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Decolonizing Ghosts: Gender, the Body and Violence in *Whole of a Morning Sky* by Grace Nichols

> One must see at first what does not let itself be seen …
> [T]hus to think the body without the body of this invisible visibility
> [means that] the ghost is already taking shape …
> (Jacques Derrida, *Specters of Marx*)

The first novel by the Caribbean poet and writer Grace Nichols, *Whole of a Morning Sky* (1986), explores the experience of the Walcott family, in the colony of British Guiana, in the late fifties and early sixties, back in the twentieth century.[1] The family moves from Highdam, a rural community, "a bit clannish and unruly", to Georgetown, an urban community "both unpleasant and disturbing ... [a] blending of contrast of the old and dilapidated beside the new and elegant", with all the conflicts that this entails: gender, racial, political, social and cultural relations arising from myth and legends, sexual, social and political violence in a period that preceded the country's independence from British domination, in 1966, when it became Guyana (*WMS,* 5, 41).

For this essay my intention is to present a reading of the novel in which I examine the theme of the ghost in relation to the main characters' approach to the body, which can be understood as a *locus* where its invisible presence is mostly felt. Such a disturbing presence appears in association with the attempt to obtain control over the political, social and sexual bodies of the novel.

In *Whole of a Morning Sky*, the writer builds separate but interrelated stories which are demarcated physically by the formatting of the text. This technique displays subtle differences between the various narratives that compose the story, especially the adolescent Gem's, and that of her parents, Clara and Archie Walcott. The novel has 36 chapters with parallel narratives, 19 of which are numbered and this distinguishes them from the other unnumbered narratives. The numbered episodes are intercalated by the girl's narrative that retell the Walcott's story. Graphically the right hand margin of Gem's narrative is totally irregular and it is as if Gem's story were a ribbon that one interlaces in a dress so as to show its finish. Unlike the other narratives, Gem's lack of borders may imply that their demarcation belongs to the future. In her narrative it can be said that the author illustrates the individual body, the unique identity of a country beginning to fend for herself. The other narratives lead to the collective body of the country.

It is possible to see a certain similarity between *Whole of a Morning Sky* and the novel *As doze cores do vermelho* by Brazilian writer Helena Parente

[1] Grace Nichols, *Whole of a Morning Sky* (London: Virago 1995). Hereafter indicated as *WMS*. I would like to thank Simonetta de Filippis, from "L'Orientale" Naples University, Italy, and Terry Gifford, from Chichester University, U.K., for being second readers to this essay. Their suggestions have been invaluable.

Cunha.[2] In her "Preface" to the second edition of the Brazilian novel, published in 1998, Rita Schmidt explains the three angles that demarcate the building of the narrative, and talks about its three columns: the first one, in the left margin of the page, refers to the past of the protagonist; the second one, in the centre of the page, narrates the present, and the third column, in the margin on the right hand side of the page, deals with the projections for the character's future. What interests us is a possible parallel between the second column, in the centre of the page, of Cunha's novel, and Gem's narrative, in Nichol's novel. According to Schmidt, in this centre angle, that "is concentrated in the present life",

> there is an omniscient narrator, in the third person, who maintains, at the same time, a complicity and a distancing in relation to the narrated subject, for she refers to the protagonist in terms of a "you", a pronoun that invokes the presence of an interlocutor, which evokes the epistolary genre, situated within the text but also outside it, in the sense that such a form of reference presupposes an interaction between text/non text, emissary/reader. (9-10) (My translation)

Schmidt's explanation may be transposed to Gem's irregular narrative. Everything is narrated in relation to a "you", as though the narrator, the girl herself, were facing an interlocutor, for whom she retells her individual story, within the main narrative, through her child's eyes.

The numbered narrative is composed of a central story, that of the Walcott family, and from this story, many others are told. It is here that the lives of other characters are introduced by means of the intercalated stories and of intermixing voices, as the language borders dilute the distance between the many stories and at the same time demarcate the construction of the linguistic identity of the people of Guyana.[3] These narratives adopt the point of view of an adult narrator who is omniscient and capable of embracing the female characters defending them against any male offense, as occurs to Clara Walcott on several occasions. The various pictures presented are photographs of the reality of those who get along with the Walcott family. One of the crucial themes for the weaving of the novel is the body and its gender differences revealed through the literary representation of the problem of violence involving men and women, also including children.

The body is to be understood here also as a *locus* both of power and of coercive practices, all of them associated with patriarchy. The theme of the body will be analysed from the perspective of feminism associated with ecofeminism. Elizabeth Grosz, for instance, in her *Volatile Bodies* (1994), discusses the body as a cultural product and as a signifying medium; it is also a vehicle for expression, for it may codify the meanings projected onto it in sexually determined ways.[4] There is a gender clash between the way the body is seen by male and female characters and the social, cultural

[2] Helena Parente Cunha, *As doze cores do vermelho* (Rio de Janeiro: Editora Espaco e Tempo, Editora Universidade Federal do Rio de Janeiro, 1988).

[3] Nichols mixes the use of standard English (associated with the coloniser) with Creole English, marking a political use of the language (Brathwaite's 'nation language'), which is enriched with words belonging to Guyana. See Ashcroft, Griffiths and Tiffin, eds., *Key Concepts in Post-Colonial Studies* (London and New York: Routledge, 1999)

[4] Elizabeth Grosz, *Volatile Bodies* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1994).

and political context plays a relevant part in their perceptions in Nichols' novel.

Ecofeminist Stacy Alaimo, in turn, defends the redefinition of women and nature as crucial in order to contemplate their "social construction". Thus, concepts such as 'the body', 'nature', 'culture', among others, may be viewed as a space for resistance, and as a place for many a struggle for power and meaning.[5] Alaimo's study of three North American women writers, Fielding Burke, Octavia Butler and Linda Hogan, invokes the body as "a place of vibrant connection, historical memory, and knowledge", and not as "a mute, passive space that signifies the inferior parts of our natures" (126). Such a re-signifying of the body implies a resistance against the conservative and Manichean binarism which separates men and women by associating them with culture and nature respectively, as well as perpetuating the notion of the body as separated from the mind, whose order of importance in the history of society has always been superior.[6] Such a division also reveals a question of power connected with the use of women's bodies in the struggle for domination over a social, sexual and political body. It is here, as we shall see, that the ghost manifests its power against women.

In Nichols's novel, it is the body of women that presents the re-signified connection referred to by Alaimo. Men attempt to exert a relation of power, control (or lack of control) and domination over women's bodies, as well as over the political body in the context of the Guyanese society. My intention is to explore this re-signified connection especially by considering the notion of the ghost as associated with men's attitudes towards the body of women in the narrative, as well as the other forms of control exercised by men in the novel.

1. The Adult Body and Gender Confrontation

> A woman need[s] time alone to regain
> her equilibrium
> (Grace Nichols)

Clara Walcott, one of the protagonists of *Whole of a Morning Sky,* is a black woman, of a fair complexion and "neat features and compact small body", whose family origin is middle class (10). She has abandoned her musical career because of her marriage, "a big and formal event", with Archie Walcott (*WMS,* 19). The piano has accompanied her in her new life as a married woman, signifying by its presence another possible future. However, Clara is a happy woman and her family experience is of the joy of living, for she was brought up in an environment where "nothing but love" (*WMS,* 18) mediated everything. According to Archie, her husband, she had an "easy life" as a child and this has turned her into a "lousy"

[5] For discussions of the theme of resistance and its relation with the body, women and nature see Stacy Alaimo, "'Skin Dreaming': the Bodily Transgression of Fielding Burke, Octavia Butler, and Linda Hogan", in *Ecofeminist Literary Criticism*, ed. by Greta Gaard and Patrick D. Murphy (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1998), 123-138, and Izabel Brandão, "Grace Nichols and the Body as a Poetics of Resistance", *Englishes* 30 (Roma: Pagine, 2006), 71-94.

[6] See Roy Porter, "História do corpo", in *A escrita da história*, ed. by Peter Burke (São Paulo: Ed. UNESP, 1992), and Grosz, *Volatile Bodies*; see also Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality*, vols. 1-3 (New York: Vintage Books, 1985, 1986), for a history of the body according to new historicism, feminism and philosophy.

housewife, a "spendthrift" "lady of leisure", and an "almost irresponsible" mother, due to the freedom allowed to their three children, Dinah, 19 years old, Gem, 12, and Anthony, the youngest. Clara fights Archie back with the support of the omniscient narrator who stresses Clara's care for everything related to the family.

Clara is an intense woman, with strong attitudes, happy and anarchic, capable of playing with her children, who "didn't take after [the father] ... Like their mother, they had no order about them" (*WMS,* 24). Her most important characteristic is her loyalty to those she loves and cares for, and this transforms her into a friendly woman who can give everything she has in order to help. Her best friend, Rose, from Highdam, is a sensitive and is always helping Clara to rid herself of bad spirits.[7] The joy that marks their friendship is a recurring trace in Nichols's works.[8] Archie's perception of Clara shows that "even in times of trouble [Clara and Rose] had preserved a place for laughter" (*WMS,* 154). Her feeling of intimacy with Rose is so strong that between them there is not even any kind of body taboo. This can be seen through Rose's anointing Clara's body under the husband's suspicious, embarrassed and envious eyes. He cannot understand how Clara can be so shameless. And this he justifies by attacking the way she was educated:

> Archie didn't like Clara becoming so familiar with the Highdam people ... Once he walked into the bedroom and found Rose anointing Clara's belly. Rose looked uneasy but went on massaging the soft, purple, creamy flesh which she was treating for narah, her soft expert fingers moving with slow circular motions around the uneven dome, an open bottle of coconut oil beside the bed, and a piece of string which she had used for measuring between Clara's navel and nipples.
> Archie glanced at his wife's face and was surprised to see that it was free from embarrassment. He pursed his lips and left the room, feeling on the edge of all this womanness.
> They would do anything for her, men and women alike. She always had this effect on people … (*WMS,* 10).

The picture shows that men and women have a completely different behavior when the body is concerned. From the male part, expressed through Archie's envy and resentfulness, there is a clear manifestation of his feeling of loss of power in relation to his wife's body. His exclusion from this place, where only a true friendship (such as is Clara and Rose's) may lead to complicity, reveals his impotence both as a man and as a husband. The scene also offers an illustration of Alaimo's notion of women's bodies operating in the sense of knowledge and historical memory. Archie's attitude also suggests a manifestation of the ghost: since its function is to haunt, it always reappears in moments when one is not ready to refuse its influence. Archie is one of the characters who is most prone to be haunted

[7] The supernatural is another relevant theme in the novel, but this essay will only deal with the notion of ghosts in a symbolic sense.

[8] For a detailed analysis of the joy of living of Nichols' women, especially in her poetry, see Brandão, "Grace Nichols and the Body".

by this invisible ghost, and if it were not for Clara's rebuffs, he would be a prey to possession by the ghost, which would turn her life into some kind of hell.

It is also possible to say that since Archie is one of the representatives of the colonial government, due to his post as head-teacher of Highdam Methodist School, his attitude towards Clara (alongside his authoritarian behavior towards the women teachers at the school) suggests the attempt of the coloniser to control the body of the colonial subjects. Such an attitude can be understood as an imperialistic attempt to decide even on the subjects' private lives. Archie's role as the representative of the "British colonial educational system", who "provided for the people", determines his conservative perception of politics and indicates his attachment to the values of the coloniser: "Like Ferreira, [Archie] didn't think that Guiana was at all ready for independence. To cut itself off from the apron strings of the British was to leave the way open for the Russians to walk in" (*WMS,* 4, 34-35). Such conservative values are also oppressive values which go beyond the notion of politics. They become ingrained in one's mind and everything which does not comply with "law and order" has to be punished, in one way or another. Considering the scene under analysis, this leads to the presence of the ghost within the novel, for it is this presence that constitutes the main threat to male integrity; indeed, the control of women is something that patriarchal society has always tried to achieve. And yet, by the same token, if the ghost is given voice through a man, the disruption or disconnection of its power is provided by the women.

In addition to this, a reference to the odour of coconut oil establishes a connection between what Archie sees and his mother. In one of the intercalated narratives of the story, Archie, at the age of 12 (the same age as his daughter Gem), remembers the day that his dead mother saved his life in the fraction of a second:

> One dark rainy night he was doing his housework ... when he heard footsteps coming up the stairs … [A] few moments later he became uneasily aware of another presence in the room. He … sat very still but he could feel the presence behind him ...
> [He] picked up the familiar body odour of his mother, the odour she had after bathing and rubbing her body with coconut oil … After that he knew nothing else …
> A beam in the roof of the house had caved in, falling across the chair where Archie had been sitting. His father …found him lying in a dead faint on the floor, only inches away from the fallen beam which might have killed him if he had remained in his chair. Somebody had been protecting him … (*WMS,* 16-17).

The coconut oil used by Rose to massage his wife's body brings back to Archie the memory of his mother perhaps in some association that he would rather not like to have with his wife.

From the woman's perspective, it is possible to say that in this territory of intimacy built between the two women, the place of feelings of affection and trust becomes clear. Even considering that there is no explicit insinuation of sensuality or eroticism between the women, the inference is that, in a situation in which the female body is massaged, the place of eroticism may be seen as "an affirmation of the vital force of women.[9] The erotic, in this case, is revealed through the reference to a harmonious intimacy between the two women and their bodies. The oblique eye that wants to deny the right to such an intimacy belongs to the male character, for even though Archie feels he 'owns' Clara, he cannot prevent her from relating to whoever she wants to, nor even control any of her impulses towards happiness, laughter and the joy of being.

Archie Walcott's childhood, on the other hand, had been a hard one, as he lost his mother when he was only 12, but "big enough to feel the weight of his loss" (*WMS,* 16). Moreover, his parents were poor, and came from different racial groups: his mother "had a little East Indian blood in her, maybe a little Amerindian too" (*WMS,* 15), and his father was an African. He was a child devoted to his mother and because of this he was considered a 'sissy' at school, a designation he fought hard to dissociate himself from.

When he married Clara, Archie was fifteen years her senior and already a teacher with a clearly defined life of his own. However, the contrast between them is not restricted to age or social differences: Clara's joy of living is opposed by his mean, bitter, conservative personality. His face had a "familiar expression of martyrdom", and the eyes that conquered Clara had an "indescribable quality that had something to do with pain", which always led her to wish to caress him, as though to compensate for the difficulties he had gone through in the past (*WMS,*117, 6). But the lack of physical intimacy outside the bedroom prevented her from acting spontaneously. In such moments she always looked for some kind of subterfuge as for instance when, pretending to dust the wings of a moth from his shoulders, she would touch his face affectionately. For their children he was an honest man, someone they had to call 'Sir' at school; who 'never lied', but who was also a 'very lonely and sober' man, from whom they escaped when he tried to control their childish naughty deeds.

The distance of his relation to the body is so great that it reveals his difficulty with demonstrations of love and affection. He feels bad when faced with any reaction of physical well being, which is what happens during the first years of marriage to Clara: "He felt a bit ashamed of the glow on his own face. That she should see it. His body reached for hers with silent intensity" (*WMS,* 20). As for her, whose relation to the body is a good and harmonious one, she accepts the man with whom she has sex as "the savouring of some strange exotic fruit, its flavour eluding her"

[9] See Audre Lorde, "Uses of the Erotic: The Erotic as Power", <http://www.womenstemple.com/EroticAsPower-article.html>, 9 May 2008.

(*WMS,* 20). When Dinah is born, she experiences her first orgasms: "It was as if her little daughter had touched some tiny hidden secret spring as she made her way down, saying 'Here, mother, a little gift to compensate for all the pain. A gift, a gift, the unfolding of your own fount of pleasure'" (*WMS,* 20). And once more the narrative shows Clara as someone who accepts her being as a woman with all its multiple features: she is the mother, but she is also the woman who has no need to separate her body pleasure from her maternal function, something that Christian society usually does, and which is to a certain extent present in Archie's reluctance to let Clara see the expression of pleasure on his face, while at the same time feeling ashamed when he senses the positive relation Clara has with her own body. This also reinforces Archie's attempt to separate body pleasure from Clara's maternity, which he associates with the character of protection connected with his mother. The odour of Clara's body, which recalls the odour of his mother's body, imposes Oedipal barriers, reinforced by the powerful presence of the ghost controlling women's bodies and sexuality.

This might explain (but not justify) why Archie has immense difficulties in showing joy and pleasure in what he does. This would show an undignified feature of his condition as head of the family, whose hard childhood could serve as an alibi for any socially inadequate behaviour. Thus, Clara's pleasure leads to an unacceptable lack of control which might block this vital force stemming from the body and from the harmonious involvement brought by the erotic force that moves both of them as a couple. The way he finds to sort this out is by verbalizing the violence he would like to commit against Clara: "'What would you do if I was to hit you, eh?' For he badly wanted to hit her. To slap her cheeks hard. To slap her for her own lovely childhood and his hard empty one. To slap her for the pain and jealousy she was arousing in him" (*WMS,* 20). Such a difficult moment is reversed vehemently by Clara whose answer is equally harsh and violent:

> 'Make sure that whenever you hit me you do a very good job of it ... Make sure that you don't leave an ounce of strength in my body. Make sure that I can't get up again, you hear?'
> Archie knew she meant it. (*WMS,* 20)

Clara's strong answer means her blocking the ghost's attempt to vilify her life. Her vehement defense shows that she is not afraid of what patriarchy wants women to be, i.e. subservient and submissive as well as accepting physical and moral violence committed against them. Her resistance is the defiance of convention and thus she demands respect from her husband.

There are many other examples of adult violence, physical *and* symbolical, in the narrative, which help show the parallel route that such

an evil presents. It is as if the author wanted to show that such a recurrence supports the quasi omnipresence of violence against women, and that this is a problem which is not restricted to a given social group; it is instead present in all social, racial and ethnic groups like a pernicious disease that needs to be combated. The women's resistance in the novel can be thought as a form of concrete answer to the problem, which means a way of expelling the ghost from their lives.

In the suburb of Charlestown, where the Walcott family moves when Archie retires from Highdam School, the neighboring families live in some kind of tenement houses. Archie finds this out after he moves into his new house, which has a pretty façade, but hides its less attractive rear behind its back garden, offering a subtle picture of the social complexity of a country strongly demarcated by racial diversity: a true "mélange of people of different races and different shades and mixture of races. Africans, East Indians, Portuguese, Chinese, a few Amerindians and ... the growing number of Mixed" (*WMS,* 52). In this suburb there are people from honest families, workers and shopkeepers, but there is also a number of criminals and exploiters, prostitutes, and widowers with grown up children. A true melting pot full of the lives led by people of different cultures, scented sometimes with incense, Indian gods and citharas, or by the deafening sound of the *calypso* music. Some families live precariously, having hardly if any privacy, as is the case of Yvy Payne, a hardworking woman who provides for all her children, daughter-in-law and grandchild, who live together under her roof.

Besides the fact that she is a hardworking woman, what interests us is her connection with the representation of the patriarchal ghost. Vibert, Yvy's son, in his jealousy, shows that he cannot stand the fact that his father died and that his mother has found another man. Yvy Payne "couldn't depend on her eldest son for anything, now that he had his own family. But she did get some extra help from her manfriend, Cyril" (*WMS,* 93).

Cyril is the trigger of one of the most violent scenes in the novel, for it is headed by a son against his own mother. Vibert Payne is 19 and not very keen on working; he depends on his mother but he cannot accept the fact that Yvy has a boyfriend: "He remembered the way she carried on at his father's funeral, throwing herself across the coffin" (*WMS,* 93). Four years after his father's death is how long it took Yvy to find someone, to find Cyril. Vibert, however, cannot accept such a replacement. The burden of his jealousy is immense and carries a strong Oedipal dimension:

> He could hear the shaking of the bed in his brother's room. He could endure that. What he couldn't stand was the sight of his mother's locked door and the knowledge that Cyril was inside there with [his mother]. The thought of Cyril's smooth body and slick hair next to his mother's healthy darkness aroused such a fury in him. He felt she had no shame … Now he had to restrain himself

> from kicking the shaky door in and dragging the man out of the house … Also the way his mother had of putting aside Cyril's food first in the glass bowl made him sour inside (93).

Vibert's attitude of ownership, his jealousy and desire to control his mother's body leads to the worrying idea of the woman as a male possession, with the man unable to conceive the idea of the woman as a free being with a right to dispose of her life and her body as she pleases. Vibert's attitude repeats Archie's in relation to Clara, but it is worse because he is younger and because he expresses physically the violence that Archie could only put into words. Hence, the author seems to be saying that violence appears to have an archetypal dimension to it and that no matter how one fights it off, it will always recur.

Yvy feels she has a right to continue her life. The fact that she has a man does not imply dependence: "It wasn't good to depend on any man and, even though she appreciated Cyril's help, she intended to make her life her own way" (*WMS,* 95). Yet Vibert sees things differently and hence finds a way to "punish" her by tearing her night dress, provoking a rupture of the link between mother and son: "That was the last time she had tried beating him" (*WMS,* 93):

> [Vibert] didn't know what had possessed him that night. It had nothing to do with her shouting that he had no ambition or the blows she rained about his head and neck. In the act of deliberately ripping her nightdress, he thought he was showing her the complete disrespect which he felt he now had for her (*WMS,* 94).

Perplexity, a feeling of outrageousness, tears and the disruption of the maternal link, in Yvy's mind; on the other hand, in the son's mind a confusing mixture of a life lacking perspective and the demand for the control of the mother's body (and sexuality). The idea of 'disrespect' in his mind leads straight to the fact that the mother is more than just a mother, that her life includes an active sexual life, which the son cannot and will not admit. The Oedipal nature of this kind of violence reveals a harsh feature of patriarchal society in that, by fragmenting women into different roles – the virgin, the wife, the lover, the prostitute, the working woman – it is unable to understand and cope with the presence of multiple identities produced within itself.[10] What happens to Yvy Payne and her son illustrates one of the ways in which the ghost makes its presence felt in Nichols' novel. And Yvy, like Clara, rebuffs such a presence, for she never stops praising her independence, nor does she leave her man. Furthermore, her son is later on killed during the riots that culminate in the independence of the Guyana. It is even possible to consider Vibert's killing as some sort of punishment inflicted on the character by the author who, through her narrator, sides shamelessly with the women.

[10] For a discussion of the nature of such a fragmentation, see Grosz, *Volatile Bodies.*

The control of the body starts disintegrating as the narrative progresses. The loss of political control comes parallel to the loss of body control. Vibert Payne's 'punishment' seems to be part of this process.

2. The Child's Body and the Hard Route towards Growing Up

> Nothing can stop the kites singing in the skies …
> Grace Nichols

The adolescent Gem may symbolically represent Guyana herself, in her struggle for a free identity, an identity which is still insecure, and in progress, without any concrete notion of its 'power' as a nation full of conflicts of all sorts, especially marked by the multiracial political question. In the historical time of the novel, the late fifties and early sixties in the 20th century, the country is undergoing a time of turmoil in the struggle for independence. "Guiana is part of the British Empire" (*WMS,* 48), as Gem hears from her schoolteachers, in preparation for the Duke of Edinburgh's visit, immediately before the riots that lead the country towards the chaos of social, racial and political violence which preceded independence.

Gem's narrative shows her perception as a child of her own body and how such a perception is altered by the constructed experiences she undergoes. Her path is delineated by the writer as an educative route which reveals how the mother's way of educating her is crucial for her learning how to deal with the body from a positive perspective. When Clara is seen through her husband's eyes, all that he sees is her anarchic way of life as well as her lack of control over her family; yet, despite this, she is capable of educating her children with love and joy, especially her daughters Dinah and Gem, teaching them how to fend for themselves in life.

The scenes selected here for the examination of Gem's educative path have to do, first and foremost, with the constitution of relations of feelings of affectivity and the body between the novel's central male reference, i.e. Archie Walcott, and his daughter. The paternal distancing stems from his difficulty in relating emotionally since he was a child. This ghost pursues him throughout his life and returns in his marriage with Clara, in the school he runs with a tough, sometimes authoritarian, hand, and obviously extends itself through the education of his three children.

In Gem's case, Archie's feelings lead to a distant, cold and authoritarian contact. The girl's memory understands the father's behavior and attitude in this way:

> Your father. You remember him in his faded blue pyjamas, giving you a ride on his back, but it all seemed so long ago. In school you call him "Sir" like all the other children … And when he come back from his evening walks with his feet stretched out before him, you're always the first to loose out his lacings

> and take off his shoes. But he'd hardly ever touch you. Not like your mother tickling you till you had to beg her to stop … (*WMS,* 21)

Thus, the girl dislocates her attention and positive reference towards another man, a friend of Archie's, Conrad, a former policeman and crime photographer. This man, like his friend Archie, is very close to his own mother; his care for her is so extreme that it surpasses filial love and it can be said that he acts like a 'father' to this mother, a woman who symbolically might represent the old Guyana, in preparation for independence. Conrad is a strange man, who takes his gun wherever he goes, making everyone next to him feel safe. Gem is fascinated by him:

> There's nobody else like him. Who else could make white mice disappear down his shirt collar and reappear … at the cuff of his sleeve?
> Who could boil milo, your favorite treat, like him? …
> He said you were a clever child … Sitting across his shoulders, hands locked under his chin, skirt bunched around your thighs, brown legs wrapped around his sides, he is like a new father …
> And because you love him, you let him nibble your ears and press you against him, smelling his special scent of liquorice and photographs … (75-76)

Hence, Gem's best experience of the masculine, considering her adolescence, comes from a stranger, to whom she extends her need for paternal feelings.

The girl, however, grows up and Nichols shows that the child also goes through moments in which her bodily changes are perceived differently by the male eye and by her own eye that is already able to understand malice in someone else's behavior. Adults in the novel seem to have a tendency to punish children through their bodies because of their mischievous behaviour. One example of this is when Gem and a friend go into a Chinese grocery shop, and the boy pretends to buy things and starts ordering them. The Chinese man does not understand that the child is just being playful, and when he realizes the trick he squeezes the boy's hand violently in his anger. Some other time, when Gem goes into the shop on her own, he leans against the counter and sexually harasses her, by pinching her growing breast. In the girl's eyes, this is horrendous: "Chin lean across the counter to pinch one of the small brown nipples just showing under your cotton dress. 'Eeeeh! You getting beeg,' he say. The pinch hurt you and you hurry out of the shop, feeling Chin is a dirty old lizard …" (*WMS,* 50).

As she gains knowledge about her own body, she learns about what gives her pleasure and, at the same time, she learns how to deal with her own sexuality. This experience is seen through the girl's eyes when she looks at Miss Sheila, a woman who supposedly threw acid in her lover Mr Percy's face, a criminal who keeps her imprisoned in her own home. Gem has found out that she can spy this African Queen (as Miss Sheila is described

in the novel), from a hole in the bathroom's door: "Sometimes you peep at her and she don't even know. Sometimes … you see her nice big heavy breasts, just a shade lighter than the rest of her skin. You stare, wondering about she and Mr Percy, touching, touching your own tiny little breasts…" (*WMS,* 101). Besides, Gem also exercises the knowledge of her body with her best friend, Lurleena, playing "husband and wife ... Lying quietly together in a tangle of legs" (*WMS,* 91). This is perceived and observed by the mother, who, unlike the father, shows her understanding of people's needs to grow up and acquire knowledge about themselves. Clara sees Gem's adolescent voyeurism in touching herself in front of a mirror, as part of the natural evolution of a child walking towards maturity:

> Lurleena tells you that rubbing your breasts with the inside of yellow plantain skin would make them get bigger. You have to warm up the skin first though. Both of you try it … no improvement. Still, your mother would say, "Aye, you fulling eye, you fulling eye" in an amused kind of way, when she come into the room and catch you looking at yourself in the mirror … (*WMS,* 155)

Clara's easy-going way of bringing her children up is what makes Gem know precisely when to impose limits to her relationship with Conrad, for, when she acknowledges herself as an adolescent, with a body which is different from that of the child who used to sit in this man's lap, or who was sexually harassed by the Chinese guy, she retreats, aware of the change: "Conrad still comes often but you hardly sit in his lap anymore. Not because your mother would say, 'You're too big for that now', but because you feel like being for yourself" (*WMS,* 155-156).

Nichols' story ends with Gem's adolescent experience. The tip of the thread of this interlaced narrative leaves only one certainty: that no one can impose a disruption on the course of life. Not even the father who despite having planted the whole house backyard in Georgetown, decides to move on and puts the house up for sale. This is the lesson one can take from Gem's speech:

> Your house is up for sale ... your father look at it … from the back garden where everything is blooming. The gooseberry tree laden with fat gooseberries, the pumpkins swelling big and heavy on the ground, the tomatoes ripe and plenty, and the bora climbing fresh and green as if it didn't care that the person who had planted it would be leaving. (*WMS,* 156)

Like the kite that she has learned to fly with Conrad, Gem shows that things just need a little help so that they can move on. For this child, the mother's teaching results in maturity and learning. This leads the ghost to recede to the deep waters of the unconscious.

* * *

The intense social convulsion – strikes, violence, protests, looting, fires, dead people and casualties – that takes hold of the country shows the recurrence of violence in different instances, but it also reinforces and retells the same story of the attempt towards controlling women's bodies.

Nichols's novel shows certain features that reveal the immense complexity of breaking through gender differences. Guyanese society, which is still tied to old values, makes men and women react differently as regards their roles, but attempts to control the female body seem to reinforce the social conservatism that seeks to imprison women in a single role – the woman is either the mother, the wife, or the daughter – and as such, she cannot evade obedience to the father figure, to the man. And yet, Nichols shows that if, on the one hand, men want to be in their places as though nothing could ever change, on the other, she shows the women's power of resistance against the fragmentation of the many different roles associated with their identities. Nichols' rich narrative has many more examples one could draw to illustrate what I have been discussing throughout this essay, but for the time being I shall briefly point out some of them as other paths the narrative opens for an in depth-study.

The maintenance of the traditional order of things which involves the political and symbolic colonization of people in Guyana, on which the ghost image persistently seeks to impose its invisible presence, can also be seen in two different situations as regards Archie's role models, both public and private. Let us consider, for example, the women teachers at Highdam School, who are also housewives. Before Archie starts in his post as Highdam School headmaster, these women used to mix their public role – their classrooms – with their private lives – their kitchen: "[They] divided their attention equally between teaching and cooking pot at home. They saw nothing wrong in putting some sums on the board and slipping home, then slipping back again" (*WMS,* 6). Their attitude simply shows that communities such as Highdam's do not consider that women have to play many roles. Their slipping in and out of work can be seen as an anarchic way of adapting their lives to British colonial rule, but it can also be associated with resistance. When Archie Walcott becomes headmaster in the school, the women have to adapt themselves to his control, a hard task for them. Thus if not all of them disobeyed the new rules, a few of them kept the double role of mother 'and' teacher as a way to symbolically disrupt a rule which might be seen as an extension of a colonial government rule.

The second example comes from Dinah Walcott, who started teaching at the age of 14, following her father's footsteps, but when she was 19 gave up her teaching career and looked for a new job. This way she dismisses her father's role model as a teacher and as a provider for the family, for she starts providing as well where her father fails to do so, like

for instance when she buys Clara the fridge she so much desired and needed at home but that Archie's meanness prevented him from buying. When Dinah becomes independent to the point of dispensing with Archie's control over her salary, there begins a breach of silence resulting from her resistance and occupation of a new space for a woman: "Ever since she had given up her teacher job he had developed this silence about her activity, a silence that acknowledged that she had slipped beyond his control" (*WMS,* 58).

This indicates that Archie's power over his daughter has terminated and he will not have any kind of control over her any more, including her sexual life, for she starts dating Hartley, a man educated in England with fascinating socialist ideas. Archie does not approve of her dating but she cannot care less. As for the mother, she sees in her daughter a perspective of a different future. For her, Dinah "will be somebody" (*WMS,* 58). This reinforces the idea that the invisible ghost is, like in Gem's case, being sent to the deep waters of the unconscious, from which it had better not return.

Violence takes on different forms in the novel and involves the body in different ways. It recurs as regards the women from different racial groups. Apart from Yvy Payne's case, another example that reinforces both the violence 'and' the resistance on the part of the women refers to Zabeeda Ramsammy, of an Indian family background, who also lives in Charlestown, with her shopkeepers' parents-in law, in a house behind Archie and Clara's. Zabeeda is another woman who is subject to both her mother-in-law's abuses as well as her husband's physical violence. Yet, following the same pattern already established, like Clara and Yvy, she defends herself: "Whenever her husband tried to beat her, Zabeeda would fight back, her wiry body clawing and scratching" (*WMS,* 124). Here the archetypical force of the ghost transcends the idea of nation. Since Guyana is made of a 'mélange of people' from different racial groups, Nichols weaves her story from the idea that the invisible ghost does not have a single face. It takes on 'any' face anywhere in the world.

The other example comes from Clara's own family and refers to Cousin Wilma, who works as a dressmaker, and at 45 gets married to an older man. She is, however, forced to flee from her own home to avoid being beaten by her husband. Wilma also reacts and resists: "I had a mind to take the same plate and hit he cross he head, but just pun on me clothes and go out of de house. And to think that before he was married de man was acting so nice …" (*WMS,* 135).

The final example of the recurring violence has to do with the social turmoil in the country which generates attempts at sexual violence. Clara is a witness of the "hunting" of a young woman, "a collie bitch", by a "pack of hounds ... a gang of twelve, fourteen, young men", running "as

if all the devils in hell pursued her" and managing to escape (*WMS,* 139). The fact that Clara witnesses such an episode can be associated with all the other forms of violence committed during the intense conflicts that brought the British troops, American aid, deaths and the curfew to Georgetown.

> [She] couldn't accept or comprehend [the violence]. The fires and the looting, yes. But not the killing and battering. … she told Archie that she couldn't see or understand how one person could kill another, merely on the grounds of race, how they could work up enough hatred. (*WMS,* 139)

For Archie, Clara's perception is naïve for she does not seem to understand the reasons for all she has pointed out. Yet, for her, the answer is in the very fact that men do not give birth: "I bet you if men used to bring children into this world, they would have more respect for human life'" (*WMS,* 139). Even if one considers her essentialist tone, she cannot be said to be entirely wrong.

This same talk about racial violence is held with Rose, who, by the end of the story, comes for a visit. She says to Clara: "'It's the wicked ones of both sides that doing the mischief... some of them using the chance to settle old scores, as they say… We only have to hope and pray" (*WMS,* 153-54). In her voice Nichols seems to be saying that the 'wicked ones' come from everywhere and elliptically one could add that the 'good' ones do too. So hope and prayer on every one's part might be a help towards exorcising the ghost…

Nichols builds a concept for the body in her novel that has a different weight for men as compared with women, as already pointed out. The women have a more pleasurable perception of the body than the men whose experience at all levels leads them to search for a way of controlling political and sexual bodies. The women, in their turn, have within their bodies a history of more positive paths, and even if they seek to build an experience which includes joy and pleasure within an oppressive society, this means that the basic word Nichols wants to pass on is 'hope'. The learning that comes from all this is immense, and Gem, the adolescent girl whose story revises the that of the adults, clearly shows her learning; she has acquired knowledge enough to discern what is 'good' or 'bad' with her adolescent eyes. Perhaps, this poignant novel by Grace Nichols finally suggests, the country's political body will also be able to learn.