

3. The Making and Remaking of the Body: Embodiment, Subjectivity, and Lived Experience

The body is a most peculiar 'thing.'
(Grosz 1994: xi)

The body has its invariably public dimension; constituted as a social phenomenon in the public sphere, my body is and is not mine.
(Butler 2004b: 21)

3.1 Whose Body Is This?

Bodies are fundamental components of literary texts, the coming-of-age novel in particular. As human bodies, as animals, aliens, or cyborgs, they populate fictional worlds. They take up space, literally or materially, in the form of ink and paper as well as symbolically and give meaning to or challenge contemporary discourses. They are 'unreal,' but come to life temporarily; not flesh and bone but perceived as multidimensional entities and acting beings nevertheless. Fiction offers readers glimpses into embodied life and bodily experiences, thereby suggesting alternative modes of being. When reading for the body in the text, attention needs to be paid to the ways the narrative produces certain embodiments and, in turn, bodies shape the narration. Which bodies are written about, what about their representation and construction, and which bodies are likely to unsettle normalized perception?

Indeed, Elizabeth Grosz could not have phrased it more accurately: The body is peculiar. It is "a thing and a nonthing" (xi) that can only be approximated, never explained entirely as the meaning of the body undergoes constant transformation. The body's materiality (corporeality) is bound to its social, cultural, and historical reality; it helps to produce such realities and is directly affected by the very same (embodiment). Social categories permeate the body and construct it as culturally specific, gendered, raced, sexualized, aged, or

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abled, determining the positionality of the individual who *has*, *acts*, and *is* that body. Before grappling with the body from a theoretical and literary studies perspective, I wish to take a detour through popular culture to exemplify the intersection of these social categories with politics and practices of the body.

Despite or rather because of its peculiarity the body sparks curiosity, or, as Tiffany Atkinson claims, “contemporary culture loves body-gazing” (Atkinson 2005: 2). We see this in the public attention paid to the body, especially to an overly sexualized female body; this we observe in the hype surrounding certain body parts generated by mass media. Especially female artists of Color and popular icons from the Caribbean and the U.S., such as Nicki Minaj, Rihanna, Jennifer López, or Beyoncé, celebrate global success with their (body) performances, playing on (but also being played by) the market value of their perceived exotic eroticism, showing off ‘what they’ve got,’ while still emphasizing their origins ‘from the blocks’ and being ‘down with the hoes.’⁹⁰ The eroticized female body itself is a common enough trope in western popular culture. The degree to which the Black female body is objectified and racialized under the consuming gaze that rests in particular on buttocks and pelvis prominently staged in semi-nude photographs or originally Jamaican dancing styles like twerking and wining, is troubling. Trinidadian Nicki Minaj’ “Anaconda” video (2014), for example, in which she extols the desirability of her behind, has stirred up the discussion on Black female ‘too-muchness’ and hypersexuality. The outrage following Minaj’ performance and her being publically body-shamed show the extent to which the display of the Black body, the ‘booty,’ and explicit sexuality are intertwined with discourses of race, power, and respectability politics. A panel discussion led by bell hooks, entitled “Whose Booty Is This?” (2014),⁹¹ takes issue with this intersection from a Black feminist vantage point. The participants address questions of bodily autonomy and ask who has or claims rights in and access to the Black female body and sexuality. Connected to these questions of ownership, I assert, is the persistence of racial stereotypes and the misperception of her sexual availability and vulgarity which erotic dancing styles like wining allegedly convey. The oversexualization along a simultaneous under-valuation of the female body of Color results from an irrational fear of excessive Black embodiment that is regarded

90 The quotes refer to Jennifer López’ hit single “Jenny From the Block” (2002) and Rihanna’s performance in the video accompanying her song “Pour It Up” (2012).

91 The title refers to hook’s think piece “Whose Pussy Is This” (1989), in which she explores Black feminism and sexual autonomy in Spike Lee’s film *She’s Gotta Have It* (1986). The title of this sub-chapter is in reference to that. The panel was hosted at The Eugene Lang, New School of Liberal Arts, New York in October 2014; for a full-length live recording see hooks (2014).

to pose a threat to hegemonic whiteness and white culture in which the female body is supposed to be skinny and take up as little space as possible. In opposition, Minaj' parading her backside – “Oh my gosh, look at her butt” – reclaims and takes pride in her body – “I got a big fat ass” – to challenge the objectifying look.⁹² This ‘grotesque gesture,’ in a Bakhtinian sense, directs and plays with the gaze of the audience and male desire as an act of resistance against the commodification and fetishization of ethnicity and Blackness.

While the bodies in the novels analyzed here dance at most in a figurative sense on paper, the example illustrates the simultaneity of the body as both an object of fetishization and source of empowerment. It reveals the cultural signification of the body alongside its political function and the actual power played out on and springing from this body. These, in turn, are major points of concern of the writers this study brings together and motivate my reading of these texts. It shows the implications attached to definitions of and ascriptions to the corporeal as well as the hierarchization of certain body types embedded within specific contexts and power structures.⁹³ What is clear, our bodies are what elementarily constitute and position us in this world in interrelation with others. Our bodies have a certain materiality or weight, are always and already charged with meaning.⁹⁴ That way, bodies are of matter and do matter, to speak with Butler. The body's material reality and its symbolic force in discourses open multiple ways of interpretation. Not surprisingly, body politics and bodies in various shapes, sizes, colors, and genders have not ceased to raise curiosity and attention.

The Caribbean archipelago itself continues to be imagined and theorized in highly embodied and gendered terms. The virgin or maternal body as symbol of

92 On the discursive power of body parts, Jennifer López' body in particular, the associated cultural capital, ethnic identity, and her performance of *Latinidad*, or what the author terms an “epistemology of the butt”, see Negrón-Muntaner (1997): “‘Latino’ cultural practices tend to be managed discursively by ‘serious’ concepts such as class, language, religion, and family [...]. It was precisely the body, however, particularly the curves (or in less poetic Puerto Rican street language, the *culo*), that proved to be the most compelling way that Lopez and others found to speak about how ‘Latinas’ are constituted as racialized bodies, what kind of cultural capital is associated with these bodies, and how the body surfaces as a site of pleasure, produced by intersections of power, but not entirely under its own control” (185).

93 Such a historicity of the body is crucial for an engagement with the rights to and ownership of the body, which for some seem to be a natural given, while others are in constant struggle to retain this right, especially seen in the context of citizenship rights, feminist movements for abortion rights (“This Body Is Mine”), or expressed in slogans such as ‘No Body Is Illegal.’

94 This understanding contradicts phenomenological approaches to the body, as discussed below.

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the land and nation, in particular, has still a prominent role in contemporary theoretical approaches to the Caribbean and its diaspora. Taking this problematic embodied imagination of the Caribbean as point of departure, a question arises: Is the literature emerging from the Caribbean (imagined as ‘womb’) then always and already a literature of the body? Do the four novels under investigation here constitute an attempt at recuperating women’s bodies and lost territories?

The conflation of the region with the female sex is apparent, for example, in Antonio Benítez-Rojo’s postmodern concept of the Caribbean as a meta-archipelago which he proposes in *The Repeating Island*. Therein, he imagines colonization in a violent fantasy of rape of the Caribbean “whose vagina was stretched between continental clamps” (Benítez-Rojo 2006: 5). He metaphorizes the colonial encounter and the transatlantic slave trade as Europe’s forceful insemination of the Caribbean womb with Africa’s blood, to which he adds the labor pains of India with the introduction of indentureship, giving birth eventually to modernity and today’s capitalist world order. Although his work is important for Caribbean cultural theory in general and this line of thought productive for decolonial thinking, Brinda Mehta is right in her criticism of this reductive “geopolitical feminizing” (2009: 4) and the androcentric dynamic dominant in Benítez-Rojo’s and others’ works. In these depictions, Caribbean women do not appear to own their bodies and merely function as objects of a “‘cannibalistic’ economy of rape” (ibid.).⁹⁵ A similar point of criticism can be found in Anne McClintock’s *Imperial Leather* (1995). She dismantles the sexualized terminology in patriarchal and early colonial narratives in which the Caribbean land figures as virgin territory, a space devoid of agency passively awaiting “the sexual and military insemination of [...] history, language and reason” by “white male patrimony” (30). This feminization of the land or what she terms the myth of the virgin or empty land – a territorial and sexual dis-possession – means a disavowal of agency both of women and those colonized, which Benítez-Rojo seems to be repeating.⁹⁶

In the Caribbean, as everywhere else, identities and subjectivity are connected to the body and the ways society conceives of it. Obviously, there does not exist a singular idea or concept of *the* Caribbean body. Body politics here is first and foremost defined against the complexity of racialized social stratifica-

95 Likewise, women’s contribution both to national independence and theory production often remains under-investigated or overlooked, which enforces masculinist power also on the discursive level.

96 One may also want to think about Glissant’s imagination of the slave ship as womb and the Middle Passage as point of origin for or giving birth to the Caribbean archipelago (cf. 1997).

tion and ethnic inter-relations. Throughout the centuries, Amerindian, European, African, and Asian conceptualization of embodiment and corporeality have come together and undergone constant transformation and alteration. In the Caribbean, in the course of colonization, first indigenous, animist world views of the unity of body, spirituality, and nature collide with Christian concepts of human embodiment in which the mind and spirit are valued over perishable bodily existence.⁹⁷ The situation is complicated further with the enslavement of Africans who brought along their own ideas of embodied being – such as the tripartite conceptualization of the body discernible in African-derived religions like Vodou in Haiti or the belief in the return after death to Guinea as the holy land of the ancestors – but joined the Amerindian population in their experience of bodily and psychological exploitation and violence.⁹⁸ Also, with the arrival of the numerous contracted workers from India the influence of Hinduism has added to already very diverse perceptions and understandings of the body (e.g. on a spiritual level the notion of transcendence and the permeability of the body, or religious concepts of purity and impurity, and the belief in an ever repeating cycle of being).⁹⁹

The following paragraphs shall highlight some important aspects of a body history and gender politics in the Caribbean context. They also outline some of the philosophical, sociological, and ethical approaches on embodiment and subjectivity that constitute the theoretical grounding of my investigation of the body and gender politics in the four diaspora novels. Theories from such di-

97 The pre-Columbian era is still under-investigated, apart from the origins, migratory movements, and settlements of the diverse indigenous population, such as Arawaks, Caribs, or Tainos, to name but a few, as well as conflicts among these diverse groups and their almost complete extinction in the course of imperial conquest.

98 While there is no doubt about this, what should be noted is that during slavery, colonialists attempted to erase forcefully the knowledge of African culture and customs among those enslaved. Whatever African-based theoretical visions of the body were at the time can only be assumed and would be vague and highly constructed and cannot be accomplished in the scope of this dissertation. The African influence on embodied resistance and performances of masculinity and femininity, for instance, still remains an under-investigated field within Caribbean gender studies, as Richard Goodridge makes clear (cf. 2003).

99 This rather general observation does not hold true for all Caribbean states to the same degree. The scheme of contract work was not put into practice by all post-slavery administrations. Also, the size of the work force of the indentured laborers, their places of origin, and the number of those who did return varied extensively. Throughout the twentieth century, the ways they have integrated and have been perceived by the rest of the population depend on the context and constitution of the respective Caribbean society. Chapter 5 elaborates in more detail on the Indian presence in Trinidad and the diaspora community in Canada.

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verse fields as phenomenology, Black feminism and womanism, poststructuralism, Indo- and Afro-Caribbean feminisms, as well as European and Anglo-American gender and body studies, difference and corporeal feminism are brought into relation. This takes into account the complexity of Caribbean history, the Middle Passage, and indentureship; the contact and creolization of people of African, Amerindian, Asian, and European origin who all brought their bodies in diverse constitutions and significations. These different lines of thought I wish to place in dialogue – with the risk of appearing eclectic at times – and avoid giving preference to European and Anglo-American theorization as suggested in decolonial theory. Caribbean literature shows that the body is myriad. It is thus crucial to pay attention to the particular ways that the novels, too, inform theories of embodiment and ultimately expand them, as they produce knowledge which the texts in turn help to circulate. Clearly, one single concept does not suffice to approximate bodies in their various dimensions, manifestations, and representations. Different concepts are relevant to theoretically grasp embodied experiences of the protagonists and through their ‘situatedness’ (cf. Haraway 1997) in the diaspora yet further layers of perception become relevant.

3.2 Skin-deep, Gaze-alert: Theoretical Explorations of the Body

The body is biological matter, cultural phenomenon, and political issue. The body is conceptualized basically through the interrelation of corporeality and the embodiment of the subject.¹⁰⁰ The first term describes the materiality of that what is biologically ‘real’ about the body (cells, tissues, genes, bones, organs, skin, breath, fluids, or sight, smell, speech, and so forth) as well as the reality of bodily experiences of what may be described as internal agitation, such as arousal or anger, and external inference, such as the sexual act or violence (taking aside for now the motivators behind and consequences of these experiences both on a collective and individual level). Embodiment, on the other hand, pertains to the constructionist dimension and symbolic side of the

100 Throughout this study I will use the term body entailing both the material and symbolic dimension. Where I find it necessary to separate the two to emphasize either the physical damage done to the body or its symbolic force only, I will make explicit use of either corporeality or embodiment.

body; it may also be thought of as political due to its centrality to one's sense of agency. What is of importance here is a complex set of societal, cultural, economic, and historical circumstances in which the subject is situated in. These circumstances produce different kinds of bodies by ascribing a certain meaning to the body material; they are also perceived differently by the thusly embodied subject. The two are inseparable: embodiment does not exist without corporeality and vice versa.

3.2.1 Situating and Regulating the Embodied Subject

Human subjectivity is produced by and through the respective social, cultural, technological, economic, political, and so forth environments. Here, Donna Haraway speaks about the "situatedness" of the subject, meaning the location and situation the embodied subject finds herself in. Haraway uses the figure of the cyborg – "a creature of social reality as well as a creature of fiction" (1997: 474) – to disclose the many facets of social domination that interrelate with the situatedness of the subject and dismantle dichotomous categorical thinking that structure and construct our "lived social relations" (ibid.). In this regard, Rosi Braidotti, too, talks about an embodied position or the embodiment of the subject in which the biological and symbolic side of the body join. She contends that

[t]he body, or the embodiment, of the subject is to be understood as neither a biological nor a sociological category but rather as a point of overlapping between the physical, the symbolic, and the sociological [...]. In other words, feminist emphasis on embodiment goes hand in hand with a radical rejection of essentialism. (1994: 4)

Braidotti's approach as difference feminist to embodied subjectivity deviates from purely constructivist views of the body as she affirms and positively embraces the existence of sexual (and ethnical, cultural, etc.) difference, recognizing, however, "the dissymmetrical relationship between the sexes" (1997: 527). In the quoted passage, she draws attention to the intersection of the biological, symbolic, and sociological dimensions which shape the embodied subject in anti-essentialist terms.

Postcolonial feminism has long grappled with the essentialist constructions and representation of the enslaved body and bodies of color in colonial discourses as well as in contemporary Eurocentric literature and theory. They

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criticize the objectification and fetishization of the body and stereotypical 'Othering' of the subaltern subject within hegemonic Western knowledge production.¹⁰¹ Postcolonial feminists share the basic assumption that dualist conceptualizations of the body are damaging to a wholesome construction of the self as they are usually reductive and discriminating. Chandra Talpade Mohanty, for instance, critically examines the epistemological, discursive production of the Third World woman in Western mainstream feminism in terms of a monolithic subjectivity ignorant of the multiple forms of oppression she experiences. Accordingly, the "average Third World woman" is "ignorant, poor, uneducated, tradition-bound, religious, domesticated, family-oriented, victimized" (Mohanty 2003: 22), dominated by a likewise monolithic local patriarchy, which Mohanty calls "the Third World difference" (40) – this, we find reproduced in the cultural coding of the Indian woman's body in the Caribbean as well. The self-representation of Western women, on the contrary, brings them forward as sexually liberated and emancipated, as "educated, as modern, as having control of their own bodies and sexualities and the freedom to make their own decisions" (22).

Such dualist concepts have figured prominently in rationalists thought of the Enlightenment period and are inextricably linked to the elevation of the immortal soul at the expense of the perishable physical flesh. The Cartesian dualism, in particular, is usually referred to in order to illustrate how the mind has come to be associated with the male, and the male with the parameters of logic, rationality, culture, and civilization. The body is thus subordinated and associated with the female, as essentially irrational, emotional, and close to nature.¹⁰² The split of the mind from the body as ultimately unmaking or doing away with the body has been most influential in the denigration of the body, leading to a theoretical disembodiment of the subject in Western thought.¹⁰³

101 In this dichotomy the image of the chaste, pure, sexually passive body of the white woman contrasted with the likewise stereotypical representation of the Black and Indian woman. Sexual pleasure was located outside of western civilization and culture. Sexual debauchery in the colonies if not denied was frequently condemned as immoral and uncivilized. The objectification of the Black female subject as the colonial 'Other' as childlike, primitive, hypersexual, immoral, diabolic, seductive served to emphasize white superiority rendering the enslaved body ever more vulnerable both to physical as well as subsequently to epistemic violence (cf. Mohanty 2003; Spivak 1988; Boehmer 2005).

102 According to Grosz, this hierarchy is based on the notion of the female body as "frail, imperfect, unruly, and unreliable" (1994: 13).

103 In Socrates' thinking, for instance, the marginalization of the body is discernible with a simultaneous emphasis on the mind as source and constituent of a 'true'

Additionally, imperial race discourses of the Enlightenment built on a dualist body politic to justify and strengthen white supremacy in opposition to a supposed black inferiority.

Judith Butler is certainly among the most radical to do away with any kind of Cartesian dualist logic or 'natural' difference between the sexes, especially in the notion of gender performativity. Butler's work, influential also for queer studies, is motivated by the quest to identify those bodies that count as valued and valuable or abjected in societies and to dismantle those mechanisms that help to produce and sustain them as such. In *Bodies That Matter* (1993), Butler poses fundamental questions which are relevant for my reading of the bodies in Caribbean fiction and those influential systems they exist in:

How does the materialization of the norm in bodily formation produce a domain of abjected bodies, a field of deformation, which in failing to qualify as the fully human, fortifies those regulatory norms? What challenge does that excluded and abjected realm produce to a symbolic hegemony that might force a radical rearticulation of what qualifies as bodies that matter, ways of living that count as "life," lives worth protecting, lives worth saving, lives worth grieving? (Butler 1993: 16)

Butler describes the materiality and materializing effects of discourses on the body, the normative and regulating function of sex, as well as the performativity of gender within a heterosexual matrix, arguing that both gender and sex are discursive and socially constructed. Although Butler contends that "normative heterosexuality is clearly not the only regulatory regime operative in the production of bodily contours or setting the limits to bodily intelligibility" (17), race as social regulation remains a mere "addition" and superficially elaborated on. Heteronormativity, or compulsory heterosexuality in Adrienne Rich's terminology, as iterability¹⁰⁴ or ritual takes precedence in Butler's argument.¹⁰⁵

humanity (cf. Shilling 2005: 6-7.) This dualism is retraceable to ancient Greek ethics and philosophy.

104 Butler understands iterability as a ritualized process, "a regularized and constrained repetition of norms. And this repetition is not performed *by* a subject; this repetition is what enables a subject and constitutes the temporal condition for the subject." Although these conditions do not fully determine the production of the subject, Butler argues that performativity happens ("ritual is reiterated") "under and through constraint, under and through the force of prohibition and taboo, with the threat of ostracism and even death controlling and compelling the shape of the production" (Butler 1993: 95).

105 A clear shift in Butler's work towards a serious engagement with racialized bodies and mourning can be discerned starting with the publication of *Precarious Life* (cf. Butler 2004a, 2009).

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The meaning of the body is entwined with gender norms and norms of ‘appropriate’ sexuality that exist within a society and are re-enacted by and through the body. These norms depend on the historical context and are re-enforced by cultural, social, and political structures (cf. Butler 2004b: 20).

The body implies mortality, vulnerability, agency: the skin and the flesh expose us to the gaze of others but also to touch and to violence. The body can be the agency and instrument of all these as well, or the site where “doing” and “being done to” become equivocal. [...] The body has its invariably public dimension; constituted as a social phenomenon in the public sphere, my body is and is not mine. Given over from the start to the world of others, bearing their imprint, formed within the crucible of social life. (Butler 2004b: 21)¹⁰⁶

What resonates in this for Butler unusually clear definition of the body are the same questions of ownership and bodily autonomy that have been raised in the chapter’s beginning. Importantly, the body here is regarded as both an object and a subject, as having agency and being acted upon.

However, in a discussion of the value or ‘irrelevance’ ascribed to an individual’s body it is insufficient to focus primarily on gender and sexuality as Butler does most of the time. Butler is certainly right in stating that the body is never one’s own alone, handed over to the “world of others.” But as this world is still structured according to the workings of the coloniality of power, the “doing” body and the body that is “being done to” continue to exist on unequal racialized terms. Hence, the questions of what counts as viable or unlivable are inextricably linked to issues of race and ethnicity and citizenship regimes. These questions have been raised also and more prominently by feminists like M. Jacqui Alexander (cf. 1994, 2005) and specifically for the Caribbean context.¹⁰⁷ There they need to be contextualized not only within the historical circumstances that allowed and legally sanctioned the violation and mutilation of Black bodies and disenfranchisement of non-white personhood but also within contemporary forms of dominance and subordination.¹⁰⁸

106 Grosz discusses the body as locus of socio-cultural marginality; bodies are sites of “social entry and exit, regions of confrontation or compromise” (Grosz 1994: 193).

107 See chapters 4 and 7.

108 Jacqui Alexander talks about heteropatriarchal recolonization and a neocolonial body politic that operates “through the consolidation of certain psychic economies and racialized hierarchies as well as within various material and ideological processes” (2005: 26). Likewise, her and Mohanty’s declaration that they “were not born women of color but rather *became* women of color” (9) – calling out Simone de Beauvoir – makes explicit where white European, second wave feminists have been in neglect.

In the Caribbean, the body is tied to a historical struggle over subjecthood, control, and ownership. The logic of slavery was based on the belief in the superiority of whiteness. The colonial mastery over the enslaved, working body worked along dualist power dynamics between the free versus the captive body, ruling and intact bodies versus ruled and broken bodies. The interrelation of body control, subjugation, power, and sovereignty is extensively elaborated on by Foucault in his concept of biopower. For him, disciplining measures are enacted on and through the body which he furthermore conceives of as the site of power and social control. He speaks about the systematic regulation of bodies and docility and contends that “the body that is manipulated, shaped, trained, which obeys, responds, becomes skillful and increases its forces. [...] A body that is docile may be subjected, used, transformed and improved” (Foucault 1979: 136). It serves to increase productivity and ultimately to sustain sovereign power. In a system of disenfranchisement such as slavery the female body was reduced to its workforce and reproductive capacity.

In this context, Marlene NourbeSe Philip provides an insightful reading of Foucault’s concepts. It is in the “the machine of the plantation” (1997: 92) where the management of bodies takes place to secure profit and the continued existence of the plantation economy and colonial, patriarchal dominance.¹⁰⁹ She makes clear how the enslaved Black female body, her womb as “the *raison d’être* of her importation to the New World” (91), became inextricably connected to the colonial project through the establishment of a ‘sexual economy’ of rape: “By far *the* most efficient management tool of women is the possibility of the uninvited and forceful invasion of the space between the legs. [...] The inner space between the legs linked irrevocably to the outer space of the plantation” (75, 93).¹¹⁰ Made explicit in this quote is how colonial violence is staged

109 Philip’s use of the machine is remindful, too, of the panopticon in Foucault’s *Discipline and Punish* (1975). The symbol may very well be applied to describe contemporary power relations in the Caribbean and the region’s dependency capitalism and sexual economy, and more precisely the management of bodies therein, to pinpoint the permanence and continuity of such hierarchical hegemonies. Another form of biopolitical power is the 1932 law of forced sterilization directed primarily against Women of Color in the United States. What we have here is an institutionalized form of racism attempting a regulation of the reproductive capacity of the ‘non-white’ body, to prevent a white nation from ‘Blackening.’

110 Hilary Beckles confirms: “The enslaved woman, therefore, was completely powerless before the law as far as her body was concerned. Legally she had no body of her own, and certainly no prior right to it. She could not legally deny her owner total access to it” (Beckles 2003: 147). Moreover, in “Caribbean slave societies, hegemonic masculinity ensured its own power primarily through the control of black bodies. White heterosexual males at the apex of society positioned themselves not only as economically and politically powerful, but also exercised ultimate sexual

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on the female body. Also, the violent intrusion into the “inner space” of the body or the threat of it functions as a demonstration of power and a tool both of discipline and punishment. To mention this is to take note of a violent history of the body and destruction in the Caribbean.

The body is subjected to multiple forms of control and disciplining measures. The terror of sexual violence is one form of bodily disenfranchisement and explicit means to exercise power over the subject. There exist other mechanisms more implicit in its operative functioning and ingrained in socialization processes such as compulsive heterosexuality and gender performances but also the gaze or in the Caribbean the regulatory social regime of respectability. The gaze is directed directly at an individual and depending on the onlooker maybe voyeuristic and oppressive – in the case of the one who stares or gazes – or subversive and affirmative – in case the one being gazed at looks back. As suggested by bell hooks, the gaze and the look, such as the phallogentric, racialized gaze hooks mentions, are embedded within structures of domination, inextricably linked to the visibility of physical attributes.¹¹¹ “The gaze is alert everywhere,” as Patricia Hill Collins puts it (1990: 195); it is political, dangerous, and a hurtful weapon. The gaze pierces through the skin; often it is oppressive and degrading. It may cause feelings of inferiority and conditions the individual to certain modes of behavior who then attempts to avoid stigmatization, shame, public embarrassment, or punishment depending on the social context.¹¹² That way bodies are controlled and kept in check. The critical, oppositional gaze as a “politicized looking” (hooks 1992: 116) can turn into a site from where to resist and retain agency. Literary texts, too, participate in the politics of the gaze by means of representation and confront readers with their own fears and prejudice, but also invite readers to read, or “to look differently” (hooks 1992: 130). The bodies in text (written about and upon) possibly unsettle “conventional racist and sexist stereotypical representations” as fictional char-

control over women’s bodies and physical control over black male bodies. They rendered black male slaves powerless through violent, physical control and by denying them legitimate access to both black and white women” (Davis 2006: 27).

111 Arguably, the gaze may be interpreted as an un-institutionalized form of a Foucauldian panopticon that puts the person being gazed at in “a state of conscious and permanent visibility that assures the automatic functioning of power” (Foucault 1979: 201). See also Frantz Fanon’s essay “The Fact of Blackness” on the objectifying gaze of a self at the ‘other.’

112 Erving Goffman, to whom Judith Butler actually refers in her theory of performativity, writes about self-presentation and the adequate performance of identity, or rather the (punitive) consequences if we fail to meet the expected behavior (cf. Goffman 1959).

acters display their bodies “for that look of recognition that affirms their subjectivity” (ibid.).

3.2.2 The Captive Body and Lived Experience

Caribbean and African-American feminists are cautious about over-emphasizing the body’s symbolism at the expense of its materiality. They argue that the body is not just mere discourse or metaphor but corporeal experience and fleshy substance that may be embraced or rejected and subjected to the scrutinizing gaze. In the collection *Daughters of Caliban* (1997), Consuelo López Springfield makes clear where Butler’s argumentation fails to fully explain the body in the Caribbean against its colonial history.

[T]he depiction of the “body-as-metaphor” must be seen in the context of political systems where women’s bodies have been subject to abuse, rape, torture, and dismemberment precisely because this very treatment, through its interpretation as symbolic construct, has been an effective method of political control. Their reading of the body thus emerges from an ever-present threat to their own vulnerable flesh and blood, and the resulting symbolism is too close to the material body to allow for the comfort of seeing this danger merely as metaphor. (López Springfield 1997: 8)

The four Caribbean writers considered here in one way or another come back to this body in pain and agony and to wounded flesh to memorize psychic mutilation and corporeal suffering beyond mere metaphorical meaning.

Likewise, Hortense Spillers is cautious to consider the body solely as discursive construct and metaphor, and describes the atrocities of slavery as “*a theft of the body*” and “high crimes against the *flesh*” (Spillers 1987: 67; all italics in original). She distinguishes between flesh and body in order to differentiate the “captive” from the “liberated” body or subject. In the context of the “socio-political order of the New World” (ibid.), meaning colonialism and enslavement, for the captive African and indigenous bodies – objects of “otherness” and embodiments of “sheer physical powerlessness” – this distinction is crucial to notice the “*actual* mutilation” (ibid.) of the flesh. Therefore, she argues, “before the ‘body’ there is the ‘flesh,’ that zero degree of social conceptualization that does not escape concealment under the brush of discourse” (ibid.). Yet, she departs with phenomenology in their view of the existence of a pre-discursive body material. In the colonial moment and set against ingrained power structures of inequalities (like racism, sexism, or classism) the body is never without

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meaning or neutral and impossible to be discoursed away.¹¹³ The flesh, in its “seared, divided, ripped-apartness,” is the “primary narrative” or testimony of colonial violence. While the flesh is being marked, branded, and engraved quite literally, the body displays or remembers what Brinda Mehta describes as the “violent wounds of history” (2009: 2).

Spillers’ statement, “This body [...] bears in person the marks of a cultural text” (67), brings up the idea not only of the body as decipherable narrative but also of the lived body that is being inscribed with and memorizes experiences. Indeed, social life is made up of multiple identity positions. Critical race theory and Black Feminism have consistently pointed out the social and cultural role of gender, race, class, religion, and ethnicity as intersecting with other societal factors to determine a body’s location as within or outside of a perceived normality. Both schools of thought define the body as lived, thereby focusing on the political implication of the embodied experience of these factors. They pay attention to interlocking factors that “produce a web of experiences shaping diversity” and a lived reality, as Hill Collins, contends emphasizing the “connection between experience and consciousness that shapes the everyday lives” (1990: 24) of individual beings in different ways.

The notion of the lived body and the concept of intercorporeality are important also in phenomenology. Intercorporeality refers to the relation of bodies with each other and their environments, of being in and opened to the world.¹¹⁴ The body, neither a static nor an unchanging entity, relates to a lived reality and is a concrete fact of the quotidian. This is a basic, universal assumption. Maurice Merleau-Ponty, in *Phénoménologie de la perception*, develops the theoretical underpinnings of the *corps vécu*, the lived body. The subject be-

113 She also rethinks the conceptualization of gender and identity and the body in the Americas, contending how in contexts of dominance and oppression, gender differences “adhere to no symbolic integrity” (Spillers 1987: 66) and succumb to the hegemony of ethnicity.

114 Cf. Howson 2013: 72. Sociologist Chris Shilling shows that the body is “a multi-dimensional medium for the constitution of society” and proposes a “corporeal realism” as theoretical framework. Corporeal realism views social structures and embodied subjects as emergent phenomena that are bodily and socially generative and productive while also constraining and limiting over time. The notion of corporeality builds on a triadic understanding of the body as being simultaneously a “source for the creation of social life [...] as a *location* for the structural properties of society[...], [and] a vital *means* through which individuals are *positioned* within and *oriented towards* society” (2005: 10-11; emphasis in original). This brings to mind Giddens’ notion of individual agency and a subject’s capacity to intervene in her environment and potentially initiate transformation. Shilling, however, fails to include ‘race’ as category crucial for and constitutive of contemporary society in his depiction of the body as “surface phenomenon” (Shilling 2005: 5).

comes defined by means of her perception and embodied existence, and moves from *having* a body to also *being* that body which Merleau-Ponty conceives of as neutral and pre-personal. He considers the body “as a source of the self and of society” (1962: 56). The apprehension of the social world happens through the body. That way the body is lived and shaped by everyday experiences and activities of various kinds both consciously and unconsciously.¹¹⁵ Although I share the assumption of the body as lived, I wish to join common criticism of phenomenological approaches to the body mostly for its apolitical notion of a “pre-personal” (Morris 2008: 115) body in neglect of both power relations as well as differences in embodied perceptions that are indeed specific to gender, race, ethnicity, and culture.¹¹⁶

The assumption that the body is lived and shaped by its specific historical context as well as personal experience counters monolithic constructions of subjecthood as well as universalist notions of, for example, female embodiment. Without doubt, “[m]etaphorically and physically the body is one of the most immediate and poignant testimonies to lived experience, and as such it is one of the most complex and contested political texts” (Mains 2004: 190). If one follows Teresa de Lauretis, experience can be understood as

a process by which, for all social beings, subjectivity is constructed. Through that process one places oneself or is placed in social reality, and so perceives and comprehends as subjective (referring to, even originating in, oneself) those relations – material, economic, and interpersonal – which are in fact social and, in a larger perspective, historical. (1984: 159)

The *lived body* as the general or universal condition or fact of being in the world needs to be reconsidered by adding here the notion of *lived experience*, meaning the body as experienced specifically by the self and referring to individual and collective experience of inhabiting the world as well as cultural imprint. This emphasizes the heterogeneity of a lived body as the life of each

115 “The process is continuous, its achievement unending or daily renewed. For each person, therefore, subjectivity is an ongoing construction, not a fixed point of departure or arrival from which one then interacts with the world. On the contrary, it is the effect of that interaction which I call experience; and thus it is produced not by external ideas, values, or material causes, but by one’s personal, subjective, engagement in the practices, discourses, and institutions that lend significance (value, meaning, and affect) to the events of the world” (de Lauretis 1984: 159). This engagement is largely an unconscious process of the incorporation of certain values and meanings which are culturally specific and vary according to differences in subject positions.

116 See also Grosz’ criticism of Merleau-Ponty (e.g. Grosz 1994: 108-109).

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individual is altered, influenced, and produced by specific historical, socio-political, cultural conditions, which affects the ways the body is perceived by the self and by others. Grosz reconceptualizes the lived body “as it is represented and used in specific ways in particular cultures [...] interwoven with and constitutive of systems of meaning, signification, and representation” (Grosz 1994: 18).¹¹⁷ A lived body also communicates experience. The consideration of personal experience allows for a theoretical reconsideration and interpretation of individual reality which plays a role in the production of situational knowledge.

3.2.3 Racialized Body Politics and Respectability

Caribbean societies are generally described as creolized, yet they differ immensely in their ethnic compositions as they do with regard to their dominant discourses on cultural and racial difference along with corresponding political and social practices of inclusion and exclusion. Patricia Mohammed hints at the contradictions inherent in the racialized/racist body politics that dominate the region’s colonial and postcolonial societies, stating that a “mixed-race population was one of the early by-products of colonization and slavery, but one which was troublesome to a system which thrived on distinctions of race, class and colour” (Mohammed 2000: 23). The ‘mulatto woman’ particularly was regarded as unsettling to the black and white binary fostered by colonialism. The surveillance and “criticism of white creole women echoed colonial anxieties about the potential for the white female body to become the conduit of white racial degeneracy and imperial decline” (Jones 2015: n.p.). The presence of the *mulata* body fueled colonial fear for whiteness in her embodiment of ‘racial contamination,’ but also did not fit completely among the black population. Yet she was the epitome of ‘desirable exotic beauty’ and has become representative of national unity and harmonious race relations and the plurality of the de- and postcolonial Caribbean nation states.¹¹⁸ Her intermediate position in fact discloses the constructedness of race and its workings of power (cf. Mohammed 2000: 29). The figure of the ‘tragic *mulata*’ in twentieth-century literature and

117 This is also from where a collective standpoint and identity politics can be formulated.

118 The beauty and desirability of the creole woman is praised (and commodified) in Caribbean popular culture, for example by Jamaican dancehall artist Buju Banton in “Love Me Browning” (1992).

film is a popular icon that stages this conflicting racial identity in its gendered dimension (cf. Blanco Borelli 2016; see also chapter 7).

Contemporary Caribbean national discourses build on creoleness. To describe the ethnic composition and racially stratified society Mohammed alludes to, Percy Hintzen adopts the concept of the “Creole continuum” with Afro- and white creole adopting either end. This rather fluid color-class pattern “is to be constituted of various degrees of cultural and racial mixing” which bears witness to the region’s own diaspora history under European rule. “Distance from the ideal European phenotype and from Europe’s cultural practices determines and defines the Creole’s position in the social hierarchy” (Hintzen 2002: 93). Still, in many present-day Caribbean societies whiteness more than Blackness continues to be associated with social status, prestige, access to resources, etc.; here, Hintzen refers to Bourdieu’s notion of symbolic capital. The elite rhetoric of unity in diversity as promoted in Caribbean postcolonial states like Jamaica or Trinidad has the tendency to privilege certain cultural practices and ethnic affiliations while marginalizing others, like indigenous and Indian presences, thus hiding racist prejudice and practices of discrimination that are firmly in place. And while this is a very condensed take on one aspect of racialized body politics in the Caribbean that hardly explains its complexity, it is one aspect that accounts, for example, for the persistent sentiment of anti-blackness, for instance in the Dominican Republic that strongly values its European-Spanish heritage over the African legacy, a stance contrary to neighboring Haiti, where the affirmation of Blackness played a major role, for instance, in their struggle for independence.

Discourses on cultural identity often reproduce and strengthen racialized body politics. The presence of the contracted laborers from the Asian continent and their descendants destabilized the symbolic order of the “Creole continuum” in particular in Trinidad and Guyana. As Jennifer Rahim explains, from within the Indo-Caribbean community has arisen unease with the identity concept of creoleness, or *creolité*, being regarded as “an accommodation that privileges the Afro-Creole influence” (Rahim 2009: para. 3). The concept of douglarization, referring basically to the blending of Afro- and Indo-Caribbean elements and interracial union, has been suggested by several scholars in order to undo the political and cultural exclusion of the Indo-Caribbean experience from the national body politics but has been far less effective as identity concept than *creolité* (cf. Rahim 2009; Puri 2004).¹¹⁹ Similarly, the (transcultural) concept of *coolitude*, coined by Mauritian poet Khal Torabully in 1992, is suggested as a creative, affirmative identity concept for the Indian diaspora com-

119 This particular aspect will be dealt with in more detail in chapter 5.

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plimentary to Aimé Césaire's Afro-centric *négritude*. Both the dougla and 'coolie' body are perceived as the 'Other,' the abject that unsettles a symbolic hegemony, to use Butler's phrasing, and discourses of ethnic 'purity.' Many critics have pointed out the precarious condition of the female body in these constellations on which neo-/colonial and communal violence have been staged and claims for 'purity,' difference, and citizenship have been projected (cf. Thomas 2011: 8-9; Anatol 2015: 12). Thus, Indian womanhood, for example, has emerged to safeguard Indian ethnic identity and to secure Indian patriarchy in the diaspora leading to increased surveillance of her body and sexuality (cf. Reddock 1998a, b; Niranjana 2006).¹²⁰ Compulsory heterosexuality as well as strictly defined gender identities have helped to guarantee women's submissiveness (e.g. in some Indo-Caribbean families Brahminic ideals of femininity and masculinity fix the body in clearly defined roles). The untouched female body in particular has been considered as a bastion against miscegenation and as vehicle in the aspiration towards a respectable status.

If social capital continues to be connected to ethnic identity and race, or whiteness, 'moral capital' and status can be attained through respectability, which, however, is not detached from racial 'belonging' and ethnicity either. Under British colonial rule, a strict, racist politics of sexual control of the predominantly Black population was enforced by the colonizers through respectable conduct, which later helped to foster the pathologization of homosexuality. On the other hand, respectability was adapted counter-wise by the Black population as moral uplift and demarcation from the sexual excesses and perceived perversion of the colonizers (cf. LaFont 2001; see chapter 4).¹²¹ Today, respectability is part of a normative discourse of citizenship in the Caribbean, more aptly described as a heteropatriarchal body politics that transcends the distinc-

120 In particular due to the imbalanced gender ratio among Indians on the plantations, arguably, indentureship provided women with comparably more liberty as they were freer to choose their partners and obtain property. One argument of anti-indentureship campaigns in India itself was the perceived decline in sexual morality of women in the colonies. The paradox was that women were the gatekeepers of 'Indianness' in the diaspora but marked as the 'Other' within nationalist discourses in India (cf. Niranjana 2006). Two publications, *Coolie Woman: The Odyssey of Indenture* (2013) by Gaiutra Bahadur and *Maharani's Misery: Narratives of a Passage from India to the Caribbean* (2002) by Verene Shepherd, reveal the precarious living conditions and pressure put on these women. See also chapter 5.

121 Bridget Brereton confirms for colonial Trinidad that persons were respectable by definition of their whiteness (1979: 211), which is valid still in the second half of the twentieth century when 'moral capital' continues to be associated with lighter skin. On the concepts of reputation and representability, see e.g. Besson (1993) and Rowe (2009).

tion between intimacy and public sphere by promoting personal and communal progress, middle-class values, thrift, education, consumption, Christian morality, and marriage (cf. Thomas 2004). Respectable life style is reproduced within the nuclear family and enforced through socialization. It functions also as a regulatory regime to ensure heteronormative gender performances and sexuality.¹²²

Especially in the Anglophone Caribbean, respectability has emerged as one of the pillars of national identity and upward mobility. However, its fragility becomes apparent considering the extent to which sexual deviance and other transgressions are perceived as threat to the battalion of middle-class morality (cf. Helber 2015; Thomas 2011; Alexander 2005). In the reading of the four novels, I refer to respectability as socially constructed and disclose the extent to which strict morality defines and constrains the protagonists' self-actualization and possibility of free sexual expression. This shall furthermore reveal in how far the homosexual body, the prostitute's body, and the HIV-infected body is perceived to be in disharmony with the respectable social body.

3.3 Beyond the Body as Text

EarthSilenceSoundBodyText
(NourbeSe Philip 1997: 91)

Despite its obvious material absence, the body is omnipresent in literature in multiple representations of corporeal experiences and embodiment.¹²³ Often, these literary representations disclose the political implications of the relation between body and identity and can unsettle and deconstruct normative views of subjectivity. Marlene NourbeSe Philip's narrative essay "Dis Place – The Space Between" illuminates how the once colonized Caribbean body is written back into the text and how corporeality may be transmitted via the text. In this respect, the poem in the subsection "Silence and the space between" is worth quoting here:

122 The entanglement of heterosexuality and citizenship in the Caribbean are "linked to desires for 'respectability' and 'decency' that are completely based on a western epistemological frame of reference – and, more specifically, on a colonial, pseudo-Victorian mutation of this order" (Kamugisha 2007: 35).

123 This does not mean that I conceive of the literary text as body itself. It is the body as text in the text, written about and inscribed with meaning that I deal with here.

arising from the body” (Punday 2000: 227), Punday’s suggestion of a “corporeal narratology” attends to the body as a textual element itself. He regards the body to be as crucial for the construction of a narrative as place, characters, and time. He points out narratology’s neglect of what and how bodies are represented and charged with meaning by the narrative and in turn shape the narration itself. The body, according to Punday, is made relevant for the narrative through the range and sorting of types of bodies, the distinction of human from non-human bodies and bodies from objects (although materialists might have a problem with the lack of agency he thus ascribes to inanimate things), the interaction of bodies and the relation to their environments, as well as the degree of the characters’ dis-/embodiment.¹²⁶ Lastly, adopting from Grosz the “corporeality of ‘touch,’” (236) Punday means to investigate the body as mediating instance through which reader, text, and characters are brought into touch or contact with each other.

Putting this approach into practice, Joan Riley’s *The Unbelonging* (1985) is an apt example. In this coming-of-age novel a young girl from Jamaica, Hyacinth, comes to live with her estranged father in England where she is confronted with the racism of British post-World War society and suffers from her abusive father. The sorting of bodies into Black/white and adult/child makes clear two things: first, the politicized racist scheme of white superiority into which the Black body enters; second, the vulnerability of the adolescent female body *vis-à-vis* patriarchal violence. Hyacinth is defined by means of her own body material with the white body as point of reference, “that skin that was so much a badge of acceptance” (Riley 1985: 75). Moreover, assigned to the setting of the school’s changing room is a racialized hierarchy of Black and white bodies, or to put it differently this kind of embodied space regulates the behavior of the subjects inhabiting it, exposing Hyacinth to the stares of her white classmates, her body set against the tiled coldness of the room. Her adult body is rendered dysfunctional through the shame caused by the very corporeal childhood experience of abuse and wetting the bed which has imprinted her consciousness. Despite her father’s absence his body still haunts her and materializes in her imagination leaving her sexually and emotionally immobile. The character’s refusal to engage with her surrounding and other human bodies can be interpreted as criticism of a society’s demands for human sociability, while at other times her seeking out company shows her want for conformity, approval, and belonging. Lastly, the reader’s position towards the narrative is not

126 Daniel Punday exemplifies his approach with reference especially to Toni Morrison’s *Beloved* (cf. 2000: 237-238).

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only directed through perspective and focalization, but also Hyacinth's "highly marked physical embodiment," to use Punday's wording (234).

Although some observations Punday makes are problematic, especially with regard to his analysis of body 'types' which must remain within preconceived essential, stereotypical views on the body or the reproduction of an unmarked *whiteness*, the approach foregrounds the fictional body in multiple ways. The view of the body in relation, recalling here what Merleau-Ponty describes as intercorporeality, helps to retrace the formation of the subject in interaction with others and her situatedness in particular spatial and temporal context. Also, a close reading of the body automatically involves a closer look at the conditions that brought this body about. Hence, agreeing with Punday, a "[c]oncern for how the body is endowed with meaning within a narrative will usually touch on systems of meaning that extend far beyond the text itself" (229).

Caribbean writers, in the coming-of-age form in particular, approach body matters from different often conflicting perspectives. Novels such as *This Body* (2004) and *Out of My Skin* (1998), both by Tessa McWatt, or *The Farming of Bones* (1998), by Danticat, make explicit (not only) in their titles a concern with the body. They then reveal the limitations of the physical body, while also highlighting its symbolical force.¹²⁷ In addition, novels such as Marie-Elena John's *Unburnable* (2007), Maryse Condé's *Histoire de la femme cannibale* (2003), or *Sirena Selena vestida de pena* (2008) by Mayra Santos-Febres, hint at corporeal in/destructiveness and the pain the subject experiences with and through the body. Santos-Febres, for instance, illustrates how cultural and heteronormative codes are inscribed on the sexual body and may eventually be subverted through gender transformation and drag performances.¹²⁸ Just like NourbeSe Philip's poem, these novelistic "Textbodies" document the violation and colonial subjection experienced by the female and non-normative or queer body, but also the protagonists' rebellion against these very same experiences and their desire to disrupt and interrupt the silence that has surrounded them, and become a source of knowledge about a silenced past.

The body is fundamental to our being as well as repository of individual experience and collective memory. In the four selected novels the body does not forget but remembers always. Reading the body "as both a palimpsest and as a

127 The title of the novels by Trinidadian Harald Sonny Ladoo, *No Pain Like This Body* (1972), or Barbadian George Lemming, *The Castle of My Skin* (1953), are suggestive of the interest in the corporeal in earlier Caribbean literature.

128 Two further examples are Patricia Powell's *The Pagoda* (1998) or Achy Obeja's novel *Memory Mambo* (1996).

thing in a state of permanent becoming,” as suggested by Vanessa Agard-Jones (2013: 187),¹²⁹ highlights on the one hand the processual becoming of embodied subjectivity. On the other hand, the metaphor of the palimpsest implies that the body (as a lived body) is written upon and re-inscribed with meaning and by experience. These inscriptions may leave traces – *visible* on the skin, like stretch marks of puberty or pregnancy or scars caused by injury or physical violence; and *invisible* as emotional scars caused by violent intrusion, depression, or trauma; or even as *symbolic* for migration and exile (as a form of embodied memory). The body bears the imprints and evidence of the past and present, they cannot be erased entirely but shining through will be remembered. In this sense, the body is never a *tabula rasa*. The idea of the body as palimpsest furthermore implies the possibility for transformation of the subject, becoming another body but not quite completely. That way, bodies in agony or a tortured body may be written over again and reclaimed in positive terms, as the endings of *The Unbelonging* or, as will be seen, *Breath, Eyes, Memory*, indicate.

As mentioned earlier, the novel of development elaborates on individual development and a subject’s dis-/integration into society, thereby disclosing mechanisms of inclusion and exclusion as well as societal forms of discrimination which are articulated through citizenship status. Hence, the body is not only a locus of memory and remembrance, but also a political issue that matters in the articulation of citizenship rights and, in many cases, the denial of the very same. Exclusion or inclusion is generated, among other things, through perceptions of the corporeal and ascriptions to or inscriptions on the body. Writing the body in case of Caribbean and diaspora literature is also writing about and challenging both legal and cultural concepts of citizenship. The coming-of-age novel that centers on the body, sexual autonomy, and citizenship rights foregrounds the legal, juridical dimension of embodied identity. Francis’ book on feminine citizenship in Caribbean literature focuses on the political dimension and regulation of intimacy and the private sphere in postcolonial societies. She introduces the concept of sexual citizenship to juxtapose – via a racialized, female gendered body – intimate and archival violence, i.e. the exclusion from historical record, with practices and the status of citizenship as

129 Vanessa Agard-Jones, a political anthropologist, conducts research on the body, agriculture, pesticides, and postcolonial power relations in Martinique. What I find interesting and relevant here, is that she understands the body as product of social relations and as assemblage “containing multiple forms of agency and bearing the traces of multiple forms of power” (2013: 187). Although not applied in a strictly narratological sense, her use of the metaphor of the palimpsest is insightful for how bodies are constantly evolving and relate to their context of global capitalism.

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well as national and/or diasporic belonging (cf. Francis 2010).¹³⁰ She analyses various scenes of subjection and sexual violence in the novels of five diaspora writers, among them Edwidge Danticat and Angie Cruz. In her analysis ‘the body in pain’¹³¹ takes precedence to show Caribbean women’s struggles for political rights and access to civic participation. At first it may appear as if Francis were substituting one stereotype of womanhood with the other, that of strength and resilience with pain and agony.¹³² She does so, however, not in order to reduce Caribbean women to a status of victimhood, but to unravel the politics of silence in Caribbean communities and official historical records that obscures not only intimate violence but also “forbidden intimate desire” (10). The exploration of the body in pain, she argues, probes “the politics behind those intimate histories concealed from view to reveal the cultural mechanisms utilized to hide these often violent practices by casting them as benign traditions” (10-11). Reading the body based on this premise brings into relief the pain inflicted onto the body and felt by the embodied subject. Women writers like the four under discussion here – and here I wish to draw from Francis’ argument – “provide the textual space for bodies in pain and for Caribbean women and girls of different races and ethnicities to *dwell* on the sad or depressed body as both aesthetically and politically generative and enabling” (11). Consequently, of issue is not the spectacular representation of violence or the intensity of pain itself, but rather what these bodies reveal about regulatory regimes within a society and their origins and how they may be subverted.

Another concept that grasps these complex issues in a similar way is Guillermina De Ferrari’s idea of the *vulnerable body* and *corporeal fragility* paired with the assumption that the body is capable to produce social meaning, which I find highly productive for the analysis of the four novels selected here.

130 Francis understands sexual citizenship to incorporate not only a “politico-judicial contract” but also practices of sociocultural belonging, “which includes sexual practices such as the freedom to choose to reproduce or not, the liberty of sexual expression and association, as well as the more conventional articulation of protection from sexual violence” (2010: 4). Drawing from David Evans’ understanding that genders, bodies, and sexualities are political issues and matter for citizens, she extends the concept of sexual citizenship to emphasize how “bodily regulations also apply to different racial and gender configurations and to examine how the intimate domain reveals the concealed sexual qualifications of political rights for all citizens” (ibid.).

131 The term is a reference to Elaine Scarry’s insightful monograph of the same title (cf. 1985).

132 The tendency in pre-1990 Caribbean women’s writing to essentialize the Black body as site of strength or nurturing in form of the stereotypical desexualized maternal body has been contested (cf. Brand 1994; Donnell 2006).

Interestingly, she notes two interrelated trends in the recent literature from across the Caribbean – and this observation can certainly be extended to the diaspora literature: “a preoccupation with the local cultural and political circumstances that have resulted from colonization, and an exhibitionist attitude toward the body in its most vulnerable states” (De Ferrari 2007: 2). All bodies are vulnerable to outside forces and ascriptions and fragile when it comes to their (material) constitution. But, the notable concern with the body in Caribbean writing, according to De Ferrari, derives from the symbolic and actual dismemberment and appropriation of human bodies that constitutes the point of origin of the Caribbean as we conceive of it nowadays (cf. De Ferrari 2007: 3). What is instructive about De Ferrari’s thinking are the myriad dimensions the body apparently has in Caribbean fictional writing – e.g. the raced and gendered, the childhood, the soiled, the abject and ill, or erotic and hypersexualized body (cf. 25-26) – which she links across temporal and spatial distance through the notion that the body in its vulnerability constitutes a creative “site of memory and contestation” (3). She shows that “the myth of the vulnerable body” is in fact a literary strategy adapted by the authors to “unmake local colonial subjectivities as well as to establish their own Caribbean poetics within the framework established by the creative violence of history, which they transcend nonetheless” (ibid.).¹³³ Reading it thusly, the vulnerable body provides “fertile semantic grounds for negotiating the political through the personal” (26), which resonates with a feminist understanding of intimacy in which the personal is always political.

The following reading of the coming-of-age novels reveals that the body is multi-dimensional; that it is at the same time discourse and matter, process and status, is palimpsestic and inscribed with meaning. The four contemporary writers considered here critically engage with the gender and body politics in the Caribbean and its diaspora communities. In one way or another, their protagonists need to negotiate their embodied existence and rights to ownership of their bodies within post- and neocolonial conditions of dominance and power. In these personal stories of migration, intimacy and the body are always sites of struggle for autonomy and control revealing the extent to which women’s sexuality is surveilled and restricted. As a matter of fact, in many cases, the sexual encounters described in the novels render the female body vulnerable, often leaving the protagonists in shame. Thus, the social pressure and stigmata connected to the female body is very much present in each of these texts,

133 She builds on Glissant’s foundational conceptualization of the Caribbean in terms of “Relation” and the “absence of uninterrupted Filiation” (De Ferrari 2007: 22), or the missing root.

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which leads me to the following questions: Which bodies are made meaningful through the narrative? What silences do these bodies reveal? How is the body inscribed by history, culture, and the nation? As this study contends, Silvera, Espinet, Danticat, and Cruz narrate stories of bodies that want to belong but also offer stories of those that refuse to conform. These fictional bodies can be messy, unruly, and disobedient. Some of them appear to be extraordinary, grotesque, rebelling, while others are regulated, corrupted, or cooperating. A corporeal narratology that understands the body as palimpsest in tandem with its fragility (though avoiding a single focus on its vulnerability), then, foregrounds the intertwining of body and text. It engenders an analysis of the ways the narrative structure of the coming-of-age novel manifests itself via the maturing body and different stages of womanhood; how bodies act as medium of communication and to get in touch; how the privileging of certain bodies makes one question social perceptions of the world.