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CORPOREAL ACTIVISM IN ELIZABETH ACEVEDO'S *THE POET X:* TOWARDS A SELF-APPROPRIATION OF US AFRO-LATINAS' BODIES[1]

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ABSTRACT
Scholars have typically studied Chicanas/Latinas in the US and African American women separately. However, this paper explores both the cultural appropriation of Afro-Latinas' bodies in the US and the strategies they employed to reclaim their bodies and agencies through Elizabeth Acevedo's novel, *The Poet X*. The protagonist's body is simultaneously and paradoxically hyper-sexualized by racist discourses, and called to chastity by the patriarchal Catholic doctrine presiding over her Dominican community. Nevertheless, I argue that the protagonist makes her body a site of activism as she re-appropriates the agency over her body by moving from a self-imposed invisibility and silence in order to try to avoid the hyper-sexualization of her incipient curves, to a non-objectified visible position through her sexual desire, self-representative embodied narrative, and performance of her slam poetry.
RESUMEN
La crítica académica ha estudiado a las mujeres chicanas/latinas y afroamericanas de manera separada. Sin embargo, este artículo explora tanto la apropiación cultural de los cuerpos de las

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afrolatinas como sus estrategias para reclamarlos a través de la novela de Elizabeth Acevedo, *The Poet X*. El cuerpo de la protagonista es simultánea y paradójicamente hipersexualizado por los discursos racistas y llamado a la castidad por las doctrinas católicas patriarcales presentes en su comunidad dominicana. No obstante, argumento que la protagonista hace de su cuerpo un sitio para el activismo ya que consigue moverse de una posición auto impuesta de invisibilidad y silencio para evitar la sexualización de sus incipientes curvas a una posición de visibilidad no cosificada gracias a su deseo sexual y a la recitación de la poesía que proviene de su cuerpo y la representa.

I. INTRODUCTION

This paper explores both the cultural appropriation of US Afro-Latinas' bodies and the strategies employed by them to reclaim their bodies and agencies. For this purpose, Elizabeth Acevedo's verse novel, *The Poet X*, is analyzed since the protagonist's body is dominated by racial and patriarchal discourses, especially, in the form of the Catholicism imposed both by her Afro-Dominican community and her mother. Nevertheless, the protagonist manages to re-appropriate her body and her subjectivity by means of her own sexual desire and self-representative embodied slam poetry.

Although since the 80s, works such as Joseph Harris' and Paul Giroy's have marked a turn to African diaspora within Black studies, the literature has mainly focused on Black anglophone communities and men. Among others, Ledent and Cuder-Domínguez (2012), Durán-Almarza and Álvarez-López (2014), or Melissa Schindler (2014) have criticized this biased view that misrepresents diasporic women and the large African-descended population in the Caribbean and Latin-American (Gallego 58-61). This critical neglect has been sometimes attributed to the ideas of mestizaje that have circulated in Latin America and the Caribbean, and which have made blackness invisible. However, intellectuals such as the Brazilian scholar Lélia Gonzalez have been long claiming the existence of *Latinegros* and establishing the bases of Afro-Latin feminism. Journals such as *Meridians: feminism, race, transnationalism* means a contemporary significant contribution to this field.

Despite the growing literature on Afro-Latinx in Latin America and the Caribbean, not much attention has been paid to US Black Latinos, their double diaspora, identity negotiations and racial

fluctuations. It is also important to focus on this context since true diasporic and transnational studies do not only address the global, but the specific in order to "work through difference" and escape essentialism (Lorde "Women Redefining Difference" 284-5). As Brent Hayes Edwards claims, "diaspora is a linkage only through and across difference" (65). In the US, Chicanos/Latinos and African Americans have been typically studied separately (Mills 112). Latinx Studies do not usually include US Latinos of African descent. On the other hand, US Black studies usually focus on the experiences of African Americans, disregarding the experiences of other Black people in the US who also live a racialized identity. Nevertheless, the pioneer volumes by Jiménez-Román and Flores —*Afro-latin@ Reader: History and Culture in the US* (2010)— and Rivera-Rideau, Jones and Paschel —*Afro-Latin@s in Movement: Critical Approaches to Blackness and Transnationalism in the Americas* (2016)— have established the bases of Black Latinidad in the US that subsequent articles and thesis have followed.

Nevertheless, there is still much to do regarding Afro-Latinx literature, especially female authors. US Latino anthologies, like Norton or Oxford one, do not normally address Afro-Latin writers specifically, and when they do, they mainly focus on "Nuyorican Poetry."[2] Both Richardson's *The Afro-Latin@ Experience in Contemporary American Literature* (2016) and the later special of "Label me Latino/a" issue, also edited by Jill Toliver Richardson, on Afro-Latinx Literature and Performance (2017) have implied a turn away from the previous focus on "Nuyorican Poetry," considering other genres and nationalities, and featuring more recent authors. However, these compilations do not specifically analyze female authors. In that sense, *Women Warriors of the Afro-Latina Diaspora* (Vega, Modestin and Alba, 2012) means a very helpful source for gender issues, although it does not address US Afro-Latinas' literature. Thus, taking into account that US Afro-Latina feminist and literary studies are still a developing field, this paper also considers other literary and feminist bodies of work, such as Black, Latina/Chicana, Afro-Latina and Afro-Carribean theory in order to explore all the intersections that US Afro-Latinas' fluid, transnational and diasporic identities have. As the US Afro-Dominican feminist

[2] *The Norton anthology of Latino Literature*, edited by Ilan Stavans and Edna Acosta-Belén, Norton (2010). *Herencia: the anthology of Hispanic literature of the United States*, edited by Nicolás Kanellos, Oxford University Press (2003).

and literary scholar Omaris Zamora claims, "we are not a fragmented body, even if we embody multiple understandings of feminism" (*(Trance)formations of an AfroLatina* 175).

As a relatively neglected field of study, much could be said about US Afro-Latinas' experiences and literary representation. In this context, this paper focuses on the cultural appropriation of Afro-Latinas' bodies and their corporeal strategies to reclaim them. To do so, Elizabeth Acevedo's *The Poet X* is analyzed. She belongs to a new generation of Afro-Latin authors, who the latest critical reviews and anthologies, such as Richardson's (2017), have not yet featured. Acevedo's work won the 2018 National Book Award for Young People's Literature and the 2019 Pure Belpré Author Award for celebrating, affirming, and portraying Latinx culture and experience in the US.[3] In this semi-autobiographical novel made of narrative poems, the Afro-Dominican and New Yorker national slam poetry winner, Elizabeth Acevedo, tells the story of Xiomara, an Afro-Latin teenager, whose incipient body curves are problematizing her adolescence in Harlem.

This "portrait of the artist as a young woman" deals with Xiomara's evolutionary process of self-representation as a poet. Through this metanarrative, the reader accompanies a fifteen-year-old Xiomara on her journey from echoing dominant images and stereotypes against Afro-Latinas in her poetry to developing her own voice. In this journey, she also has to make the difficult decision of discontinuing confirmation class, for which her mother signs her up, to go to the poetry club run by her Afro-Latina English teacher, Ms. Galiano, as they are scheduled at the same time. Thus, she evolves from having her body appropriated by racist and sexist discourses, especially in the form of Catholicism, to reclaim both her body and subjectivity through slam poetry and the desire she experiences when falling in love with Aman, one of her high-school classmates. In this way, during her adolescence, Xiomara does not only develop her pubertal body, but also her agency over it.

This paper is organized in two sections. The first one, "The Appropriated Body," analyzes how Afro-Latinas' bodies are on one hand hyper-sexualized by colonially rooted discourses and on the other, called to chastity by Catholic doctrines. The second section, "The Reclaimed Body and Subjectivity," studies the corporeal practices (desire and slam poetry) that Xiomara uses to finally link

[3] www.acevedowrites.com/about

her agency/subjectivity and body after centuries of disassociation, and which, therefore, reclaim the latter from oppressive narratives.

II. THE APPROPIATED BODY

Xiomara's incipient curves are intersectionally sexualized due to her racial and cultural origin by dominant racist and sexist discourses and forces which can be traced back to the bodily practices of colonization and slavery and continue operating through current systems such as capitalism, and at the same time are called to chastity by the patriarchal Catholic ideology that prevails in Latino communities, as *The Poet X* shows.

Colonialism conquered female bodies just as it did territories. Indigenous and enslaved African women were not only physically exploited —women were commodified both as workers and bearers of new slaves—, but also culturally abused by the imperialist narratives that classified them as animals, uncontrollably sexual and wild (Lugones 743). Part of this racist imagery is the "Jezebel" stereotype which objectified Black women's physical attributes, such as the buttocks, by considering them "excessive" and therefore signs of their animal hypersexuality (Collins, *Black Sexual Politics* 119-148). This narrative of dehumanization and sexualization was made to justify rape and sexual abuse. However, the exploitation, objectification, and fragmentation of colored female bodies did not end after slavery and colonization. In its different formulations like neocolonialism and capitalism, the dynamics of oppression in race/class/gender/sexual relations continue working to create bodily hierarchies and structures of power in order to make profit. What bell hooks calls "imperialist white-supremacist capitalist patriarchy," that is, the intersection of all these current forces, is one of the most effective forms of Foucault's "biopower" (hooks 2004, IX; Foucault 2003, 277). Foucault defines biopower as the modern systems of restriction, which no longer imply physical punishment, but exercise control through social constructions.[4] Capitalism and neocolonialism do not use slavery, military force and other clear ways of physical violence as imperialism did, since the idea of control is less tolerated. However, these systems use cultural coercion by making narratives

[4] While old political systems, like monarchies, had power to take life through violence, current systems of biopower control the population while they are living beings through different methods such as social constructions (Foucault 247).

such as the Jezebel stereotype prevail in the social consciousness.[5] This symbolic violence over Black female bodies culturally appropriates them.

In the poem "How I Feel about Attention" (Acevedo 48), Xiomara comments on how her body is constantly under surveillance. She contends she feels like "a myth, a story distorted, waiting for others to stop and stare" (Acevedo 48). Xiomara is referring to the male gaze that objectifies her and makes her a passive subject who can only wait for others to look at her. By using the words "myth" and "distorted story," Xiomara shows awareness of the constructed component of racist and sexist discourses. Xiomara knows that myths, race and gender are social constructions that have been created to justify structures of power. However, she also warns that the discomfort she experiences when being looked at, as a result of these discourses, is real. If situations are socially defined to be real, they are real in their consequences. By feeling scrutinized through the lens of racist and patriarchal discourses, she considers that this male gaze makes her body "something to be slayed, conquered" (Acevedo 48). In this way, she fantasizes about being a "Dominican Medusa" to transform into stone those who look at her (Acevedo 48).

The conquering effect that these distorted narratives continue to have over racialized women's bodies in nowadays society can be seen in other poems such as "It's Only the First Week of Tenth Grade" (Acevedo 46-7), in which Xiomara narrates an abusive scene during the first week of classes:

> Today, I already had to curse a guy out
> For pulling on my bra strap,
> Then shoved a senior into a locker
> For trying to whisper into my ear.
> "Big body joint," they say,
> "we know what girls like you want." (Acevedo 46)

By introducing the boys' words —"' big body joint' they say 'we know what girls like you want'"— just after their actions —pulling on her

[5] Nevertheless, it is necessary to say that violence persists as a means to circumscribe Black lives. The actions denounced by Black Lives Matter and Me Too in the United States context, the assassination of Marielle Franco in Latin America, and female genital mutilation in Africa are examples of the atrocities that are still committed towards Black female bodies around the world.

bra and whispering into her ear—, Acevedo shows that boys feel entitled to act this way because her "prominent body" is read as a sign of invitation and consent. This scene confirms that that the jezebel stereotype of "excessive and consequently hypersexual Black female bodies" is still used to justify abuses against them. In "Unhide-able" (Acevedo 5), Xiomara also speaks about the hypervisibility of her body, its connection to hypersexuality and of the aggressions she suffers as a consequence of it. Her body, being described as "too much for a young girl," is impossible to hide, and its "excessiveness" is again linked to notions of sexuality (Acevedo 5). In this poem, not only does the male gaze slay her, but also girls and their rumors echo the racist dominant stereotypes that connect her body with hypersexuality by calling her "Ho. Thot. Fast" (Acevedo 5).

Xiomara dates all these instances of harassment and offensive names from when she grows breasts and gets her period. The fact that she does so shows that at the beginning of the novel she blames her body for being the cause of others' behaviors: "And I knew then what I'd known since my period came: my body was trouble" (Acevedo 151). Xiomara has internalized from patriarchy "the provocateur myth," which blames the victim, rather than the perpetrators of harassment. As Nadia Celis Salgado claims, for Afro-Caribbean girls adolescence is an incarcerating process in which their bodies become both origin and victim of male gaze and abuses, so teenagers do not only face physical transformations, but also the loss of their own subjectivity at the expense of the objectification that these corporeal changes bring along (22). In this way, after the bra scene, Xiomara wishes to fold her body into the tiniest corner so she could hide in it. The fact that she says "for me to hide in" clearly points to the dissociation of her body and her subjectivity that patriarchy achieves through objectification (Acevedo 47). Xiomara does not say that she wishes to hide, but rather that she wants to hide herself in her body, thus implying that her body, being appropriated by society and its cultural constructions, is neither an integral part of herself, nor a bearer of her subjectivity. While her excessive body takes space, her agency and subjectivity being removed from it do not have any room left. As she herself recognizes, her body takes more room than her voice (Acevedo 5).

In "Games" (Acevedo 50), another boy, who again alludes to Xiomara's big and hypersexualized body —"that's a lot of body for someone as small as you to handle"—, calls her "*mami*." The term "*mami*" is used in Latin cultures, especially in music genres such as

reggaeton, to express that a woman is "hot." The fact that he uses such an ideologically loaded Spanish word to address Xiomara does not only sexualize her, but also makes clear that he can perceive her Afro-Latin identity. It is worth noticing how Black Latinidad is recognized for sexual purposes, while rendered silent and invisible for many others. Whereas US Afro-Latinx are normally taken as African American for their phenotype and poor scholarly attention has been given to their literary production, the titles of porn videosuse the term "Afro-Latinas" or "Black Latinas" quite often.[6]

It is precisely necessary to consider how Latinidad intersects with race and gender in the appropriation of Afro-Latinas' bodies. In this way, Catholicism has to be understood as part of the cultural appropriation of Afro-Latinas' bodies. Religion is one of the divergent points between African American and Afro-Latin experiences that warns of the dangers of an essential Black feminism. Although there are some Black feminist critiques of patriarchy, sexism, and homophobia in Black churches, in general terms African American authors depict religion in a more positive way than Latin Americans. While the Protestant church has often been instrumental in channeling the social and political struggles of the community (Manigault-Bryant 175), many Latin American feminists consider Catholicism, being linked with Spanish colonialism as a strategy to subdue societies, to play a negative role in reading Afro-Latinas' bodies and sexuality in more positive and emancipatory ways.[7]

Xiomara lines up with these Afro-Latinas who take a critical view of Catholic patriarchal discourse. Several poems in the novel convey Xiomara's rejection towards this patriarchal discourse of Catholicism. In "God" (Acevedo 14), she complains about how the holy trinity doesn't "include the mother;" in "During Communion" (Acevedo 56-7) about God giving her life, but not allowing her to live it the way she wanted to; and in "Church Mass" (Acevedo 58-9) about how girls should be passive and submissive as she is told to wait and obey. In an attempt to show her disagreement with the Catholic

[6] "PornHub", "Xvideos", "Let me jerk", "SpankBang" or "Thumbzilla" are examples of pornographic webpages where videos using the tag "AfroLatina" or "Black Latina" can be found.

[7] The Afro-Latina hip-hop artists Krudas Cubensi denounce in "Mi Cuerpo es Mío" the Catholic control over their bodies and sexuality: "Saquen sus rosarios de nuestros ovarios, saquen sus doctrinas de nuestras vaginas" (take your rosaries out of our ovaries, take your doctrines out of our vaginas).

doctrines she entitles one of her poems "Talking Church," as an irreverent allusion to the expression "talking shit" (Acevedo 132). In "Church Mass" (Acevedo 58-9) Xiomara is also very critical with the racist discourse of Catholicism, and especially with the intersection of racism and sexism within the Church:

> When I'm told
> To wait. To stop. To obey.
> When I'm told not to be to like
> Delilah. Lot's Wife. Eve.
> When the only girl I'm supposed to be
> was an impregnated virgin
> who was probably scared shitless.
> When I'm told fear and fire
> are all this life will hold for me.
> When I look around the church
> And none of the depictions of angels
> or Jesus or Mary, not one of the disciples
> look like me: morenita and big and angry (Acevedo 58-9)

Xiomara holds that there is no room for girls in Catholicism, especially for girls like her, who are "*morenita*, big and angry" (Acevedo 59).[8] She complains about the fact none of the religious figures look "*morenita*" like her (Acevedo 59). Indeed, the only biblical character related to Black folks, Ham, the putative father of Africans, was cursed with heritable servitude, which is interpreted to be a justification for slavery (Keaton 165). Beside this, Xiomara wonders what her position within the Church is if Catholicism's only role

[8] Although "morenita" literally means "little tanned or brown girl," Xiomara is phenotypically Black. The reason to call herself "morenita," rather than "Black," as a person like her would be catalogued in the US's "one-drop" racial system, can be found in her roots. In the Dominican Republic, the terms "*morena*" and "*prieto*" are used for dark-skinned Blacks (Cruz-Janzen 171). Not using the term "negro" responds to the discourse of mestizaje that prevails in Latin America and the Caribbean. The black subject is a direct threat to the project of whitening the population through the idea of mestizaje. Mestizaje is central to the "racial democracy thesis," which asserts that Latinos are so racially mixed that they transcend racial discourse. However, this delusional myth of racial mixture and racial sameness do not exempt Black and indigenous Latinos from racial discrimination. Furthermore, mestizaje dismisses centuries of African legacy and black political mobilization against racial injustices and inequalities in Latin America and the Caribbean. For further information, please read "Ni de aquí, ni de allá": Garífuna Subjectivities and the Politics of Diasporic Belonging (Paul Joseph López Oro).

available for women is to be an "impregnated virgin" (Acevedo 59). Since she is Black, she cannot perform the virginal role because blackness is associated with hypersexuality, and consequently, with "fear and fire", that is, with hellish sin and blame (Acevedo 59). As Zamora holds, because of blackness there no such thing as innocence granted for Black Dominican girls, who are always thought as "willful" ("Black Latina Girlhood Poetics of the Body" 2). By using the word "impregnated" rather than "pregnant" Xiomara points again to the role of passive recipients that women are assigned within the Catholic faith.

However, Xiomara cannot renounce the Catholic appropriation of her body so easily. Catholicism, being part of the Dominican identity, is closely linked to her community. As Alma Itzé Flores claims, for Latinx in the US the ties to religion are cultural (196). This same poem we are referring to, "Church Mass" (Acevedo 58-9), starts by portraying the Latino atmosphere of the Mass: "the church ladies singing hymns to merengue rhythms" and "Father Sean's mangled Spanish sermons." In this way, leaving Church also implies losing a space of community and fellowship. Furthermore, this decision is not understood as a personal option, but as a betrayal and confrontational act to community standards of living. Thus, Xiomara is in a space of negotiation between the connection to her roots and community and the distance she wants to take from specific aspects of it which are oppressive, such as the racist and patriarchal discourse of the Catholic Church.

Xiomara's refusal of religion will not only defy her community, but her devoted mother in particular. Although Xiomara is surrounded by a Catholic community, it is her mother's duty to bring her up in the light of religion. Under patriarchy, it is women's role to raise children according to established values since motherhood does not only reproduce individuals, but also dominant systems (Spillers 465-76). It is especially when migrating that women have the role of culture bearers. Migrating women feel the responsibility of introducing her roots to her daughters; consequently, women become a synonym of tradition (Giró Miranda I). In fact, Altagracia is the impersonation of traditional Dominican Catholicism as her name points out. She is named after the Virgin of Altagracia, the Patron of the Dominican Republic. The symbolism of her name ties Altagracia to Dominican tradition and to Catholic models of femininity. On the other hand, Xiomara's name which means "who is ready for war," highlights her identity as someone who challenges the status quo.

Although Xiomara disagrees with Catholic practices and discourses, it is very difficult to expel Catholicism from her life considering that it is very much linked to her community, and especially to her mother. It is indeed through Altagracia's teachings that Catholicism often appropriates Xiomara's body in a symbolic way. The poem entitled "the most impactful day of your life" about Xiomara's first period is a good example of it (Acevedo 39-40):

> Threw away the box of tampons, saying they were for cueros.
> That she would buy me pads. Said eleven was too young.
> That she would pray on my behalf.
> I didn't understand what she was saying.
> But I stopped crying. I licked at my split lip.
> I prayed for the bleeding to stop. (Acevedo 40)

In this poem, Altagracia relates tampons with "cueros" (Dominican word for "bitches") since she connects them with deflowering, and according to the Catholic doctrine, a woman must be a virgin until marriage (Acevedo 39). After Altagracia's reprimand, Xiomara feels the Catholic blame and wishes "for the bleeding to stop" (Acevedo 40). Again, the body seems to be the one to blame, rather than the social constructions that negatively affect it. This is just an example of how difficult Xiomara's puberty has been since her body starts showing what her Catholic mother considers to be sources of temptation and sin, and consequently of guilt. Indeed, Altagracia tells Xiomara that she would have to pray "extra," so her body did not get her into trouble (Acevedo 151). All Catholics have to pray, but Xiomara having a racialized gendered body has to pray "extra," so her curves do not cause her problems. By saying "so my body didn't get me into trouble" it can be seen how her mother reinforces the patriarchal disassociation of subjectivity and body, since in that sentence that Xiomara reports from her mother, her body and herself are two separate identities: "my body" and ""me" (Acevedo 151).

Altagracia's dissociative goals go further when she tries to disembody desire from her daughter's developing body by forbidding her to date anyone. In this way, Xiomara has to keep her relationship with Aman, her classmate, from her mother. However, when Altagracia finds out, Xiomara is punished physically —standing on her knees in front of their home altar while the floor is covered in rice (Acevedo 198-9)— and psychologically —no phone, no leisure time, etc. By dragging Xiomara to her altar of the Virgin, Altagracia

establishes the Virgin as the pure female model that Xiomara must look at. By punishing her in this way, Xiomara claims that her mother and Church turn into "dirty" what it "feels so good" (Acevedo 131). Indeed, in this poem, "Fingers" (Acevedo 131), Xiomara confesses the shame and guilt that she feels for the pleasure she can find in her own body, as a consequence of the negative associations that female desire has within Catholicism and patriarchy. Desire and sexuality are always a matter of others, for other's consumption through the male gaze or the Catholic sacrament of marriage, and for others to judge her, like her mother or other girls' rumors.

Nevertheless, Altagracia's rigid attitude might not only be read as a vehicle for dominant and oppressive discourses. Altagracia's concerns about Xiomara's body and relationships could also respond to high hopes and overprotection. Elaine Kaplan claims that Black mothers felt cheated when, after many self-sacrifices, their daughters do not experience social uplift (52). Altagracia wants to see her highest self-sacrifice, abandoning her country, turned into a better future for her daughter. In the poem "Diplomas" Altagracia tells Xiomara that she has not come to the US for her to be a teenage mother, but for her to have a degree: "You think I came to this country for this? So you can carry a diploma in your belly but never a degree?" (Acevedo 204). Altagracia envisions higher education as a way to make her daughter's life better and knows that teenage pregnancy could stop Xiomara from reaching that goal. On the other hand, some Black mothers are overprotective to ensure the survival of their kids (Collins "Black Women and Motherhood"183-184). Being aware of the patriarchal and racist narratives against Black female bodies, Altagracia might just want to protect her daughter. Thus, she might not be necessarily blaming Xiomara's body as the cause of possible abuses, but warning Xiomara of the cultural implications of it.

III. BODY AND SUBJECTIVY RECLAIMED

Agency is often conceptualized as a "capacity" or "property" of agents, a formulation that locates agency within individual entities as an immanent potential. However, drawing from Paul Kockelman's study on agency, this paper understands agency as a social and interactional phenomenon, that is, a work in progress (375-401). As a bildungsroman of a diasporic and transnational person, Xiomara's story is not about the subject being, but about the making of the subject. Xiomara's agency and subjectivity are indeed a work in

progress that she needs to negotiate since being a racialized and gendered person they are not taken for granted. However, she finally overcomes objectification through corporeal practices such as embodied discourse, performance, and sexual desire. In this way and taking into account that activism is defined as the engagement in a particular sphere of activity to bring about political or social change, this paper holds that these embodied practices are forms of corporeal activism as they achieve the goal of reclaiming both her subjectivity and body from dominant racist and sexist discourses. Thus, conceptions around the body are reversed. The body is neither the one to blame, nor something to be protected from. It is precisely through the body that an integrative self is accomplished.

In "The Last Fifteen-Year-Old" (Acevedo 151) and "Wants" (Acevedo 146), Xiomara narrates her self-evolution regarding desire. In the past, her body was hyper-sexualized and she was considered "willful," but she did not show any sign of sexual libido. Lines like "boys have wanted to kiss me, and back then I didn't want to kiss them" again show this dissociation between her sexualized body and her non-sexual agency (Acevedo 151). However, once she meets Aman, who does not like her for her body as she was afraid all men would do, Xiomara wants Aman's "fingerprints all over," and "some of these things [men want to do to her body] done" (Acevedo 151, 146). Quotations like these ones and other instances of agency, such as being the one to decide when to have intercourse with Aman, point to Xiomara's recently acquired position as subject rather than as an object of desire. By claiming her own desire, she manages to disassociate her body from external lust. In this way, her embodied desire is not something that she has to be ashamed of, but grateful for, as it enables Xiomara to reclaim both her body and subjectivity. With this narrative, Acevedo lines up with scholar and writer Audre Lorde, also American with Afro-Caribbean ascendence, who in "Uses of the Erotic: The Erotic as Power" already talked about the political dimensions of the erotic, and consequently how it must be embraced as a site for activism and social change.

Desire becomes especially political when it is represented. By writing about her desire, Xiomara challenges the existing dominant narratives of hypersexuality. One might think that talking about desire reinforces these hyper-sexual narratives and stereotypes. Indeed, the cult of secrecy —dissemblance strategies to dismantle the dominant negative discourses around Black women— was believed by some Black women to be the only way to achieve

respectability (Hine 915). Altagracia's own version of the cult of secrecy, what happens "in house stays in house," dissuades Xiomara from being personal in her poems (Acevedo 344). However, although the "politics of respectability" have maximized Black women's opportunities in a racist and misogynist society, this rhetoric of survival also functions as a tactic of surveillance and control that restricts agency, impedes self-representation, and reinscribes systems of power (White and Dobris 171-86, Durham et al 721-737). Therefore, scholars, such as Audre Lorde with essays such as "Transforming Silence into Language and Action" or books like *Your Silence Will Not Protect You*, have moved away from respectability and have claimed that only through self-representation can dominant discourses be combated.

Acevedo also lines up with this turn to representation as *The Poet X* clearly shows that this ideology of dissemblance is not effective. In "The Last Fifteen-Year-Old" (Acevedo 151), Xiomara narrates how her initial strategy of self-imposed invisibility by "hiding in big sweaters and in hard silence" did not work as her body kept being "unhide-able" and sexualized. Instead, *The Poet X* proves that representation techniques are a source of corporal and agency reclamation. As opposed to her mother and the female roles she introduces to Xiomara, such as the Virgin and saints, Xiomara finds other women that encourage her to practice self-representation. One of them is her English teacher, Ms. Galiano, who urges her to join the poetry club and write about herself, disregarding dissemblance:

> How can I say things like that in front of strangers?
> In house stays in house, right?
> "Wrong" Ms. Galiano tells me.
> She tells me words give people permission
> To be their fullest self. (Acevedo 344).

As Rachel Quinn holds, Xiomara uses the internet "as a bridge for transnational relations," since on the net she discovers slam poets and singers that, as well as Ms. Galiano, serve her as inspiration to combat the cult of secrecy, such as the also Afro-Caribbean artist Nicki Minaj. Xiomara dedicates these artists a poem entitled "Asylum" (Acevedo 82-83) to show that they are indeed her own sanctuary as she can relate better to them than to the White Virgin and angels, but especially, she writes a poem to Nicki Minaj and the celebration she does in her songs of her curves and sexuality.

Although Xiomara claims that Minaj has been criticized for being "overly sexual," Xiomara recognizes this to be a "persona" to rewrite Black women's sexuality and bodily representations, and draws from their example by representing her recently reclaimed sexuality and celebration of her body in her poems (Acevedo 180).[9] Indeed, the first poems in which Xiomara celebrates her "bubble butt" is named after Nicky Minaj and Beyoncé's song "Feeling Myself" (Acevedo 92).

Thanks to these alternative female models that Xiomara includes in her Black female genealogy, she realizes that she needs to create alternative self-images in order to challenge the dominant assumptions that appropriate her body. Remaining in silence does not make bodies "acultural" objects. Narratives must be contested by other narratives. In this way, self-representation can redefine patriarchal and racist cultural constructions, or at least, expel them from Afro-Latinas' own cultural representations. As Lorde says, "If I didn't define myself for myself, I would be crunched into other people's fantasies for me and eaten alive" ("Learning From the 60s" 657). Indeed, in this second part of the novel —which is being dealt with in this section of the paper, and in which Xiomara is not only older, but also more empowered— her voice silences the stereotypes of Afro-Latinas that she previously echoed in her poems. It is her own voice the one that emerges now in her writing, rather than reporting other people's sentences as she did in the first half of the novel. Thus, Xiomara inscribes herself in the long tradition of Black women that, according to Bennett and Dickerson, have restored their bodies and subject positions through language (9).

Xiomara does not only "write the body," that is, writes about her body and its sexuality in order to challenge dominant discourses and move from an objectified position to a position of full subjectivity; but she also writes through the body to make a full reclamation of it by showing that a corporeal epistemology and art

[9] Nicki Minaj's performances have been indeed very polemic. Scholars such as Dines claims that "the image of Nicki Minaj, caged, in chains [in the "Anaconda" music video], displaying, and singing about her prominent buttocks in no way differs from the 19th-century display of Sarah Baartman, the South African woman known as Hottentot Venus, who, due to her large buttocks, was exhibited as a freak in show attractions in 19th-century Europe. On the other hand, scholars like Janelle Hobson and Nash seek to get over the "Hottentot Venus reading strategy" of Black women's bodies by considering the agency of these women regarding their identity, image, and sexuality in mass media and pop culture (141-78, 53).

are possible.[10] In Western epistemological traditions, sensuality and bodies have often been considered distractions to be overcome in order to attain true knowledge. However, several decolonial and feminist scholars have denounced this expulsion of bodies from epistemology. The Chicanas authors Gloria Anzaldúa and Cherríe Moraga (1987) have coined the term "theory of the flesh," and Afro-Latin scholars such as Frantz Fanon (1967), Jacqui Alexander (2006), Lorgia García Peña (2007), and Omaris Zamora (2013 have also defended corporal knowledge politics in which the body is interpreted as an embodied archive.[11] It would not make sense to write about racism and patriarchy, oppressions that these women feel due to and though their bodies, and not doing it through them.

In "Holding a Poem in the Body" (Acevedo 79) Xiomara proves wrong this Western separation of mind and body that links the mind and reason with higher faculties and the body with wild instincts by claiming that her poem comes from and is memorized by her body. Indeed, it could be said that Xiomara's body (re)members since by becoming a site for knowledge, discourse and memory, her body ceases to be mere set of objectified members to be transformed into an instrument of subjectivity. Xiomara uses the metaphor of a puzzle to explain her journey from objectification to self-affirmation and integrity. Her body used to be fragmented (butt, boobs, mouth), as the pieces of a puzzle. However, by making the body a site of artistic production, as the creation of a puzzle is, she can put all her pieces together and build an integral body and self that is able to have an embodied discourse.

> Tonight after my shower
> Instead of staring at the parts of myself
> I want to puzzle-piece into something else,
> I watch my mouth memorize one of my poems (Acevedo 79)

[10] "Write the body" is a concept that the post-structuralist French feminists (Hélène Cixous, Luce Irigaray, and Julia Kristeva) coined to express that writing about one's own body is a tool for women to return to the bodies which have been confiscated from them in patriarchal societies (Judith Still "French Feminist Criticism and Writing the Body").

[11] For further information on corporal epistemology, please read *Decolonizing Post-Colonial Studies and Paradigms of Political Economy: Transmodernity, Decolonial Thinking, and Global Coloniality* (Ramón Grosfoguel) and *(Trance)formations of an AfroLatina: Embodied Archives of Blackness and Womanhood in Transnational Dominican Women's Narratives* (Omaris Zamora).

Thanks to poetry, the body is reclaimed from dominant discourses. It is no longer about the textuality of Xiomara's body, that is, her body as a tabula rasa or passive bearer, a recipient of meaning for dominant racial and gender discursive regimes, but rather about the embodied discourse of her texts as Xiomara produces meaning and knowledge from the experiences she obtains through her body. In this way, the biblical passage that entitles the second section in which *The Poet X* is divided —"the word was made flesh"— is reversed. Through embodied discourse, the word was not made flesh, but the flesh was made word.

This is just one of the examples in which writing is presented in opposition to religion. Not only do the poetry club run by Ms. Galiano and the confirmation class take place at the same time, but while Catholicism means listening to commands, writing involves articulating her own voice. Besides this, writing gives Xiomara what religion was supposed to. It does not only provide her a way to spirituality and reflection, but also a community, which is formed by the poetry club and the Nuyorican café where she recites her slam poetry. In fact, Xiomara claims that words "connect people" and "build community" (Acevedo 287). Xiomara chooses her own way to spirituality and community, rather than accepting what religion and family impose upon her. Furthermore, writing grants Xiomara a place to be beyond the church —the Nuyorican café and the club. Finding a place is a key aspect of slam poetry for Xiomara, as Afro-Latinx communities in the US have been linked to displacement due to their double diasporic heritage and the current gentrification they are experiencing in cities, as Acevedo shows in one of her poems: "the neighborhood had changed, that there were no more Latino families and the *bodegas* and *sastrería* were all closed down" (Acevedo 127).

Xiomara does not only write her poems, but recites them in the Nuyorican café. Slam poetry links Xiomara to her African roots as orality occupies a central position in African tradition. However, it is the performative component of slam poetry, in the sense that the body is in use, what takes Xiomara's embodied discourse to the next level adding extra value to slam poetry as a tool for reclaiming her body. Performing just feels the right approach to embodied poetry. As writing through the body seems logical because it is the site from where the world is experienced, it makes even more sense to perform what is written through the body. As Moraga says, "my writings have

always had bodies and as such are best rendered through the physical space of staging" (36).

Apart from being the best way to render embodied discourse, performance allows the re-appropriation of bodies for different reasons. In the first place, performance stresses presence. Both Leanne Betasamosake Simpson and Gail Lewis believe that performativity reminds us of hereness, fleshy and rooted presence (96, 4). This is important to stand up again for embodied discourse and knowledge, as Xiomara does in "Holding a Poem in the Body" (Acevedo 79). Versus a dominant detached epistemology which claims that universality is precisely achieved through an incorporeal and delocalized subject, decolonial and feminist critics embrace the geopolitics of knowledge and discourse and claim that the stand-points (such as an ethnic, racialized and gendered identities and bodies) from which knowledge and discourse are produced should not be erased in favor of a hypothetical universality that does not include a diverse range of perspectives. The clearly present dimension of performativity stands up for a corporeal and rooted knowledge and discourse, that implies a reappropriation of the body and of subaltern subjectivities.

The power of performance is such that the scholar Melissa Blanco Borelli coined the word "hip(g)nosis" to refer to the feminist corporeal tactic of performing that Afro-Latins can engage with in order to challenge the objectification of Black women bodies by demonstrating that Black women's bodies are a primary site of knowledge production (gnosis), and I would add, of art (6). It is precisely the power of performance to dismantle bodies' objectification what constitutes the second use of slam poetry. According to Latinx and Black scholars, performing is the transgressive act through which the same bodies that were supposed to be possessed, fragmented and objectified by others in different forms (physically, culturally) are reclaimed for self-affirmation (Moïse 146, Brown 32, Brooks 41-70, Escoda-Agustí 291, Jacobs 49). Xiomara's body is no longer a sexual object, but a tool for her empowering and embodied art. Indeed, Xiomara confesses that she "could get addicted to" this new type of attention on the stage, as there her body is not an object, but a discursive and performative instrument that finally "feel[s] important" in a non-sexual way (Acevedo 259).

As has been said, Xiomara overcomes dislocation by finding the Nuyorican café and the poetry club to go. However, beyond the

physical space of the stage, Xiomara also overcomes another type of displacement that *The Poet X* focuses on, the corporal one. Xiomara's agency and subjectivity were removed from their body as it was constantly objectified and made a bearer of racist and patriarchal dominant discourses of hyper-sexualization. However, through her slam poetry, Xiomara achieves the goal of inhabiting her own body. Her inner self and a body are no longer disassociated. When her body and subjectivity were two separate entities, she wanted to make her body disappear. There are several poems in which she refers to it. For example, in "The Last Fifteen-Year-Old" Xiomara says that she wanted to forget about "this body at all" (151), and in "The Shit and the Fan" Xiomara confesses to have tried "to make all the big of [her] small", refereeing to her big and hyper-visible body (193). However, now that her subjectivity and poetry are embodied and are part of her whole self (body and subjectivity), she embraces her body and let it takes the space it wants, instead of folding it or making it small, as is told in "Holding a Poem in the Body" (Acevedo 79):

> I let my body finally take up all the space it wants.
> I toss my head, and screw up my face,
> And grit my teeth, and smile, and make a fist,
> And every one of my limbs
> Is an actor trying to take the center stage. (Acevedo 79)

IV. CONCLUSION

Racial and patriarchal discourses have dominated the Afro Latina body for centuries as a result of slavery, colonial and neocolonial regimes, capitalism, and oppressive Catholic doctrine. Nevertheless, the body can also be a site of activism, resistance and subversion for Afro-Latinas in the US. What better scenario to reclaim the body from these dominant discourses that the body itself? Xiomara in *The Poet X* shows that embodied practices such as sexual desire and its self-representation through performative and embodied poetry are mechanisms to combat the cultural constructions against Black female bodies that objectify them. Thus, by becoming a desiring and artistic site, the body can be transformed into an instrument of agency and subjectivity for Afro-Latinas.

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