate historically abused and marginalised women outside the realms of oppression within which they are usually placed. This thesis has worked to contribute to the protest the lack of agency for black and brown women across Hispanic Caribbean and Brazilian contexts, through the study of texts that voice black women's experience across history and across borders. I have worked to give a voice to those who have long been and remain invisible. Although this thesis has only scratched the surface of these issues, I hope it provides scope for further scholarship and exploration of a new cross-Caribbean feminist consciousness. By taking a cross-border approach, I have provided an insight into the importance of the body and Caribbean feminisms if we are to see these bodies outside of the realms of exploitation and oppression.

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