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Grace Nichols
as an author and editor
of children's poetry

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Dedicated to my parents who first aroused my interest in “Humpty Dumpty”, “Winnie-the-Pooh” and all the other classics of English literature

Table of Contents

1. Introduction

1.1. Why Write about Caribbean Children’s Literature?	4
1.2. Grace Nichols- a Biographical and Bibliographical Introduction.....	5
1.3. Previous Studies on Nichols’ Work.....	6
1.4. Theories of Children’s Literature	7
1.5. Children’s Literature, Colonialism and Post-Colonialism	7

2. “Asana and the Animals”- Creating a Child’s Universe

2.1. Friendship and Fear- Asana’s Relationship to her Animals.....	11
2.2. Reality or Fantasy?.....	16
2.3. Asana and the European Children’s Books.....	19

3. “No Hickory No Dickory No Dock” and Other Caribbean Nursery Rhymes

3.1. Nursery Rhymes: Undeservedly Marginalized.....	20
3.2. Colonialism and English Nursery Rhymes.....	22
3.3. Rewriting English Nursery Rhymes:	
Giving Personal Traits to Nursery Rhyme Figures.....	23
3.4. Criticizing Western-oriented Education.....	26
3.5. Defamiliarizing and Remixing English Culture.....	28
3.6. English Pre-texts, Caribbean Themes.....	29
3.7. The Nursery Rhymes Back- with a Vengeance?.....	34

4. Nichols as an Anthologist for Children

4.1. Analyzing Anthologies.....	36
4.2. Anthologizing “Black Poetry”: Explicit Criteria of Selection.....	37
4.3. “Black Poetry”: An Implicit Poetology.....	38
4.4. Anthologizing Caribbean Poets.....	46

5. Conclusion.....

Appendix:

Bibliography of Grace Nichols’ works.....	53
Other Works Consulted.....	55
Statement (“Erklärung”).....	62

1. Introduction

1.1. Why Write about Caribbean Children's Literature?

About a year ago, when I decided to write a paper about black literature in English, I had neither any knowledge of black English poetry nor any theoretical background on post-colonialism. First was my desire to learn something different, something other than the white European and American texts I had previously studied. I didn't know what I was going for and suspected already I was being a bit naive..

However, reading post-colonial theory, I realized that this desire to experience something Other was considered a fault of Westerners in contact with non-European cultures (Pieterse 229-235). Yearning for the exotic and the different, as Pieterse writes, many colonists, explorers and their European public exploited and exhibited it. Often, contact with other cultures ended in "creating a static and dualistic relationship between Self and Other, us and them." (234) In such a hierarchical one-way relationship, the Other's own voice is never listened to.

I wondered- was my desire to write about "exotic" black literature similarly exploiting? And who gives me the right - as a white woman- to write about a black woman and maybe reproduce the colonial gaze¹? But then I read what another (white) critic of black women's literature, Olga Kenyon, wrote about studying black women's writings: "Reading is a dialogue between self and the 'otherness' of writers and their community's texts." (22)

Discovering the nearly unexplored field of children's literature written and edited by Grace Nichols, I often thought about my own position. These texts are doubly "foreign" from my perspective as a white German adult student: they are rooted in a black British-Caribbean context and aimed primarily at children. But I tried to engage in a dialogue with the texts and found that some features of these texts not only struck a chord with me but even sounded partly familiar. Nichols' rhymes often reminded me of my own childhood, and sometimes I wanted to chant "Humpty Dumpty" rather than having to interpret it.

I took my initial childlike fascination with the poems written and edited by Grace Nichols as a motivation: writing to explain this fascination in adult terms.

1.2. Grace Nichols- a Biographical and Bibliographical Introduction²

¹ As the black feminist Smith argues in her seminal work on black female literature, only a black woman could appreciate "the profound subtleties of this particular body of literature" (qtd. in McDowell 11)

² Compiled from Forbes, Jonas, Kenyon (32-35), Webhofer (vi), and an interview with Nichols in: <http://www.mystworld.com/youngwriter/authors/grace_nichols.html (2003)>

Grace Nichols was born in Georgetown, British Guiana in 1950, but she grew up in a coastal village where her father was the village teacher and moved to Georgetown again at the age of eight with her parents and seven siblings. She experienced the political changes leading to the independence of Guyana in 1966 as a teenager. Her childhood and adolescence are described in her only novel, the autobiographical “Whole of a Morning Sky”³ (1986). Nichols worked in Guyana as a school teacher, reporter and freelance journalist. While studying communications at the University of Guyana, she travelled to the Guyana hinterland, an experience which aroused her interest in Amerindian myths. In 1977 she came to Britain with her partner, the Guyanese poet John Agard, with whom she is living together in Sussex. They have two daughters.

In 1982, Nichols published her first volume of poetry, “i is a long memoried woman”, about the histories of black women enslaved in the Caribbean. It won the Commonwealth Poetry Prize of 1983 and began to establish her reputation as a writer. In 1986 she won the Arts Council Writers’ Award. Her following volumes of poetry draw on a contemporary black woman’s experience in Britain: “The Fat Black Woman’s Poems” (1984) and “Lazy Thoughts of a Lazy Woman” (1989). Both volumes reappraise, often in a humorous way, denigrated characteristics like being a fat, black and lazy female. In the 1980s, Nichols also started to publish books for children. Her poetry book for children, “Come on into My Tropical Garden” (1988) introduces children to Caribbean nature and culture. In 1988, she also edited her first anthology for children, “Black Poetry” (re-edited in 1990 under the name of “The Poetry Jump-Up”.)

From the 1990s to the present, Nichols has mainly worked as a writer and anthologist for children, with the exception of “Sunris” (1996), a poetry book on carnival for adults, which won the Guyana Poetry Prize. In 1991, her second anthology for children, “Can I buy a slice of sky”, appeared, and later “No Hickory, No Dickory, No Dock” (1995), a collection of West Indian nursery rhymes. Again together with John Agard, she edited the children’s verse collection “A Caribbean Dozen” (1994), and its sequel “Under the moon and over the sea” (2003), which won the CLPE (Centre for Literacy in Primary Education) Poetry Award 2003. Other recent volumes of verse written for children by Nichols are “Give yourself a hug” (1996), “Asana and the animals” (1997) and “The poet cat” (2001) in praise of her daughter’s cat. She won the Cholmondeley Award (2000) and was Writer-in-Residence at the Tate Gallery (2001).

³ For a complete list of her works, see also the bibliography in the appendix.

Nichols is one of the contemporary poets listed in the British National Curriculum for English (Poetry Society, n.p.). Like her partner John Agard, Nichols is active visiting schools and talking to pupils. She is also well-known for her lively talks and performances of poetry.

1.3. Previous Studies on Nichols' Work

In 1988, only six years after her first publication, the Cambridge Guide to Literature in English wrote about Nichols that she was “one of the best poets in Britain who also happens to be black and female” (qtd in Bettinger 126). Critical interest in her arose, and although there is no book-length study on Nichols alone yet, there are over a dozen articles in books and journals on her work. They focus mainly on her volumes of poetry for adults from the 1980s and on subjects such as “Writing the Body” and post-colonial and black female identity⁴. However, there is only one study that mentions Nichols’ poetry for children, Lissa Paul’s “Coming to sing their being. The poetry of Grace Nichols”. She points out Nichols’ non-canonical status and her “positions conventionally seen as marginal: as a woman, a black woman, a poet for children” (85). For Paul, Nichols combines “the politics of the nursery and the politics of colonial subjects” (85) and decenters the colonial order (domestic=marginal) by writing about the domestic sphere as an authoritative subject (86). There is no criticism yet on Nichols’ more recent volumes of poetry for children, which will be discussed in the following study.

1.4. Theories of Children's Literature

⁴ “Body Language in the Work of Four Caribbean Poets” (De Caires Nairan) focuses on Nichols “articulating woman’s body within the particular context of the Caribbean”. Other studies follow in this vein, like Easton: “The Body as History and ‘Writing the Body’: the example of Grace Nichols” and Scanlon: “The Divine Body in Grace Nichols’ *The Fat Black Woman Poems*”. In “Writing the Body” Griffin stresses the oral and thus bodily qualities of Nichols’ work.

Brodber places Nichols in the context of Guyana’s historical sociology, while Benton analyzes the trope of the Middle Passage in the work of Nichols. Fokkema states that, for Nichols, Britain is not a country of exile, but, in a post-modern sense, her poems assume different identities (with similar findings as in Montefiore).

Hoving and Gohrisch focus on the link between geography and identity. Hoving discusses how geography and sexual identity become fluid in “My Black Triangle”, while Gohrisch applies the concept of cultural and sexual hybridity to Nichols’ poems. Bettinger offers a study on “Grace Nichols’ ‘Sugar Cane’: A Post-Colonial and Feminist Reading”. The thesis of Webhofer deals with Nichols’ constructions of black female identity through her use of Creole as well as through her body concepts.

Children's literature has generally not received the critical attention that canonical works of adult literature have⁵- Peter Hunt writes in *Literature for Children*:

Children's literature, although widely accepted institutionally, has tended to remain uncanonical and culturally marginalized (2).

However, in the last twenty years there has been a surge of critical interest in children's literature. Hunt points out that this coincides with a new focus on other marginalized bodies of literature, like texts written by women and in the geographical periphery; he also points out that the modes of cultural hegemony between the paternalistic colonizers and the "childlike" colonized has its parallel in the attitude towards adults' and children' literature (ibid., 2).

Criticism of children's literature has not developed a coherent theory of its own, but has adopted virtually all critical modes in use for adult literature⁶. The critic writes exclusively for adults, at a level mostly far beyond the comprehension of the children actually reading the books. Thus, a dilemma arises. As Pickering puts it (qtd in Hunt, *Literature*, 9), isn't it "perverse and indecorous" to "write obscurantist prose about the simple prose and poetry that is children's literature"? I encountered this dilemma many times and sometimes despaired at writing about the rhetorics of talking to a honey-bee or the intertextual methods of transculturation presented in "No Hickory, No Dickory, No Dock"⁷. But doing academic research on children's literature not only permits valuable insights into underlying value systems concerning the description of society and childhood, but also - as Hunt points out (*Literature*, 9) - draws attention to the complexity of the texts themselves.

1. 5. Children's Literature, Colonialism and Post-Colonialism

Since the 1970s, there has been growing interest in exploring the reflections of society in children's literature, especially concerning gender and racial images. Studies of children's literature, writes Butts in the introduction to "Stories and Society", may "disclose, for instance, not only the way a society operates, but the way it would like to be perceived operating. British adventure stories nearly always see British imperialism as completely fair and altruistic." (xii)

⁵ For a detailed history of criticism of children's literature and a list of journals, see May, ch. 2.

⁶ E.g. "Stories and Society. Children's literature in its Social Context" (ed. Butts) demonstrates how children's literature reflects and discusses "the interests, concerns and values of that society's dominant class" (see also the next chapter). Watkins writes on "Cultural studies, New Historicism and Children's Literature"; May (1995) employs poetic and rhetoric analyses as well as the reader response theory; gender relations are discussed in books such as "Girls, Boys, Books, Toys" (ed. Clark/Higonnet).

⁷ Maybe it is no coincidence that children's literature lends itself to satires on academic writing like "The Pooh Perplex"; serious researchers on Pooh Bear are struggling with these funnier and more successful counterparts. See Hunt, "Winnie-the-Pooh", 112 and 123.

One example is Prince Bumpo in Hugh Lofting's classic "The Story of Doctor Dolittle" (1922)⁸. In Africa, Doctor Dolittle is imprisoned by a wicked black king. His son, Prince Bumpo, secretly visits Doctor Dolittle in prison and confesses:

"White Man, I am an unhappy prince. Years ago I went in search of the Sleeping Beauty, whom I had read of in a book. And having travelled through the world many days, I at last found her and kissed the lady very gently to awaken her – as the book said I should. 'Tis true indeed that she awoke. But when she saw my face she cried out, 'Oh, he's black!' And she ran away and wouldn't marry me- but went to sleep again somewhere else. So I came back, full of sadness, to my father's kingdom. Now I hear that you are a wonderful magician and have many powerful potions. So I come to you for help. If you will turn me white, so that I may go back to the Sleeping Beauty, I will give you half my kingdom and anything besides you ask." (93)

Being black is a tragedy for Bumpo. Having read romantic fairytales, he wants a white face and blue eyes to match his outfit: "I shall wear shining armour and gauntlets of steel like the other white princes and ride on a horse" (92). A "magic potion" of Dolittle's turns Bumpo white, if only for a day. This extract shows not only the devaluing of black skin and black intelligence (Bumpo appears naive compared to the powerful "medicine man" Doctor Dolittle), but also a metafictional twist: Bumpo doesn't fit into the fictional pattern of the fairy tales he has identified with because of his race. Doctor Dolittle with his "magical powers" of modern medicine can take advantage of this. Instead of telling Bumpo about the illusion of his quest, he exploits his belief in white romantic fiction. Such patterns in classics of children's literature helped to entrench racism in British society from a young age⁹. For many black children growing up in Britain, their first experience of literature must often be frustrating, having mostly white literary role models or overtly or covertly prejudiced texts, in an often hostile and racist environment¹⁰.

However, since the 1970s, with growing consciousness of such issues, there has been a surge in demand for "socially and racially aware" (Hunt, *Introduction*, 149) children's books in the United Kingdom¹¹. Parallel to the growing awareness of racial stereotypes, stereotypical gender description in Western children's literature was criticized, as Clark, Kulkin and Clancy explain (78): in a seminal study by Weitzman in 1972, these images were explored for the first time. A desideratum of Clark, Kulkin and Clancy is to shift Weitzman's liberal white paradigm of feminism towards a multicultural perspective and also look at portrayals of coloured women and postcolonial settings (80-82).

⁸ See the article on "Racism" in: Carpenter, Prichard (eds.). "Doctor Dolittle" is mentioned there as racist but not analyzed.

⁹ Carpenter and Prichard also mention „Mary Poppins“, „Uncle Tom's Cabin“ and „The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn“ (ibid.). For a criticism of colonialist attitudes in German-speaking children's literature, see Becker and Rauter (eds.), "Die Dritte Welt im Kinderbuch" (1978).

¹⁰ See Bryan et al. (65) for an anonymous black schoolgirl's account of reading racist children's literature.

¹¹ Hunt (*Introduction* 149) writes: "This need [for "racially and socially aware" books, E.Z.] has been answered by hundreds of books clearly designed to be bibliotherapeutic (or, if we are cynical, to exploit the market)."

These discussions mostly originated in Western Europe and the United States. What was and is the situation for children's literature in the former British colonies? In colonial times and well afterwards, almost the only texts available to children were of British origin - due to the fact that up to now, postcolonial children's literature has faced severe obstacles:

A healthy children's literature does not develop until there is a large and stable middle class to become consumers. Only when the conditions for market capitalism exist does business enterprise develop around the production of children's books. There must be widespread literacy and political stability, a large populace that regards the education of children as important, and, most important, a public and school library system to buy the books produced in that country in quantity (Rubio 228-229).

In addition, it may be cheaper for developing countries to print (legally or illegally) and distribute books from established authors abroad than to foster native literature (Rubio 229). Nevertheless, as Robinson (234-36) writes, there appeared some some authors and presses in the Caribbean.

As for early experiences with reading in former colonies, post-colonial writers comment on their socialization with British fiction: Jamaica Kincaid from Antigua wrote the novel "Lucy" (1991) about a Caribbean girl who wants to kill daffodils when she first sees them in New York (18; 29)- she had to learn by heart Wordsworth's "Daffodils" as a schoolchild in the Caribbean without even knowing what these flowers look like¹². In an essay on his childhood, Kwame Dawes, a Ghanaian author who spent his childhood in Jamaica, recalls his childhood experiences with literature:

The problem with *The Famous Five*, *The Secret Seven*, *The Bobbsey Twins*, *The Hardy Boys*, *Nancy Drew* [British and American children's books, E.Z.] ... was that these people were white. In many ways, I sought to replicate their instinct for adventure and their life of comfortable consistency. But the landscape was too different and their economic circumstances differed too much from mine. They ate different food, they spoke a different language; above all, they were white. (...) every time I pictured myself among this group of lily-white, blond-haired people who apparently had never heard of black people, I felt a twinge of envy, a sense of indefinable unease.(113-114)

Dawes recalls what a "dramatic moment" it was for him when in the school library he discovered the tales of "Sprat Morrison, a young Jamaican boy of my age who (...)took the same buses ... that I understood to be mine." Sprat fostered in Kwame "a voracious appetite for more worlds in which I could conceive my existence" (113) and led him to discover more literature.

The author of "Sprat Morrison" is Jean D'Costa, a Jamaican writer and professor of literature. She outlines the cultural background for children's literature in the West Indies in "Bra Rabbit Meets Peter Rabbit: Genre, Audience, and the Artistic Imagination: Problems in Writing Children's Fiction". Different from English children, she argues, West Indian children

¹² Kincaid herself now owns a large garden in Canada and plants anything there but daffodils. (Tiffin 155)

have been socialized by literatures that transmit two sets of values: the local oral tradition with its trickster tales where the “hero’s great triumph usually consists in staying alive” (258) at all costs; and English children’s literature (mainly read, not told) with its “middle-class childhood” (259) values and happy endings which prepare, according to D’Costa, for the understanding of English literature and culture in general. She sees her task as a writer for Caribbean children in combining both:

The challenge to the writer of Caribbean children’s fiction lies in the creation of a world that will prepare the young Caribbean mind for Antoinette Cosway and Lady Macbeth, for J. R. Ewing and Anancy, and for Bob Marley, Dylan Thomas, and Lewis Thomas. (259)

Socializing children in and for an environment where they are constantly exposed to concepts of different cultures is challenging. For expatriate writers of Caribbean children’s literature in Great Britain, their task is even more complex, as they write for British, Caribbean and British-Caribbean children. Benjamin Zephaniah, John Agard and Grace Nichols (all now living in the United Kingdom) are among the foremost Caribbean expatriate writers of literature for children and adolescents. Zephaniah, the Rastafarian poet from Jamaica, and Agard and Nichols from Guyana are all notable not only for their children’s books drawing from diverse cultural experiences but also for their linguistic mixture of Creole, Black British English and Standard English, as well as for their educational commitment as shown in British schools: They all give poetry readings and lectures on various issues including racism. However, there is to my knowledge no academic criticism of this work up to now. Although recent criticism has saved many post-colonial *or* children’s literature writers from marginalization, the double position on the margins seems to have been too remote even for the academic community.¹³

2. “Asana and the Animals”

2.1. Friendship and Fear- Asana’s Relationship to the Animals

¹³ On post-colonial children’s literature, I could only find an article by Rubio in the “Encyclopedia of Post-Colonial Literatures in English”, an article by D’Costa on her writing for children and Paul’s study on Nichols’ *Tropical Garden*.

“Asana and the Animals. A Book of Pet Poems” (1998)¹⁴ is a picture book containing sixteen poems by Grace Nichols and illustrations by Sarah Adams¹⁵. “Pet Poems” meaning both “animal” and “favourite” poems. The girl Asana is at the centre of the poems which describe different kinds of relationships between her and various animals. Their observation and description always leads to emotional involvement such as admiration for the “Jersey cow”:

She’s a slow-plodding
Chew-cudding Jersey cow
But every time I see her
I got to go – WOW!
(...)

Admiring and liking animals can also lead to joyful communication through bodily contact as well as in words: “Pit-a-Pat-a-Parrot” is a cheerful lesson in this, the onomatopoeic chains of syllables mirroring not only Asana’s “parrot talk”, but also the language of the parrot itself and the rhythmical bird-scratching:

(...)
If you pit-a-pat-a-parrot
if you chit-a-chat-a parrot
while you scritch and scratch a parrot

She will chit and chat right back.

Asana and the animals can make friends by talking and touching. “pit-a-pat” and “chit-a-chat” are equally important. Animal and human bodies enjoy contact with each other on an equal, playful level and are described as full of vitality¹⁶. “Don’t cry Caterpillar” is a dialogue between Asana and an intimate friend, a caterpillar.

Don’t cry Caterpillar
Caterpillar don’t cry
You will be a butterfly
by and by.

Caterpillar please
don’t worry ‘bout a thing –

“But,” said the caterpillar,
“Will I still know myself
in wings?”

Asana seems wiser and more experienced than the caterpillar. In this most philosophical poem in the book, she presents metamorphoses as something not to be feared. However the

¹⁴ There is no index or pagination in “Asana”. As the book contains only sixteen poems, I will only quote the titles of the poems or simply the respective animals.

¹⁵ Describing the illustrations and their relationship to the text could be the subject of a separate study.

¹⁶ This emphasis on positive body images has a parallel in Nichols’ poems for adults. As Webhofer writes: “Representing the body is a central aspect of Nichols’ identity as a poet.” (9). But while in Nichols’ poetry for adults, bodily beauty and sexuality are celebrated, there is no reference to sexuality in “Asana”, and the animals, not the humans, are praised as beautiful.

caterpillar, not wise Asana, has the last word. A child may simply take delight in the witty dialogue; an adult may read the poem as an unobtrusive reflection on whether there is an identity that remains stable throughout bodily metamorphosis.

In other poems Asana's friendship with animals gives rise not to philosophical questions, but to new powers and perspectives. "If I Had a Giraffe" offers Asana a sense of unlimited freedom and physical security at the same time.

If I had a giraffe-
I'd climb up a ladder to her with a laugh.
I'd rest my head against her long neck,
And we'd go- riding riding riding. (...)

We'd go to the land
where all fruit trees grow,
And my giraffe would stretch her neck
To get me to the highest, rosiest mango,
And we'd go- riding riding riding. (...)

The giraffe gives both comfort and adventure: In this fantastic friendship, Asana can be both a small child being pampered and fed with "the highest, rosiest mango" and participate in the almost supernatural powers of her friend.

In "Little Asana", a spider "takes her for a ride to the ceiling", literally offering her a new outlook on her everyday environment.

Little Asana sat on a sofa
Eating her peas and rice.
There came a small spider
That snuggled up beside her
And Asana said, "I think you're nice".

Now little Asana is a spider-liker,
Little Asana is a spider-minder,
she always keeps one close beside her.
And sometimes when she's asleep
and dreaming
her spider will take her for
a ride to the ceiling.

Bodily contact with the spider, who "snuggles up", is not repulsive but friendly. This contrasts with a pre-text for the poem, "Little Miss Muffet", a nursery rhyme where the protagonist is scared away by a spider¹⁷.

Another poem presents "What Asana Wanted for her Birthday":

Please don't get me
A hamster or budgie.
Please don't get me
A goldfish or canary.

¹⁷ For a comparison of the poems "Miss Muffet" and "Little Asana", see ch. 3.5.

Please get me something
 a little scary.
 Maybe something
 a wee bit hairy.

How about a tarantula?
 What's wrong with a spider-pet?
 If it gets sick of course
 I'll take it to scare-
 I mean to see
 - the vet.

Asana refuses the “common sense” pets for something dark, exotic and fantastic- again in beautifully crafted rhetoric: in two stanzas, her plea is prepared, first by a fourfold negation with the anaphora “Please don’t get me”, then, as an antithesis, by a “Please get me” and an indirect description. The title already suggested “What Asana Wanted for Her Birthday” which evokes curiosity; in the first two stanzas, the poem is structured like a riddle, coming closer and closer to the solution - and in the third stanza, a rhetorical question answers the riddle: “How about a tarantula?” She defends her plea by another rhetorical question and a vow to care for it- but her rhetoric is not yet fully crafted, a ‘slip of the tongue’ reveals her real fascination: not care, but scare. This scariness, however, doesn’t deter Asana, but, as she herself has no fear of spiders, this gives her power over those who are afraid – even adults, even the vet!

The dream of having a tarantula, same as the dream of riding a giraffe, makes “Little Asana” feel stronger by associating herself with strong friends. Interestingly, two sets of values seem to appear in the spider poems. On one hand Asana knows that spiders are commonly seen as scary, on the other hand, she isn’t afraid herself. Maybe this is due (if Asana is seen as a Caribbean girl) to a cultural difference between Europe and the West Indies: While a tarantula in Europe is regarded as repulsive and frightening, although it isn’t poisonous, the mythical spider-figure of Anancy in the Caribbean is a popular cunning hero and trickster, far more attractive than the European view of spiders as repulsive¹⁸. Asana prefers the dark spider to English middle class pets like hamster, goldfish or budgie.

Perhaps the parallel could even be drawn further. Asana, the dark and foreign child (at least in the eyes of white British readers) is not afraid of dark, foreign and seemingly scary pets. She dotes on the unloved outsider. For white British children, the message could be that there are more possible pets than hamsters and budgies, and that there are lovable people outside their own culture and colour. But as this message is presented very subtly, it will not annoy children with overtly didactic and moralistic gestures.

¹⁸ For more information on Anancy see ch. 3.5.

Not all of the animals Asana knows are as harmless as the tarantula. One animal presents a real danger to fearless Asana, the alligator in “Lying still in muddy river”.

(...)
 Pretending to be tree-trunk
 but I can see your bumpety-bumps
 and your long long mouth
 and your half-moon eye
 suddenly opening sly (...)

Not me, Asana, for you dinner.

In a thoroughly realistic way Asana sees the danger and even recognizes the cunning camouflage of the alligator. However, she is not paralyzed with fear, but is convinced that, by recognizing it, she can escape the threat.

Asana is torn between fear and curiosity towards the “Honey-bee”. She employs a rhetorical strategy to appease her in “Dear Honey-Bee”:

Dear Honey-bee
 if I speak politely
 will you still sting me? (...)

I love your
 see-through wings
 and everything

I love your creepy legs
 (no, not creepy
 just nice and shimmery)

While the “friendship poems” show a genuine concern for her animals, here “I love” is spoken as a strategy, not out of affection; but her rhetoric isn’t so well-crafted as to completely conceal her real feelings: She thinks the bee’s legs are “creepy” but quickly corrects herself.

However, either Asana doesn’t trust her rhetoric or she doubts that the bee understands her – or does she suspect that the bee justly doubts her sincerity? She hesitates and withdraws.

See, Honey-bee
 I’m coming ...
 a little closer

But no,
 I think I’d better go
 back inside, Honey-bee

Goodbye.

As for the adults Asana encounters, she tries to negotiate with them as much as with the bee.

In wishes such as “Can’t I be a bit like the elephants, Mum?” and “How about a tarantula?” she playfully tests the limits of her own rhetorical powers.

Asana and the adults are depicted as joking, friendly and warmhearted. The difference between Asana's relationship to animals and to adults doesn't seem too big: She talks to both, jokes with both and negotiates possibilities with both. The relationships between Asana and the animals are predominantly positive (thirteen of sixteen poems present lovable creatures, only alligator, wolf, and honey-bee pose a limited threat). The animals to be feared are not dangerous provided that one is intelligent enough to spot the danger.

While some descriptions of animals can simply be read as conveying information (on the way alligators hide and elephants protect themselves from the sun, for example), all poems offer an additional dimension: The animals can also be interpreted in relationship to humans. Nitschke writes (qtd in Römheld 10):

Immer wenn der Mensch Tiere beschreibt, muss er bekennen, wie das Verhältnis zwischen Tier und Mensch aussehen soll. Wenn er eine Gemeinsamkeit zwischen Tieren und Menschen annimmt (...), gibt er damit eine Beschreibung des Menschen. Wenn er die Trennung zwischen Tier und Mensch betont, wird ebenfalls durch die Darstellung des Tieres der Mensch mit charakterisiert.

Thus, there is no way of talking about animals without indirectly talking about humans. Anthropomorphic animals, in particular, have a special place in childrens' literature. This is due to the psychology of children, of whom Hunt ("Winnie-the-Pooh and Domestic Fantasy" 118) writes:

It is commonly held that children- and this is a defining characteristic of childhood- are more inclined to attribute human characteristics to inanimate objects. (...) In fantasy, the things closest emotionally to the reader become animate.

What is true for inanimate objects, is of course also true for animals. Blount argues that this is due to wish-fulfilment (qtd in Hunt, "Winnie-the-Pooh" 118)

Human is what the child wants his toy or pet to be, the substitute friend or brother, like himself but exempt from all the dreary rules attached to childhood and growing up.

The poems in "Asana", however, are more complex. On one hand, there is – as Hunt believes – friendship with animals as a kind of wish-fulfilment, as with the giraffe and the spider, whose friendship offers a fantastic world of explorations. On the other hand – contrary to Hunt – these anthropomorphic animals also present problems like growing up and change (the caterpillar). Character traits like shyness (a hedgehog, who only moves "...when she thinks I'm not looking") or untrustworthiness (the alligator) are shown which wish-fulfilment cannot account for. What all the poems have in common is not identification with the animals, but verbal and bodily communication. They may be seen as a model for the different encounters a child will have in the world of humans (even if these will often be less physical): there are people with whom to make friends (as e.g. grasshopper and spider), people to comfort and to instruct (as the

caterpillar), people to admire (as the cow) but also people not to be trusted (the alligator) or people one is ambivalent about (the honey bee).

As in real life, “Asana and the Animals” is about experiencing relationships. But in Asana’s world, the friendship with a giraffe offers possibilities one does not expect from a friendship with humans. Realistic descriptions of encounters are mixed with wish-fulfilment projected on relationships.

2.2. Reality or Fantasy?

Asana observes a cow but rides on a giraffe: Is Asana’s world realistic or fantastic?

As Hunt (*Introduction* 184) writes, “perhaps the most important” feature of (European) children’s literature is “the relationship between reality and fantasy”. I will use “fantasy” not as a genre description but in the broader sense defined by Hunt, who describes fantasy as a mode of fiction “where the rules of the world are suspended”. (*Introduction* 167)

In “Asana and the animals”, there are many realistic descriptions, such as the sighting of a hedgehog in “At the Bottom of the Garden”:

No, it isn’t an old football
grown all shrunken and prickly
because it was left out so long
at the bottom of the garden.

It’s only Hedgehog
who, when she thinks I’m not looking,
unballs herself to move ...
Like bristling black lightning.

The poem offers a precise description of a child’s perspective upon first seeing something unusual in the garden, then comparing it to common objects (“an old football”) and realizing that the perception was wrong: the ball “unballs herself” when she thinks she is unnoticed and reveals herself as a hedgehog. The comparison “like bristling black lightning” combines different realms of nature, but succinctly and realistically evokes the hurried movements of a hedgehog. Similarly realistic as the “Hedgehog” poem are the three texts where adults, as well as animals, are involved, for example “What Asana Said About the Elephants at the Zoo”:

Elephants are nice
because they like
to squirt themselves
with mud and dust
to protect their skin from the sun
then later on they wash it off
in splashing fun.

Can’t I be a bit like the elephants, Mum?
I hate putting sunblock on.

Asana realizes that elephants have a similar problem as humans (protecting themselves from the sun) and admires the practicality and “fun” of their solution. The description and comment on the elephant’s behaviour and Asana’s cheeky suggestion: “Can’t I be a bit like the elephants, Mum? I hate putting sunblock on” to her mother are thoroughly realistic. Mum’s answer isn’t given- obviously the outcome of the suggestion is less important than the creative idea itself and its impressive rhetoric: first, an *exemplum* from nature is given with a positive connotation (“like”) and a stress of its usefulness (“to protect”), which serves to make acceptable the negatively connoted “mud and dust”. Then a surprising parallel is drawn with a rhetorical question (toned down by “a bit”) and an explanation for the parallel with an antithesis “I hate-they like”. Dirt and splashing are made acceptable by Nature’s useful example. But is Asana convinced of the practicality of her suggestion? Or is she rather inventing, with a tongue-in-cheek joy in rhetoric, a playful universe where humans are “a bit like the elephants”?

In “What Asana Wanted for Her Birthday”, she wishes: “How about a tarantula?/ What’s wrong with a spider-pet?” This poem, too, doesn’t tell the actual outcome of Asana’s suggestion. Does Asana believe that this present is realistic, is she convinced that she is fantasizing, or is she ambivalent about this? The poem itself doesn’t break any laws of nature or common sense- it just presents Asana’s wishes without telling their outcome (probably disappointing, if Asana’s parents are more realistic).

We also find poems where fantasy and reality seem to merge as in the last one in the volume, where Asana simply enumerates “Things I like in the Sea that Go by Swimmably”:

Jellyfish
Starfish
Flying fish
Seals

[follow three more verse of similar enumeration, E.Z.]

But best of all
I like Mermaids

In this poem, there seems to be no border drawn between realism and fantasy. But- isn’t Asana a cheeky girl whose last lines often give a surprising twist? For example, how convinced is she that her mum will really allow her to wallow in the mud like the elephants in the poem quoted above and that she will really get a tarantula “to scare the vet”? When reconsidered, the borders between fantasy and reality dissolve.

Another poem uses the conditional- “If I had a Giraffe” (cf. 2.1.). At first glance, the poem is set in a world of fantasy; but at second reading, it is not clear whether, from the

speaker's point of view, "If I had" presents a possibility or whether the speaker recognizes this as a fantasy. And even if she does- isn't the poem, on another level, a very realistic description of a little girl's daydreams of unlimited freedom and friendship? This poem leaves doors open to the realms of reality and fantasy.

In the series of what could be called the "friendship" poems- in Asana's contacts with grasshopper, parrot, ladybug, caterpillar and spider- there are different kinds of communication. When Asana asks the grasshopper at the end of "Grasshopper one": "Grasshopper, /will you be my secret friend?" and no answer is given, no laws of nature are yet broken; when the parrot in "Chit-a-chat-a-parrot" chats back, this is still realistic.

In "Ladybug" the insect answers back- as is the tradition in fables- and reveals a distinctively anthropomorphic pride in its appearance:

Red black-spotted Ladybug,
Can you do the jitterbug?

I've never tried the jitterbug
But when the sunlight hits my wings
You should see me do my thing,
Child, you should see me
do the Glitterbug.

The spider in "Little Asana" doesn't talk, but even has supernatural powers - in Asana's dreams:

(...)
And sometimes when she's asleep
and dreaming
her spider will take her for
a ride to the ceiling.

Sleep and dreaming are of course much-used literary devices for transgressing reality (for children's literature, cf. e.g. "Alice in Wonderland") and at the same time retaining a realistic framework. Here, however, it is not said "Asana dreams *that* her spider takes her..", but: "*when* she's asleep": does this really happen during her sleep or only in her dream? In the "Asana" poems, realistic encounters with animals are entwined with settings in a borderland between reality and fantasy¹⁹.

2.3. Asana and the European Children's Books

In European and Northern American modern animal stories and poems, there are mainly two different modes of narration: realistic descriptions of animals' lives (as in Jack London's

¹⁹ There is even a poem in "Asana", "Hey Diddle-Diddle", which refers to a classic of British non-realistic children's literature, the nonsense verse of the same name. It transposes the British verse into a new, more concrete and realistic setting (see ch. 3.2. for this transformation).

novels) and- more often- fantastic narration. In fantastic narration, animals explicitly have human or supernatural characteristics, thus breaking “a natural law” (Hunt, “Winnie-the-Pooh” 118), as in Bond’s “Paddington Bear”, Lofting’s “Doctor Dolittle”, T.S. Eliot’s “Cats” poems etc.²⁰ This division between reality and fantasy, however, is a fairly recent and regional one: for modern readers, fairy tales featuring talking animals can be read as fantasy as opposed to realism, while for a medieval audience or a traditional African audience, they may have not been (Sullivan III 97).

Concerning the tension between fantasy and reality, “Asana and the Animals” is different from most Western children’s books. Hunt writes about the clear rules of fantastic worlds in “Winnie-the-Pooh and Domestic Fantasy” : “Once a natural law has been subverted everything continues logically” (118). In “Asana”, this simple logic doesn’t work. Sometimes, there is no natural law subverted at all, as in the realistic, descriptive poems; creatures from fairy tales (the mermaid) appear or animals have anthropomorphic characteristics. But most often, it is left open whether all this takes place in a supposed reality or rather in Asana’s mind and whether she knows (or wants to know) that she is fantasizing. The boundaries between a realistic and a fantastic world-view remain fluid and often depend on the reader’s perspective. While a small child might take the talking animals for granted, an adult may take delight in Asana’s crafted rhetoric and wonder whether she is taking us all- consciously and cheekily- for a ride through her own imagination.

In the classical European fantasy books for children, there is a “second world” (like Peter Pan’s “Neverland” or Pooh’s “Hundred Acre Wood”) which often has specific conditions and/or means of accession (Carroll’s “Alice” goes through the looking-glass, Barrie’s “Neverland” is only open for children) and clear boundaries (often even indicated by maps in the books, such as Pooh’s “Hundred Acre Wood”, described in Hunt, “Winnie-the-Pooh, 114).

As for conditions for access in “Asana”, there is no group of figures (such as adults in “Neverland”) excluded²¹ and thus, there is no tendency towards an esoteric and possibly escapist or elitist cosmos of its own; Asana tells the adults about her fantasies. While Asana is in the centre of her universe, there is no hierarchy, neither between adults and children nor between humans and animals nor between the different animals. Asana is not a “*dea ex machina*” but on an equal level with the animals²². In terms of geographical boundaries, in “Asana and the Animals” the setting is less defined than in many European children’s books. It

²⁰ For a brief history of animal literature and the implications of its different modes of narration- social criticism, escapism etc.- see Karrenbrock (151-155).

²¹ Lissa Paul writes: “In Nichols’ world ... there is a constant flow between adults and children.” (91)

²² This contrasts with the “Pooh” books, for example. Hunt criticises Christopher Robin in “Winnie the Pooh” as often being a “*deus ex machina*” who plays out “a fantasy of control”. (Hunt, “Winnie-the-Pooh” 116)

is not located in a specific- realistic or fantastic- geographic place. The “Jersey Cow” and the “Hedgehog” are distinctively British/European and the “Elephants” are found in the zoo, while the “Alligator” presents a real danger in the “muddy river”- is the setting tropical or European? In “If I had a giraffe”, the imagination knows no limits: it is possible to go to “the desert where the hot sands glow”, to “some faraway blue seaside” and “anywhere under the sky”. To put it in terms of post-colonial criticism: Asana’s world is the “contact zone”²³, explained by Pratt as:

... an attempt to invoke the spatial and temporal copresence of subjects previously separated by geographic and historical disjunctures, and whose trajectories now intersect. (qtd in Paul, “Coming to sing..”, 86)

Asana invokes the tropical alligator, but she also enjoys the milk of the English “Jersey cow” and mentions the English middle-class pets hamster, goldfish, canary and budgie, only to reject them in favour of a tarantula. In joyful physicality, Asana enters into contact with the grasshopper and the giraffe, transcending the boundaries of reality and fantasy and of the genres “realistic animal description” and “anthropomorphic fiction”. This complexity of Asana’s relationships leads to a celebration of friendship and diversity.

3. “No Hickory No Dickory No Dock” and Other Caribbean Nursery Rhymes

3.1. Nursery Rhymes: Undeservedly Marginalized

“No Hickory No Dickory No Dock” (1991) presents – as the subtitle says – “A Collection of Caribbean Nursery Rhymes by John Agard and Grace Nichols”. About one third of the rhymes are written by Nichols, another third is written by Agard, and the rest are traditional West Indian nursery rhymes collected by the two.²⁴ While the genre of nursery rhymes is probably one of the oldest and most popular types of literature worldwide (Opie and Opie 41), it has attracted little critical interest.²⁵ It is a marginalized genre in many ways: as a domestic and “female” genre (transmitted mostly by mothers and nannies), a genre for children, and – in the case of Caribbean nursery rhymes – a genre spoken by voices in the geographical periphery. They are also at the crossroads between written and oral culture, individual and collective authorship. All this makes them a genre that is neglected by traditional critics, but is

²³ Hoving also uses the term “contact zone” in her discussion of Nichols’ poetry, but uses this term as a reference to the female body in Nichols’ “My black triangle”. (214-218).

²⁴ It is not mentioned how, where and when these rhymes have been collected. As the subtitle of the American edition (1994) says “Caribbean nursery rhymes written and remembered by John Agard and Grace Nichols”, the couple has probably written the verses labelled “traditional” down from memory. This unacademic method of not quoting the sources should be excused by the fact that “No Hickory ...” is a childrens’ book, not a folklorical study.

²⁵ Exceptions are collections and folklorical studies such as the anthology of Opie and Opie or recommendations for paedagogical purposes (Tucker).

fascinatingly flexible and mirrors processes like contact between different cultures and hybridization.²⁶

An example of the interplay of written and oral, collective and individual is found in “No hickory ...”: The written original is “A Verse from one of Guyana’s National Songs”:

Onward upward may we ever go
Day by day in strength and beauty grow
Till at length each of us may show
What Guyana’s sons and daughters can be. (65)

The pathos of the original is deflated in the “Children’s Version of the Same Verse”:

Onward upward Mary had a goat
Day by day she tied it with a rope
Till at length de goat buss de rope
And Mary had to run behind it. (ibid.)

Whether by deliberate parody or misperception, the conventional metaphor “onward upward may we ever go” is transformed into the more concrete and down-to-earth “Mary had a goat”.

“Onward upward” loses its sense except as a reference to the pre-text. The pre-text in Standard English is creolized, “the” becomes “de”. The genre of the nursery rhyme, with its many speakers and hearers, lends itself particularly to such borrowings and variants. This variability is also consciously used by Grace Nichols and other Caribbean writers to reshape English texts.

3.2. Colonialism and English Nursery Rhymes

A central subject of “No Hickory No Dickory No Dock” is the re-writing of English culture, values and, more specifically, English nursery rhymes²⁷. This re-writing can be seen in a post-colonial context. In colonial times, English nursery rhymes like “Humpty Dumpty” or “Hey Diddle Diddle” were the first texts that West Indian children learnt to read, and were featured in, among others, the schoolbooks “West Indian Readers”, used throughout the British Caribbean from the 1920s on (Thieme 82). The Jamaican author Edward Kamau Brathwaite describes Caribbean literary socialization with English nursery rhymes:

²⁶ In ch. 3, rhymes by Nichols, Agard and traditional rhymes will be discussed alongside each other. While it may be fruitful in some cases to point out differences- this would be the subject of a study of its own- there is generally a very close connection between oral and written, individual and collective authorship in nursery rhymes. The Opies explain: Many rhymes believed to stem from a timeless oral tradition are in fact variants of ballads or verses written by individuals; but there are also orally transmitted rhymes that are printed, read and recited from memory before being collected and printed again a few generations later, inspiring individual authors in turn (18-25). So it is reasonable to discuss traditional rhymes and rhymes by individual authors together, as they are very closely related.

²⁷ In the following chapter, most poems will be taken from “No Hickory No Dickory No Dock”, but there are also poems by Grace Nichols from “Asana and the Animals”, “Come into my Tropical Garden”, and, edited by her, “Can I Buy a Slice of Sky?”, as similar principles of “writing back” to English nursery rhymes appear in all of them.

I could bring you a book, *The Royal Reader*, or (...) *Nelson's West Indian Reader* by J.O. Cutteridge, that we had to learn at school by heart, which contained phrases like: 'the cow jumped over the moon', 'ding dong bell, pussy in the well', 'Twisty & Twirly were two screws' and so on. I mean, that was our beginning of an understanding of literature. 'Literature' started (*startled*, really) literally at that level, with that kind of model. It was all we had. (25)

Brathwaite deplures not having been offered any better model of literature by the colonizers and also refers to another Caribbean author, the Calypsonian "Mighty Sparrow". In a 1963 recording of a calypso performance "Mighty Sparrow" attacks the English schoolbooks featuring nursery rhymes:

Listen what they teach me: (...)
Humpty Dumpty sat on a wall,
Humpty Dumpty did fall.
Goosey Goosey Gander,
Where shall I wander. (...)

The lessons and poems they write and send from England
Impress me they were trying to cultivate comedians. (...)
J.O. Cutteridge wanted to keep me in ignorance. (...)

How I happen to get some education, my friends, me ent know (...)
They wanted to keep me down indeed,
They tried their best but couldn't succeed.
You know why?
Me head was dumb, see, an up to now I can't read (qtd in Thieme 83)

"Mighty Sparrow" ridicules the absurdity of nursery rhymes. In the calypso, they are seen as a symptom of the colonial curriculum, "an attempt at infantilization of the colonial subject" (Thieme 83). He answers back to this genre in another mode of discourse, the calypso, and adopts a parodic, masquerading approach²⁸.

Writing- or, in Mighty Sparrow's case, performing a calypso- in answer to English pre-texts can be interpreted as "a clear counter-discursive encounter with the former colonizer" (Thieme 81). While re-writings of canonical English works ("Robinson Crusoe", "The Tempest", "Jane Eyre" and others) by West Indian authors have been thoroughly studied (Kreutzer 414-416), up to now there is no study on transposing English nursery rhymes into Caribbean ones.²⁹

3.3. Giving personal traits to nursery rhyme figures

²⁸ In his performance, "Sparrow" was dressed as a schoolboy (Thieme 84). According to Thieme, he even "upends colonial hierarchies by denying the authority not just of literature but also of literacy" (ibid).

²⁹ It would be worth while to write a study on English nursery rhymes and Caribbean literature in general. E.g. Jamaica Kincaid describes the Caribbean sea as seen through the eyes of a twelve-year-old girl: "The Caribbean Sea is ours and we share it with people who live on islands like us ... All these islands surround the Caribbean Sea like a ring around the rosy pocket full of posey games" (Kincaid, *Interview*, 224). Thus, a child's sense of home in the Caribbean is described in terms of a rhyme imported from England: "Ring-a-ring o'roses,/A pocket full of posies (...)" (Opie and Opie 433)

In “No Hickory, No Dickory, No Dock”, several rewritings of English nursery rhymes lend a voice to nursery rhyme figures which are only briefly mentioned in the original. An example is the traditional Guyanese nursery rhyme “London Bridge”. While the first stanza is identical with one of the most popular English rhymes, the following verses depart from it. Here is the classical English version:

London Bridge is broken down
Broken down, broken down,
London Bridge is broken down,
My fair lady. (Opie and Opie 318)

In the following stanzas, different methods of rebuilding the bridge are considered and discarded: “wood and clay”, “iron and steel” and finally “silver and gold”:

Build it up with silver and gold (...)
My fair lady.

Silver and gold will be stolen away (...)
My fair lady. (ibid.)

The Caribbean version of “London bridge” leaves the theme of the bridge completely after the first stanza, which is identical with the English version (“London Bridge is broken down”):

See de robbers passing by (...)
My fair lady

What dis poor robber do (...)
My fair lady
He broke my lock and stole my gold (...)
My fair lady
How many pounds will set him free? (...)
Ten thousand pounds will set him free (...)
Ten thousand pounds is far too much (...)
Then off to prison we must go (...) (Agard and Nichols, *No hickory*, 28-29)

The focus has departed from the London Bridge, a remote image to most Guyanese anyway, to the more concrete and pitiable “poor” robber. The only link of this theme to the Standard English version is probably “Silver and gold will be stolen away”. But while the potential robbers remain unnamed in the English version, they become the protagonists of the Guyanese rhyme. The speakers are more Creole than Cockney: “What dis poor robber do ...”. and identify with the robbers: “...off to prison we must go”. Compared to the “standard” London Bridge version, a shift has taken place: the criminals in the English version, a hazard to rebuilding the bridge, become the likeable protagonists in the West Indies.³⁰ The West Indian version is not concerned with rebuilding London Bridge (a symbol of imperial power?), but rather

³⁰ This strategy is employed not only in nursery rhymes, but also in classics of post-colonial literature, where a marginal outsider from an English pre-text becomes the protagonist, as in Jean Rhys’ “Wide Sargasso Sea”, based on “Jane Eyre”, or in the different re-writings of Shakespeare’s “Tempest”, where Caliban is revalorized, as in Brathwaite’s “The Arrivants”. (Kreutzer 414-16)

sympathizes with the underdog. It has a note of powerlessness: the Creole speakers are too poor to set the “robber” free.

Other rhymes seem to be written out of fun of giving English nursery rhyme figures a personality. An example is the title-giving “No hickory no dickory no dock” by John Agard.

The English version is:

Hickory, dickory, dock,
The mouse ran up the clock.
The clock struck one,
The mouse ran down,
Hickory, dickory, dock. (Opie and Opie 244)

The version by John Agard goes:

Wasn't me
Wasn't me
Said the little mouse
I didn't run up no clock

You could hickory me
You could dickory me
or lock me in a dock
(...)

Was me who ran under your bed
Was me who bit into your bread
Was me who nibbled your cheese

But please please,
I didn't run up no clock
no hickory
no dickory
no dock (Agard and Nichols 9)

In this poem the mouse answers back to the speaker of the English original and has a character of its own. Running up the clock seems an accusation against which the mouse defends itself, confessing its other little sins instead. “Hickory dickory dock” is transformed from a nonsense counting formula into a undefined means of punishment (“you could hickory me”) and into a denial: “No hickory/ no dickory/ no dock”. Whether it can be believed or not is something a child may wonder about. The child might also identify with the mouse confessing and denying little misdemeanours.

Another example of this rhyming back for fun is “Humpty”. The English version goes:

Humpty Dumpty sat on a wall,
Humpty Dumpty had a great fall.
All the king's horses,
And all the king's men,
Couldn't put Humpty together again. (Opie and Opie 252)

Grace Nichols modernizes this:

Humpty Dumpty did sit on a wall

Humpty Dumpty did have a great fall
 All the king's horses and all the king's men
 Did try to put him together again.

But after they left
 And poor Humpty had wept
 Along came little Hugh
 Who knew of super-glue

It took him a while
 But Humpty Dumpty was back in style (...) (Agard and Nichols 40)

The delight in repetition of sounds in the pre-text is continued by Nichols: Neither Christopher nor Peter, but Hugh “knew” of “super-glue”. While the original “Humpty Dumpty” is a broken egg that cannot be mended, in Nichols’ version he is miraculously glued back to life. The original story is not disclaimed as in “No hickory ...”, but continued. In the modern – but equally fantastic – time of “super-glue”, Little Hugh achieves what the king’s horses and the king’s men in ancient times did not. Humpty now has a character of his own: “Poor Humpty had wept”. Children will probably not suffer with the broken egg in the pre-text; but in Nichols’ version, children can feel empathy with the misfortune and mending of Humpty.

Rewritings of English nursery rhymes occur not only in “No Hickory No Dickory No Dock”, but also in other volumes written and edited by Nichols. In the already mentioned “Asana and the Animals”, there is a rewriting of “Hey Diddle-Diddle”, “probably the best-known nonsense verse in the language” (Opie and Opie 240). Here is the pre-text:

Hey diddle diddle,
 The cat and the fiddle,
 The cow jumped over the moon;
 The little dog laughed
 To see such sport,
 And the dish ran away with the spoon. (ibid.)

And here is Asana’s version with the same title:

Hey diddle-diddle
 the cat’s on my middle
 and my grandma’s in the kitchen
 with the spoons.

And I can’t lift her off
 ‘cause she’s digging in her claws.

Grandma stop the twiddle
 and take your cat from my middle.

She doesn’t give a fiddle
 that I want to get up
 and see the moon. (Nichols, *Asana*, n.p.)

The nonsense rhyme is transposed into a realistic setting: the “cat” becomes Asana’s grandmother’s cat; the “fiddle” becomes “doesn’t give a fiddle” to make more sense to describe a stubborn cat. Asana and the cat have distinct personality traits in their divergent desires. The location is not a fantastic cosmic scene but a clearly defined domestic one and the moon is looked at, not jumped over while the spoons have lost the life of their own and are mere objects. While the nonsense verse is completely acausal, here causality reigns: grandmother is called because the cat doesn’t get off. In the pre-text, the “spoon” is motivated by the preceding “moon” only (or vice-versa) and not by any other considerations of logic. In Nichols’ poem, “diddle” seems to produce “middle” and “twiddle” out of the fun of multiple rhymes too, but the poem gives a realistic sense, retaining the light-hearted spirit of the pre-text - except that the nonsense figures have changed into personalities with character traits.

3.4. Criticizing Western-oriented education

In “No Hickory ...”, there are several traditional nursery rhymes referring to school, such as “No more Latin (Chanted by Children when School is Closing)”:

No more Latin
No more French
No more sitting
On de old school bench

No more licks
To make me cry
No more eyewater
To come out me eye (Agard and Nichols 57)

Indirectly the curriculum influenced by the colonizer is criticised. Latin and French must seem strangely irrelevant in a place where even Standard English is a foreign language. When school is closing, Creole is reasserted as in: “de old” or “come out me eye”. The lively trochaic rhythm of the rhyme contrasts with the motionlessness of “sitting on de old school bench”.

“A-So She Say” by John Agard rewrites the nursery rhyme “Tom Tom the piper’s son”.

The pre-text goes:

Tom, Tom the piper’s son,
Stole a pig and away he run;
The pig was eat
And Tom was beat,
And Tom went howling down the street. (Opie and Opie 493)

Agard’s version intersperses the verse with a commentary, partly in Creole and partly in Standard English:

Tom Tom the piper’s son

Stole a pig
 A-SO DEM SAY [or so they say, E. Z.]
 and away he run
 A-SO DEM SAY
 the pig was eat
 A-SO DEM SAY
 and Tom was beat
 A-SO DEM SAY
 but my teacher say
 A-SO SHE SAY [or so she says]
 it ought to be
 the pig was eaten
 and Tom was beaten
 A-SO SHE SAY
 and my teacher does talk sweet
 and my teacher does write neat
 and my teacher don't eat pig meat
 A-SO SHE SAY (Agard and Nichols 56)

The nursery rhyme is literally quoted; in the refrain “A-SO DEM SAY”, “DEM” are the anonymous speakers of the pre-text, maybe the *vox populi*. In the second half this is changed to “A-SO SHE SAY”: “SHE” is the teacher who corrects the verbal endings of the pre-text with the normative “it ought to be”. The speaker acknowledges the linguistic authority of the teacher, who “does talk sweet”. Contrary to the speaker, the teacher doesn’t break any grammatical rules and contrary to Tom, she doesn’t break any laws: She “don’t eat [stolen?] pig meat”. The last line, however, questions this with A-SO SHE SAY. Maybe, as the speaker suggests, there is a discrepancy between what the teacher says and what she does.

At first glance, “A-SO SHE SAY” sets up an opposition between Standard British English and Creole. However, the linguistic distribution is more complex: The quoted nursery rhyme with its grammatical incorrectness (“eat ... beat”) comes from Britain, not from the Caribbean. So does the teacher, maybe Caribbean herself, want to be more British than the Brits? The speaker is only temporarily impressed and influenced: After producing two correct Standard English Sentences “and my teacher does talk sweet / and my teacher does write neat”, s/he relapses into Creole English with “don’t eat pig meat”. This poem discusses not so much the content of the pre-text, but rather serves as an example that even English texts are not always “correct”. It advocates a polyphony of English and Caribbean linguistic variants against the artificial upholding of a “Standard” language.

3.5. Defamiliarizing and remixing English culture

“No Hickory no Dickory no Dock” has many references to English customs and rhymes. Among the traditional Caribbean rhymes we find the counting-out rhyme “Abna Babna”:

Abna Babna

Lady-Snee
 Ocean potion
 Sugar and tea
 Potato roast
 And English toast
 Out goes she. (Agard and Nichols 49)

Typical English food is mentioned from a Caribbean perspective (an Englishman would not call his toast “English toast”) and set in a context of half-nonsense “exotic” items like “Abna Babna” or “Ocean potion”. Used as a device for counting out, English food is defamiliarized and seen as exotic in a literally playful fragmentation and re-contextualization of British colonial relics.

Another nursery rhyme, “Pumpkin, Pumpkin” by John Agard, is more irreverent:

Pumpkin
 Pumpkin
 Where have you been?

I been to Hallowe’en
 To frighten the queen (...)

With two holes for my eyes
 and a light
 in me head

I frightened the queen
 right under her bed! (ibid. 72)

The pre-text is the arch-English “Pussy Cat”³¹:

Pussy cat, pussy cat, where have you been?
 I’ve been to London to look at the queen.
 Pussy cat, pussy cat, what did you there?
 I frightened a little mouse under her chair. (Opie and Opie 432)

In Agard’s version, the re-writing may be seen as a playful thrust at three British institutions: Halloween, the “pussy cat” verse and, of course, the Queen. While the pussy cat wouldn’t dream of frightening the Queen herself, this is the pumpkin’s declared intention. He also surprises her at a more private place, “right under her bed”. The (cultural) shock is not only due to the presence of the pumpkin, but also to the presence of Black British English forms (“I been to Hallowe’en” ... “me head”) right where the “Queen’s English” should originate. This nursery rhyme can be regarded as a “contact zone” (Lissa Paul 91)³² between previously separated cultural elements, by mixing some ingredients of British culture and presenting them in a slightly un-British language.

³¹ Opie and Opie (433) write that this verse was known even by Queen Victoria and Queen Elizabeth II .

³² For the definition of “contact zone”, see ch. 2.3.

3.6. English pre-texts, Caribbean themes

Several nursery rhymes take up the English structure and some key words and alter content and rhythm to make them Caribbean. One pre-text, Jane Taylor's "The Star" (1806), is said to be "one of the best known poems in the English language" (Opie and Opie 475):

Twinkle, twinkle, little star,
How I wonder what you are!
Up above the world so high,
Like a diamond in the sky (...)

Then the traveller in the dark,
Thanks you for your tiny spark,
He could not see which way to go,
If you did not twinkle so. (...)

As your bright and tiny spark,
Lights the traveller in the dark,-
Though I know not what you are,
Twinkle, twinkle, little star. (Opie and Opie 474)

John Agard transforms this into:

Twinkle
Twinkle
Firefly
In the dark
It's you I spy

Over the river
Over the bush

Twinkle
Twinkle
Firefly
For the traveller
Passing by

Over the river
Over the bush

Twinkle
Twinkle
Firefly
Lend the dark
your sparkling eye (Agard and Nichols 19)

"The Star" has often been parodied (Opie and Opie 475). Agard doesn't write a parody but a transposition into a Caribbean context: there are fireflies in the West Indies, but not in Britain (Branham n.p.). Agard retains keywords of the pre-text: the traveller in need of light, the twinkling eye, and the second-person address to the twinkling object. He changes the subject from star to firefly. While the star is seen as miraculous "How I wonder what you are", the firefly is instantly recognized: "It's you I spy". Agard also leaves out the sentimental and

pseudo-naive diminutives of the English version “little star”, “little light”, “tiny spark”, although they would be more appropriate to the size of a firefly than to a star. The rhythm in the original is rather monotonous, and for the sake of metre and rhyme, clumsy lines like “If you did not twinkle so” are produced. Agard changes the rhythm by shortening the lines: “Twinkle / Twinkle / firefly” mirrors the flashing light of the firefly; the unvaried trochees of Taylor are interrupted by the dactyls of the whispered “over the river / over the bush”.

The changes from the English to the Caribbean version are rather subtle and may reflect not only cultural, but also temporal differences between a rhyme published in 1806 and its counterpart printed in 1991: nowadays, ideas about metrical structures of poetry are far more relaxed. One-word lines like “Twinkle / Twinkle” would have looked very unusual in 1806. In addition, concepts of childhood have changed to see children in a less sentimental way and maybe as less naive than two hundred years ago.

The English nursery rhyme “Little Miss Muffet” inspired two Caribbean poets³³. Here is the pre-text:

Little Miss Muffet
Sat on a tuffet,
Eating her curds and whey,
There came a big spider,
Who sat down beside her
And frightened Miss Muffet away. (Opie and Opie 382)

“Little Miss Muffet” contrasts with the “big spider”, the tender girl with the scary animal.

Different from Miss Muffet, who conforms to the gender stereotype of a timid female, frightened by a spider³⁴, Nichols’ Asana is not at all afraid (cf. also ch. 2.1.):

Little Asana sat on a sofa
Eating her peas and rice.
There came a small spider
That snuggled up beside her
And Asana said, “I think you’re nice”. (Nichols, *Asana*, n.p.)

Here the relationship with the pre-text is one of opposition: fear in one poem, friendship in the other. In contrast to Miss Muffet, who can be imagined either silent or shrieking with terror, Asana talks to the spider. “Little Asana” and the “small spider” match in size and are both likeable. This re-writing may be a reaction against gender stereotypes, an attempt to draw a positive picture of spiders (maybe of outsiders in general), or simply a variation composed out of the fun of re-writing.

³³ Apparently Miss Muffet is a favourite across cultures; in Hindustan she is known as *Mafiti Mai* (Opie and Opie 42)

³⁴ Miss Muffet has inspired U.S. feminists too: the title of a 1974 publication of „Feminists on Children’s Media“ is „Little Miss Muffet fights back.“ (qtd in Clark, Kulkin and Clancy 71)

There is another Caribbean poem which takes “Little Miss Muffet” as a starting point. In Nichols’ collection “Can I buy a slice of sky? Poems from Black, Asian and American Indian Cultures” (1991), Lillian Allen from Jamaica writes “Anancy”:

Anancy is a trickster of no small order
 Half a man and half a spider
 Miss Muffet was sure glad
 He hadn’t sat beside her (...)

He’s never lost a game
 ‘cause he cheats, doublecrosses his friends
 When he can’t win fair
 He’s a spider again (...) (ed. Nichols, *Can I buy*, 100)

Apart from the English rhyme, “Anancy” draws on the pre-texts of the oral West Indian and African tradition of Anancy stories. Anancy is a mythical man- spider:

In the Caribbean Anancy emerged as a survivor of the Middle Passage (the second leg of the Triangular Trade that brought slaves to the Caribbean and sugar and other commodities to Europe). Many see the small spider with the larger than life character as "representative of the principles of cunning, subtlety and intelligence as techniques of survival which the slave employed in the New World" (Rohlehr, 19, p. 184-5). Anancy is said to have spoken to the slaves' empowerment while undergoing immense subjugation. (Tortello, *Anancy*, n.p.)

In Allen’s poem, this cunning is extensively described. This can be interpreted as admiration for the “trickster”, his protean nature (“when he can’t win fair / he is a spider again”), but also as a warning to caution (“doublecrosses his friends”). The poem may also be an explanation for (English?) children who don’t know Anancy yet. This could also explain why the poem is written in standard English, although traditional Anancy tales are written in Creole (Tortello n.p.).

As Jean D’Costa points out, the value system of Anancy, who cheats his friends to survive, is not compatible with English middle-class ideas (258). Indeed, in this poem there is a confrontation of two different cultures. Miss Muffet is not at all an equal to Anancy: She hasn’t changed her character since the times of the pre-text, and is still effete and fearful, knowing that Anancy could outsmart her. Ironically the feared British, who brought the slaves from Africa to the Caribbean, with Anancy as a “blind passenger”, are here represented by a little girl. Miss Muffet is justly scared of the vitality, intelligence, and power of the African-Caribbean hero. While D’Costa sees it as a task for children’s literature to combine both English and Caribbean values³⁵, in the “Anancy” poem it is clear where the sympathies lie. Writing the poem about the power of Anancy in Standard English could be seen as an attempt to “talk back” in the colonizers’ language and to tell English children about the West Indian hero, after generations of West Indians had been brought up with English rhymes and values.

³⁵ see also ch. 1.5.

The “Little Asana” poem writes back to the pre-text by changing both the character of the girl and the nature of the spider. The “Anancy” poem retains the character of the protagonist and confronts her with much stronger aversion (“sure glad”), as her counterpart has far more power than in the pre-text. It is again a negative figure without a voice in the English version that gets a voice and a personality in the West Indies. Similar to the “robbers” in the “London Bridge” rhyme, who become the protagonists of Caribbean version, the spider, nameless and only a scary sight in the pre-text, becomes likable (in “Little Asana”) or even a folk hero with mythical powers who is far more important for the poem than Miss Muffet (in “Anancy”).

A mixture of colloquial Standard English and African-Caribbean tradition is found in “Mama-Wata” by Grace Nichols:

Down by the seaside
when the moon is in bloom
sits Mama-Wata
gazing up at the moon

She sits as she combs
her hair like a loom
she sits as she croons
a sweet kind of tune

But don't go near Mama-Wata
when the moon is in bloom
for sure she will take you
down to your doom. (Agard and Nichols, *No Hickory*, 42)

Mama-Wata is, similar to Anancy, a hybrid figure: She appears in West Africa as “Mami Wata”, a “beautiful and seductive river goddess with long flowing hair and fair skin” (Gore 108), probably imported to the Caribbean with the slave trade. While Mama-Wata can be both helpful and destructive in Africa, Nichols’ version shows only her dangerous side.

The haunting atmosphere of the poem is emphasized by the repetition of dark vowels, not only in “Mama-Wata”, but also in the series of words rhyming with “moon”. Nichols writes in Standard English in the tone of an English folk ballad. The poetic language also recalls archaic English diction (“loom”, “doom”). But this archaic gesture is juxtaposed with irony: “She sits as she croons / a sweet kind of tune”. “Croon” is usually pejorative for singing in a sentimental way (Terrell 1215)- can a goddess who “croons/ a sweet kind of tune” be taken seriously?

By writing about this African-Caribbean subject in Standard English, the figure of Mama Wata gains a more than regional significance.³⁶ The language carries a double message: the archaisms and dark vowels create a haunting atmosphere, but the ironies in the language (and the context in a volume of nursery rhymes) also distance the reader from the subject. Is Mama Wata in this poem a dangerous goddess, an item of slightly sentimental folklore – or is

³⁶ For German readers it is surprising how much this portrait of Mama Wata resembles the Loreley.

the pathos in the poem to be taken no more seriously than Humpty Dumpty's tragedy? The ambivalence between Afro-Caribbean beliefs and its description in different registers of English is not resolved.

In Grace Nichols' earlier volume of poetry for children, "Come on into My Tropical Garden" (1988), a transposition of an English nursery rhyme formula appears, the "Riddle":

Me-riddle me-riddle me-ree
 Me father got a tree
 Tell me what you see
 hanging from this tree (...)

It's big
 it's rough
 it's green
 it came with old Captain Bligh
 from way across the sea

Still can't guess?
 well it's a Breadfruit [written upside down in the original, E.Z.]
 Me-riddle me-riddle me-ree (Nichols, *Come on*, 11)

The formula "Riddle me, riddle me ree" originated in English nursery rhymes.³⁷ The meaning of "riddle me ree" ("expound my riddle rightly", Opie and Opie 432) is probably no longer understood, but this formula functions as a reference to the English nursery riddle.

Nichols' "Come on into my Tropical Garden", from which this poem is taken, is written as an invitation to non-Caribbean children to join a tour of the Caribbean – the title-giving poem ends with "Come on into my tropical garden / Come on in please come on in" (3). The "breadfruit" riddle might be intended for English children who do not yet know the breadfruit, but are familiar with the "riddle me" formula. Starting with something well-known, they are introduced to a new culture.

The quotation of an English formula in a Caribbean riddle is not the only act of transculturation in this poem. The breadfruit itself, imported by "old Captain Bligh / from way across the sea" is an example of literally planting items of other cultures in a new soil in a colonial context. Following the demands of Caribbean plantation owners to grow food for the slaves, King George III sent an expedition led by Captain Bligh to Tahiti to bring breadfruit to Jamaica. (Tortello, *Breadfruit*, n.p.)³⁸ The riddle itself, with its "implantation" of an English formula into a Caribbean poem, mirrors the English transfer of foreign fruit into Caribbean soil. These complex historical and textual processes are palpable in the breadfruit as an object and a symbol.

³⁷ "Riddle me, riddle me ree" continues: "A little man in a tree;/ A stick in his hand,/ A stone in his throat, /If you read me this riddle /I'll give you a goat." (Opie and Opie, 431-32)

³⁸ This endeavour famously failed at first in the mutiny on the "Bounty" before Bligh, in a second attempt, brought the trees to the Caribbean in 1793.

3.7. The Nursery Rhymes Back- with a Vengeance? Post-Colonialism and re-writings of English Nursery Rhymes

Both the traditional Guyanese verses in “No Hickory ...” and those composed by Agard and Nichols share a number of strategies to rewrite English nursery rhymes. By mixing and juxtaposing English and Caribbean elements, they create new layers of meaning: They experiment with different linguistic registers (the “pussy cat” verse set in Creole), sympathize with the villain and the underdog (the “robbers” and the “spider”), they transplant poetic patterns from the past to the present (“Twinkle Twinkle”) as well as from one (hybrid) culture to another (the “breadfruit” riddle). Some English rhymes which are set in an acausal nonsense world, where figures like “the cat” or “the mouse” have no personalities of their own, have a more concrete and realistic Caribbean counterpart, its figures often being invested with individual personality traits (“Hey Diddle-Diddle”).

Other nursery rhymes defamiliarize English traditions (“Abna babna.. English toast”) but also Caribbean myths (like Mama-Wata, who “croons/a sweet kind of tune”). There is no binary opposition of a “pure” Caribbean culture to the (ex-)Empire, but rather a complex continuum of different mixtures of English/Caribbean cultures. While the “Twinkle Twinkle” poem departs from the English pretext only in subtle nuances, the “Mama-Wata” poem is at first glance entirely Caribbean; only on second glance, English influences become visible.

Sometimes the re-writings have a metafictional twist, as in “A-SO SHE SAY”, where it is demonstrated that not even an English nursery rhyme is linguistically correct. Some rhymes can be read (probably only by adults) as highlighting social issues (enforcing Standard English in a non-standard environment, as the teacher of “A-SO SHE SAY”) and reflecting processes of transculturation and hybridization. But even children can spot the change from “Hickory Dickory Dock” to “No Hickory, No Dickory, No Dock” and the transformation in “Twinkle, Twinkle” from a star to a firefly and may want to know more about Mama-Wata or the breadfruit.

Most re-writings of nursery rhymes composed and edited by Nichols treat the pre-texts rather kindly. Maybe the marginalized genre of the nursery rhyme has- at least in the eyes of Nichols and the authors edited by her- escaped the pretentiousness of English “high” culture in the colonies³⁹. The re-written nursery rhymes sometimes show playful, but not aggressive

³⁹

Other Caribbean texts are far more aggressive towards British pre-texts; as already mentioned in ch. 1.5, “Lucy” in Jamaica Kincaid’s eponymous novel wants to kill daffodils after a traumatic encounter with Wordsworth’s “Daffodils” as a child.

opposition to the pre-texts and their values and often continue in the vein of the original (such as “Humpty Dumpty”), as they share their delight in onomatopoeia and repetitions. None of the quoted rhymes (maybe except “Anancy”, where Miss Muffet is slightly ridiculed as weaker than the spider) can be seen as denigrating the pre-texts, even when they oppose them.

This is especially striking when these rhymes are compared to the harsh criticism of English nursery rhymes voiced by Brathwaite and “Mighty Sparrow”, who attack nursery rhymes as symptoms of aesthetic and intellectual deprivation of the colonies. Maybe this difference is due to a change in audiences: thirty years after decolonization, aggression towards the colonizers is probably less virulent. (“Mighty Sparrow” composed his calypso in 1963, “No Hickory” was published in 1991). Moreover, “No Hickory” is aimed at young children, both British and Caribbean⁴⁰. They wouldn’t appreciate the harsh rhetoric of Brathwaite or “Mighty Sparrow” who, in a very adult way, deplore the nonsense worlds of nursery rhymes for aesthetic and political reasons. Rather, children will take delight in the funny re-writings of familiar texts, and both British and Caribbean children will get early insights into their own and into the respective other culture in an unobtrusive way.

4. Nichols as an anthologist for children

4.1. Analyzing anthologies

Hardly any studies analyse anthologies (let alone anthologies for children)⁴¹- the compilation of anthologies, painstaking as it may be, is not widely recognized as significant in itself. However, anthologies reveal much not only about the personal tastes of their compilers, but also about issues like valuing and categorizing texts and searching for the typical, the “best”, for drawing boundaries, reproducing and establishing poetic and cultural value systems⁴².

Grace Nichols’ anthologies for children, which form a significant part of her work, shall be analysed in view of such cultural value systems and implicit poetics. Apart from “No hickory, no dickory, no dock”, Nichols has edited four anthologies of poetry for children and young people: “Black Poetry” (1988), which was re-edited under the name of “The Poetry

⁴⁰ As its London-based Puffin publishing house suggests, probably British children will be the main audience.

⁴¹ Practically the only texts discussing anthologies seem to be reviews in newspapers which discuss single books, but rarely theoretical principles of anthologies. The only theoretical remarks on anthologies in general I found were in Frank Paul, “Übersetzungsanthologien”, whose study concentrates on anthologies of translations. A thorough study on anthologies and their underlying poetic principles and selection criteria would be a desideratum for further research.

⁴² Brathwaite notes for example that in the 1962 “Independence Anthology of Jamaican Poetry”, the popular poet-performer Louise Bennett “does not appear among the poets ... but is at the back of the book, like an afterthought if not an embarrassment, under ‘Miscellaneous’ ” (28) because she wrote in Creole at a time when Standard English was still considered the only language for proper poetry. In a Caribbean anthology of 1986 (ed. Burnett) however, Louise Bennett finds her place among other Creole and Standard English poets.

Jump-up” two years later; “Can I Buy a Slice of Sky? Poems from Black, Asian and American Indian Cultures” in 1991; and, together with her partner John Agard, two collections of Caribbean poetry: “A Caribbean Dozen. Poems from Caribbean Poets” (1994) and “Under the Moon and Over the Sea. A Collection of Caribbean Poems” (2003).

Anthologies are always a corpus of texts selected from a much larger corpus (Frank Paul, 10), and the selection is influenced by different criteria, not the least of which will be financial and copyright issues (what Paul calls “die unbekannte ‘Rückseite’ von Anthologien” (9)); as Nichols does not mention them, we will never know which poems might have been omitted for these reasons. Other issues are those of the relation of the anthology to the whole body of texts: anthologists usually consider their selection to be representative of the body of texts they selected from (Paul 10) (in Nichols’ case, Black or Caribbean poetry). In Nichols’ case, an additional criterion is suitability for children. Thus, her choice can be read as making implicit- and, in her prefaces, explicit- statements on what makes good Black and Caribbean children’s poetry.

4.2. “Black Poetry”: an explicit description

In her introduction to “Black Poetry”, Nichols writes:

Some would argue that poetry has no colour and that one wouldn’t dream of putting together an anthology of ‘white poetry’. One might well say as a parallel to this, that the fact that one wouldn’t need to describe an anthology of poetry by men as ‘men’s poetry’ as opposed to ‘women’s poetry’ points to certain real issues of omission and neglect by the literary establishment and to the whole question of power. (7)

Her aim as an anthologist is to explore new literary territories beyond “canonical” texts- parallel to feminist critics’ aims to publish forgotten or neglected women’s literature.

However, she does not only want to foster the reputation of black authors and give black children role-models, but also to give a fuller picture of literature for both black and white children and widen their horizons:

I saw this [compiling the anthology, E.Z.] as a way of offering children something new; new sounds and tastes and ways with words. I think it’s important for all children (black or white) to be exposed to poetry from different cultures and to be aware that black poets exist and contribute to the world’s literary heritage (ibid.).

Her definition of “black” is very broad:

Black evokes for me, almost unconsciously, a certain cultural spirit or aesthetic with underlying connections to an African past. This spirit manifests itself in the creole speech of the Caribbean for example; in the black English of Afro-Americans; in the blues, jazz, gospel, calypso and dub, the influences of which can be felt on Afro-American and Caribbean poetry (ibid.).

She also adds another definition: “black” as a political term for “people of colour who’ve shared a common resistance of discrimination” (8), including Asians, but is aware that “some Asians object to the term ‘black’ and see it as a blanket label, denying their own distinctive identity.” As she perceives the Asian poems to have “their own kind of sensibility” (8), she groups them into a chapter of their own- “A Taste of Asia” (115)- while all the other “black” poets are mixed together in thematically organized chapters, regardless of their regional origins. However, she also includes “poets like Ian McDonald, a white West Indian, and David Dabydeen, an East-Indian Guyanese”, because their works are “very much rooted in the Caribbean” (8). Is that to say that the Caribbean is seen as a “black” area, with whites and (East) Indians pronounced “honorary blacks”, if their cultural views fit in? Isn’t the Caribbean a region more defined by racial and cultural mixture, where “black”, “white” and “East Indian” are more part of a continuum than of a “black” culture⁴³?

I see this very broad and essentialist definition of “black” as rather problematic. When leafing through the anthology, we find, for example, in the chapter “Kid Stuff” one poem by the Harlem Renaissance poet Langston Hughes, a poem by Grace Nichols herself written in Creole and two poems where simply “Malawi” is written instead of an author’s name- how should children know that “Malawi” is not an author, or how should anyone know how this text was collected or translated? Does it make sense to group oral and written poetry from such different cultures as Afro-American, African, Caribbean and Black British together and at the same time segregate the Asian poetry, which seems rather artificial? Furthermore, no information at all is given about the date of the poems, the origins or biography of the authors. This is especially frustrating as many of the poets are not well-known (being, as Nichols justly points out, often marginalized as black poets) and the anthology doesn’t help much to know them better⁴⁴. Similarly, her concept of a “black spirit” is essentialist and at the same time very vague, as the cultural manifestations she quotes- creole speech, black English, gospel, blues, jazz, calypso etc.- are never “pure black” creations (she doesn’t write about African cultures in this enumeration anyway) but emerged in contact and cross-fertilization with the English-speaking white (and, e.g. in the Caribbean, with Native American, Indian and Chinese) cultures. Another problem is that connecting black “almost unconsciously” with “a certain cultural spirit

⁴³ see Gohrisch (139- 142), who cites Dash and Brathwaite on the multiracial and –cultural aspects of Caribbean societies and gives them Bhabha’s term of „hybridity“.

⁴⁴ Her second anthology for children, “Can I buy a slice of sky” includes “Poems from Black, Asian and American Indian cultures”. This anthology evades the trap of a too essentialist definition of “black” and the ensuing question whether Asians are “black” by separating these groups from the start. Moreover, the poets’ origins are stated, and the poets “who were either born in the UK or came to the UK when they were very young” are marked.

Nevertheless, the information on the context remains relatively scarce.

or aesthetic” is in danger of repeating the old and often unconscious racist stereotype that blacks are, if not much else, good artists- especially musicians- because of their emotional nature and vitality⁴⁵.

4.3. “Black Poetry”: an implicit poetics

This explicit description of black literature in Nichols’ preface shall now be compared with an implicit poetics in the choice of the poems. “Black Poetry” is divided into chapters:

The Beauty Of It
Kid Stuff
Poor Fowl and Other Creatures
Hard Times/Work Times
Way Down in the Music
Magic and Old Days
A Taste of Asia (5)

The first six of these chapters are arranged as thematic groups (but there are themes recurring throughout these chapters, as my analysis will show), the seventh one according to ethnicity (no thematic consistency is recognizable in the seventh chapter, its only common denominator is the Asian origin of the poets⁴⁶.)

The first chapter, “The Beauty Of It”, is composed of diverse praise poems. The title-giving poem of this section by Don L. Lee describes the beauty of a rarely praised feature:

(...)
I have often wondered
 about the beauty of its
 darkness,
my Shadow. (12)

This poem, which stresses the word “darkness” in a one-word line, can also refer in a wider sense to dark skin, which is seldom praised, similar to the shadow. “Shadow” is capitalized in the same way as “Black” is sometimes capitalized as a term of cultural/ethnic and political identity⁴⁷. The affirmation of “black (and black styles) is beautiful” is an important theme for the whole anthology.

The speaker of “Dread-Lock style” (by Lesley Miranda) praises dreadlocks:

(...)

⁴⁵ See Pieterse (132-136). Even the leading racist theorist Comte Gobineau writes about the “vivacity and spontaneity” of “the black element” which makes art possible. (qtd. in Pieterse 137)

⁴⁶ There are poems such diverse as “Feeding the Poor at Christmas” (Eunice de Souza 117) about rich self-indulgence; the animal poems of Manohar Shetty (136) and Rabindranath Tagore’s romantic “Paper Boats” on a child who sends paper boats with flowers and dreams down the river. (137)

⁴⁷ p.ex. in Sutcliffe. I use the lower case spelling however, which is not only in accordance to standard spelling but also to Nichols’ own usage. Further, the lower case spelling “black” avoids the cultural and political implications that are already present in “Black” and aims at denoting only the colour of the skin.

dem hair gals
 putting a dunno what on yuh hair
 bunning up yuh scalp
 thinking I was born yesterday

So I think I gonna stick
 to me dread-lock style
 me dread-lock style
 looking wild wild wild (20)

This poem constructs a black identity in its language and subject. The nonstandard⁴⁸ forms “I gonna” and “me” instead of “my” contrast with Standard English in the same way as hair-styles contrast: Rastafarians refuse to use styling products for their hair to keep as close to natural states as possible⁴⁹, in sharp contrast to “dem hair gals / putting a dunno what on yuh hair”. Here, the “style”, part of the cultural identity of the “I”, is defined in its visual and linguistic separation from other (white or at least non-Rastafarian) styles. The content of this poem is not very original- “looking wild” in dreadlocks today comes near being cliché⁵⁰. In affirming a style that can be identified with, it may still help black teenagers to find positive self-images. However, the dichotomy “dem”/“I” which ridicules the “dem” to strengthen the “I” is a problematic means of enhancing one’s self-esteem. Or is the speaker slightly ironic in her own fierce self-description “looking wild wild wild”, and mocking not only the “hair gals” but also herself?

Another subject recurring in the whole anthology is praise for strong mothers.

Grace Nichols includes her poem “Wha me mudder do” (34) from her earlier volume, “Come on into my tropical garden”:

(...) Me mudder chase bad-cow
 with one ‘Shoo’
 she paddle down river
 in she own canoe
 Ain’t have nothing
 Dat me mudder can’t do (...)

As Lissa Paul interprets this poem, the “mudder” is “praised for her domestic prowess inside and outside the house”, but “she also leaves the domestic site and has her own

⁴⁸ The poem is probably written in Black British English (the forms of the poem conform with the description of BBE in Sutcliffe, but as the origins of the author are not stated, it might as well be African American Vernacular or a Caribbean variant of English.

⁴⁹ Moore, a Rastafari himself, writes in the chapter „Ras Tafari“ (qtd in Sutcliffe 69): “Also he’s a *naturalist*. As far as possible he’s as natural as possible. Which is one of the reasons for the hair right? (...)Don’t do anything to it, you must wash it, you must keep it clean, you must oil it. You mustn’t do anything else.”

⁵⁰ It is pandered by a merchandising industry that comprises everything from Bob Marley posters to advertisements for “Afro-Styles” in hairdressers’ shops and even sounds like an echo of white stereotypes of “wild” blacks.

adventures” (89). She is depicted in a realistic way and- in the last lines- invested with almost mythical powers (or seen from the perspective of a bragging child).

While Nichols’ “mudder” lives in the Caribbean, Benjamin Zephaniah writes about an immigrant “mudder” in Britain. Both are seen from the perspective of their admiring children. Zephaniah’s Black British English poem is called “I love me mudder”:

(...)
 She shouts at me daddy so loud some time
 she don’t smoke weed she don’t drink wine
 she always do the best she can
 she work damn hard down ina England,
 she’s always singing some kind of song,
 she have big muscles and she very very strong (...)

I love me mudder and me mudder love me
 we come so far from over de sea
 we heard dat de streets were paved with gold
 sometime it hot sometime it cold,
 I love her and she love me too
 and dis is a love I know is true
 me and my mudder we love you too. (Nichols, *Black Poetry*, 17)

In a tone similar to that of Nichols’ poem, the physical strength and vitality of the “mudder” is praised. Contrary to clichès about black immigrants who are said to be lazy and use drugs, this “mudder” “don’t smoke weed” and “work damn hard”. But while the poem writes against stereotypes at this point, it naively picks up another stereotype: “we heard dat de streets were paved with gold”- which presents mother and child as gullible. The poem ends- differently from Nichols’ “Wha me mudder do”- in unashamed sentimentality (“a love I know is true”) with a last line that lacks credibility “we love you too”- as if mother and child were reincarnations of Jesus and Mary.

The chapter “Magic and old days” is also full of praise of mother figures and ancestral heroines: David Dabydeen writes “For Ma” (97); in Barbara Mahone’s “sugarfields”, the mother has become part of the landscape: “treetalk and windsong / are the language of my mother” (111).

Margaret Walker writes in “Lineage”: “My grandmothers were strong” (110) - this recurrent theme always being in danger of becoming a cliché, and even tending towards sentimental doggerel, as in Yansan Agard’s “Granny Anna”:

I love my Granny Anna
 Yes I love her so
 For when I was little
 She could never let me go (...)(111)

While mother figures are clearly dominant and often idealized in the whole anthology, fathers are hardly ever described. In Zephaniah’s already quoted poem, the “daddy” is in a marginal

and un-patriarchal position and only mentioned once: “she shouts at me daddy”⁵¹. This dominance of mother figures mirrors not only Nichols’ concern with depicting positive female figures⁵², but also studies like Senior’s, who shows a virtual absence of fathers in the lives of mothers and children in the Caribbean (18-24).

In the chapter “Poor Fowl and Other Creatures” there are types of poems unfamiliar to Western readers, such as “Chant for killing a snake” by Nicalás Guillen. This poem is probably performative, i.e. helping to kill a snake by its recitation, or refers to a tradition of performative poetry:

Hit it with the axe, and it dies;
hit it now!
Don’t hit it with your foot, it will bite you,
Don’t hit it with your foot, it will flee! (...) (Nichols, *Black Poetry*, 60)

This practical advice is followed by an incantation, interspersed with unintelligible magical spells and structured by repetition. At the end of the poem, the performative aim is completed:

(...)

Mayombe-bombe-mayombe!

Sensemaya, the serpent ...

Mayombe-bombe-mayombe!

Sensemaya, he is dead! (ibid.)

This spell is followed by two other “performative” poems in the section “Hard Times / Work Times”. They are two prayers, “Prayer for Rain” (72) (Malawi) and “An Elder’s Prayer” (65) (African Oral Tradition). In “An Elder’s Prayer”, the “Great Spirit” is addressed, given a sacrifice, prayed to for sunshine, rain, wind and protection and at the end promised a feast after the harvest. This poem is probably supposed to accompany the gesture of sacrifice:

O Great Spirit of my fores
I have nothing in my hand
But a chicken and some rice
To make sacrifice to you,
This is all my land can give,
Bring us sunshine with the rains
So the harvest wind can blow,
Save my people from all pains
When the harvest time is done
I will make a feast to you. (65)

⁵¹ The only other mention of a father in a poem is in Zinziswa Mandela’s „My country“ (qtd later in this chapter) about Nelson Mandela’s imprisonment. Patriarchal, authoritative father figures are completely absent from the anthology.

⁵² Nichols writes: “There is a danger of reducing the black woman’s condition to that of ‘sufferer’,” and she sets positive figures like her “fat black woman” or the “priestess figure” of “i is a long memoried woman” against it. (“The Battle with Language”, 284-86)

In a Western anthology of poetry, a prayer would rarely be included. Here Nichols demonstrates a different, far more existential concept of poetry: Not as an art for its own sake but as a means to “bring us sunshine with the rains”.

Other poems in the chapter “Hard Times/Work Times” include a haunting poem on hunger on the outskirts of Bombay (68) and “My country” by twelve-year-old Zinziwa Mandela about her father in prison:

(...)
 My father left my mother
 In his arms
 He is roughly separated
 From her

The van pulls away
 Mother watches bravely enough
 I as a child do
 Not understand (...) (70-71)

This most political poem of the anthology doesn’t present politics as an abstract concept but seen through the eyes of a girl suffering from the cruel intrusion of politics into her private life: seeing her father’s imprisonment without understanding the reason for it. Children suffering from racism themselves will be able to identify with her, and children not affected by racism may learn to understand its cruelty in a deeper way than by abstract moral teachings.

The chapter “Kid Stuff” in Nichols’ anthology is influenced by oral forms: there are anonymous teasing songs from oral tradition in Malawi (43-44), and Nikki Giovanni’s “a heavy rap” (36) with rhythms similar to rap music. Dionne Brand writes a “Skipping Rope Song” (39), Eloise Greenfield a “Rope Rhyme” with rhythmical patterns mimicking the rope rhythms:

Count to a hundred, count by ten
 Start to count all over again
 That’s what jumping is all about
 Get set, ready now,
 jump
 right
 out! (38)

This rhyme is performative, as the imperatives “count” and “jump” suggest: it is meant to be spoken by playing children to time their movements. The stressed syllables could indicate the moments when the feet of the child touch the ground, while the whole rhythm could be used by the rope-turners to keep pace.

The importance of oral forms and music is especially palpable in the chapter “Way down in the music”, as in Langston Hughes’ “Song for a Banjo Dance”:

Shake your brown feet, honey,
 Shake your brown feet, chile,
 Shake your brown feet, honey,

Shake ‘em swift and wil’-
 Get way back, honey,
 Do that rockin’ step.
 Slide on over, darling,
 Now! Come out
 With your left. (92)

The poem mirrors the refrains of a song, sung in African American Vernacular, and the “wil’ ” (wild, E. Z.) but elaborate dancing movements to it. Similarly to the “Rope Song”, but in a more complex rhythm, this “song” could be performative, as a way to memorize the dancing steps and as a, literally, step-by-step instruction from the male dancing partner to his “chile” (or “honey” or “darling” female) to do as told. Other poems in Nichols’ anthology celebrate black music too, like “Way Down in the Music” (“Inside the sound of the Jackson Five” (84) (Eloise Greenfield) or “Beat Drummers” (91) by Benjamin Zephaniah. In each poem, the music is not only described, but- in rhythm and onomatopoeia- mirrored.

As already mentioned, the anthology “Black Poetry” (1988), was re-edited in 1990 under a new title. While the same poems and introduction were retained, the title was changed to “Poetry Jump-Up”, the title of a poem by John Agard. “The Poetry Jump-Up” is a central poem for the anthology in many respects- it not only provides the new title and the back cover text in the new edition, but is the only poetological poem and might be a comment on the selection of the other poems. In an otherwise realistic Caribbean or British street carnival setting, the protagonists are not people but words:

(...)
 Words dancin
 words dancin
 till dey sweat
 words like fishes
 jumpin out a net
 words wild and free
 joinin de poetry revelry
 words back to back
 words belly to belly (Nichols, *Black Poetry*, 88)
 (...)

Words are seen as sensual bodies in a vital and erotic dance. In this poem, the reader is addressed to participate in a hilarious celebration:

dis is poetry carnival
 dis is poetry bacchanal
 when inspiration call
 take yu pen in yu hand
 if yu dont have a pen
 take yu pencil in yu hand
 if you dont have a pencil
 what the hell
 so long de feeling start to swell

just shout de poem out (ibid.)

There is a shifting of registers between Black British English (“yu”, “de”) and Standard English (“you”, “the”) in the spelling, and a mix of Black British morphological forms and literary terms (“when inspiration call”) as well as a constant shift in the lexicon from colloquial (“what the hell”) to ‘educated’ language (“bacchanal”). The Romantic idea of the inspired poet, overcome by his own emotions, is taken up and blended with Caribbean orality and rhythm. While “bacchanal” is of Greek origin, “carnival”, derived from an Italian word, can mean an English funfair as well as a Caribbean celebration (Terrell 1150). This linguistic and cultural mixture is personified in the “words”:

(...)
 words wit black skin
 words wit white skin
 words wit brown skin
 words wit no skin at all
 words huggin up words
 an saying I want to be a poem today (Nichols, *Black Poetry*, 88)

Though the poem is written in the sociolect of Black English and set in an “ethnic” context, it expresses the thought that “words” are not tied to race: they can have every hue of skin or even “no skin at all”, and the “words huggin up words” to form a poem can be words from different colours. So this poem in Nichols’ anthology undermines her own theories about an essentialist “Black spirit” and showing how poetry can transcend colour in a carnivalesque, exhilarating setting.

The language varieties of the poems in this anthology range from a translation of Tagore from Bengali⁵³ to Standard English, Black British English (B. Zephaniah), African American Vernacular (Langston Hughes) and Caribbean Creole. While most of the poetry is linguistically not too difficult to understand, some Creole texts pose a bigger challenge for the non-Creole reader⁵⁴, but there is no glossary. In printing them unannotated, the musical and onomatopoeic quality of the words gets (at least for the non-Creole) priority over understanding all of the content.

As for “suitability for children”, Nichols writes in the preface of “Black Poetry”, it was a problem for her that, while some black poets write explicitly for children, “a number of good black poets just happen to have work that is geared to adults.” (7) Rather than theoretical definitions as for “children’s poems” and “adult poems”, she states her selection criteria as

⁵³ Unfortunately, the fact that it is translated is not stated in the anthology, giving the impression that Tagore wrote in English.

⁵⁴ Most of all David Dabydeen’s “For Ma”: “Cutlass foh shaap wood foh chap fence foh build dat bull bruk dung / Is wha da maan stretch e haan an yaan foh!” (97) remains a challenge even if read several times.

“offering children something new; and sounds and tastes and ways with words” (ibid.). In the case of Indian poets, she writes that she didn’t find many poems for children but “from the adult works of poets like Nissim Ezekiel, Eunice de Souza, Cecil Rajendra and A.K. Ramanujan, I selected what I felt could work for children” (8) using her intuition. What her intuitive criteria are, becomes clear when the poems selected by Nichols for children are compared with her own poetry for adults: there is almost no reference to sexuality in her anthologies for children, while this is an important subject in her “adult” poetry⁵⁵. Apart from this, poems from nearly all walks of life appear in the collection, with topics ranging from childhood to old age, death, hunger, happiness, politics and religion being seen as suitable for children. Abstract concepts are presented in a concrete way: “Black is beautiful” is praised in the dark, beautiful “shadow” and the “dreadlocks”; the politics of Apartheid become visible in the suffering of a twelve-year-old girl.

The implicit poetology in the selection of these poems might be: an emphasis on texts influenced by oral poetry, folklore and music; the praise of mothers and heroines and of black culture; an addition of performative to descriptive poetry, including rarely anthologized genres such as prayers, an incantation or skipping rope songs; a broad range of language varieties from vernacular and Creole writing to Standard English poems; and above all an eclecticism that undermines Nichols’ own claims to capture an essentialist “black” spirit.

4.4. Anthologizing Caribbean poets

In “A Caribbean Dozen. Poems from Caribbean Poets”, edited by John Agard and Grace Nichols and illustrated by Cathie Felstead, a different concept of anthology appears: the criterion for inclusion is geographical, not ethnic, and each chapter presents one poet. This avoids the traps of essentialism when “ethnic” poetry is grouped in “typical” subjects as in “Black Poetry”.

As Agard and Nichols explain, their principle for this anthology is West Indian: similar to Caribbean markets, where “vendors would throw in an extra fruit or fish or handful of shrimps, especially if you had bought a lot” (11), they kept to this tradition of the “brata” and threw “an extra poet into your poetry basket- a generous Caribbean dozen of thirteen poets

⁵⁵ This is especially notable seeing that other anthologists include erotic poems in collections for teenagers: Nichols’ poem “My black triangle”, originally printed in “Lazy thoughts of a lazy woman”, one of Nichols’ collections for adults, was included in an anthology for adolescents, “Culture Shock”, edited by Michael Rosen. (Paul, “Coming to ‘sing their Being’ ”, 91). “The Fat Black Woman’s Poems”, her most popular volume for adults, which also contains scenes of seduction, is even a subject for AS-exams in British Schools. (Leete n.p.). Maybe the audience Nichols collected “Black Poetry” for is younger, maybe she doesn’t think sexuality a suitable subject for children and teenagers, maybe her publisher imposed restrictions?

drawn from around the English-speaking Caribbean” (ibid.). Contrasting with “Black Poetry”, where there is next to no information about the poets, “A Caribbean Dozen” presents individual authors, not only poems.

Each poet- except for the posthumous introduction on Frank Collymore- introduces herself or himself in a short autobiographical note on their Caribbean childhood. Often in these notes they write how they came to be poets or to like literature; many quote oral literature as their first formative influences, like “skipping games” (13) (Valerie Bloom); “family performances, plays, poetry recitals and singsongs” (49) (Marc Matthews) folk tales, ghost tales and Anancy stories told by grandmothers or aunts (Faustin Charles, Opal Palmer Adisa, James Berry (19, 43, 79). John Agard recalls the fun he had when teachers took them outdoors to chant multiplication tables with them (55). A few poets also mention written texts, like Faustin Charles (“The first books I fell in love with were *Grimm’s Fairy Tales*, *Andersen’s Fairy Tales* and *The Town Mouse and the Country Mouse*.” (19) The only author to recall a Caribbean poet as a formative influence is Pamela Mordecai, who mentions the Jamaican poet Louise Bennett-Coverley (“Miss Lou”), whom she learnt to recite as a pupil (67). Oral traditions, Western children’s literature and one solitary Jamaican poet are quoted as the influences on the children’s poetry in “A Caribbean Dozen”. Many of the chosen poems are influenced by oral traditions, such as the “Skipping Rope Song” by Dionne Brand (already anthologized in “Black Poetry”) or the poetry by Telcine Turner, who mixes children’s verses into her description of a “Morning Break” at school:

Girls in white blouses, blue skirts,
Boys in blue trousers, white shirts,
Singing, swinging, screeching, reaching,
Hooking wasps, riddle-saying,
Ring-playing-

Bayhanna, bayhanna, bayhanna, bay.
If your teachers scold you
Listen to what they say.
That’s the way you bayhanna, bayhanna, bay. (...) (33)

In the first stanza, the setting of children playing in a school courtyard is described in dynamic movement verbs, the second records (or invents?) a ring-playing verse with an onomatopoeic nonsense refrain. The serious everyday worry of scolding teachers is put into song, but with a light-hearted note.

A similar mix of an orally influenced and a more literary lyrical voice can be found in “The Pum Na-Na Frogs” by John Lyons:

(...) “Pum, pum, pum-na-na,
pum, pum, pum na-na.“
They sit in their muddy pools

thinking
that candleflies
are shooting stars. (75)

The onomatopoeic frog-voices in their fluent dactylic rhythm remind the reader of nursery rhymes or the refrains of folk songs, but the rhythm of the other lines is much slower, more complex and, in showing the limited perspective of the frogs, lyrical and melancholy. The tone of most poems is joyous and humourous; there are many poems in praise of music or food- the most memorable is Valerie Bloom's bathetic "Ode to Twelve Chocolate Bars", probably the shortest and one of the funniest "odes" ever:

Oh glorious doz
that woz. (17)

Many poems about animals and having pets reflect realistic observations about the role of animals. "My praying mantis" (John Lyons) is eaten by the cat, but the tone is still humorous: "I suppose, for a mantis, the moral to this story / is, look out for cats or you'll be sorry⁵⁶". - In "Lucky Me" (Valerie Bloom), the lyrical "I" is lucky not to be eaten like rabbits, turkeys and pigs:

(...)
They make a stew out of the rabbit,
And Christmas dinner from the turkey.
Pigs are taken
For ham and bacon,
But nobody dares eat me. (16)

The lyrical "I" states its position in the world and defines him- or herself apart from domestic animals, less passive and more valued. However, "Lucky Me" sounds ironic: shouldn't it be self-evident that people are lucky not to be eaten? In "Chicken Dinner" (Valerie Bloom), a child persuades her mother to save "Henrietta", the pet chicken, from the pot. She has it replaced by an anonymous chicken from the shop, only to bring the troubling question in mind:

(...) "Yuh don' suppose is somebody else pet
We eating now fe dinner?" (14)

Different from the animals presented in European childrens' books (or even in "Asana"), where the mention of killing animals is generally taboo, the ambivalent status of domestic animals is not denied in Caribbean poetry. On one hand, they are friends and companions, on the other hand useful food; the moral dilemmas arising are seen with dark humour. Probably in more rural societies (e.g. in the Caribbean) this ambivalence is more commonplace than in an industrialized country.

⁵⁶ *ibid.*, p. 78

Anthologizing Caribbean poetry for children, the question must arise how much a major theme of Caribbean literature, the cruelty of colonialism and slavery⁵⁷, is suitable for children. Nichols and Agard chose to include only one poem about sadder experiences of the Caribbean: Pamela Mordecai's "Lament of an Arawak Child" about the Arawaks, one of the native tribes of the Caribbean.

(..)
 they made my people into slaves
 they worked us to the bone
 they battered us and tortured us
 and laughed to hear us groan

Today we'll take a long canoe
 and set sail on the sea
 we'll steer our journey by the stars
 and find a new country. (70)

The historical context remains rather vague (who are "they"?) as the poem is written from a child's perspective. The violence of the oppressors is described, but not in as much detail as, for example, in Nichols' own volume of poetry "i is a long memoried woman" for adults⁵⁸. The poem ends on an optimistic note: The colonized people will mimick the colonizers, become discoverers themselves and "find a new country". Will it be real or metaphorical?

Choosing only one poem about the darker side of the Caribbean might express not only concern about the childrens' psyche and a fear of presenting them with too shocking images, but also to a desire to paint a joyful and optimistic picture of the Caribbean for children. In the poetological essay "The Battle with Language", Nichols writes that she refuses to "subscribe to the victim mentality ... which seems to me like wallowing in 'look what they've done to us'" (284) and rather wants to "come up with new myths and images that please us." (287) Western mythology with its black-and-white dichotomies might be "destructive, however inadvertantly, to the black psyche." (ibid.) She postulates that

... we have to keep on creating and reshaping. We have to offer our children something more than gazing at *Superman 1, Superman 2, Superman 3*, and possibly *Superman 4* (...) (288)

This poetology helps to explain the choice of poems in "A Caribbean Dozen". For example, choosing "Corn and Potato" by David Campbell could have been motivated by her wish to present an alternative to the *Superman* myth. It juxtaposes the belief in "Western" heroes of popular culture with Indian fruit and inventions:

⁵⁷ See e.g. Nichols' volume of poetry "i is a long memoried woman" or Dabydeen's "Slave Song".

⁵⁸ „i is a long memoried woman“, Nichols' first volume of poetry, uses the voice of an unnamed African woman to recall the slave trade with the cruel "Middle Passage" from Africa to the Caribbean, sexual abuse, infanticide, back-breaking work and inhuman punishments, but also joyful sensuality, spiritual development and strength in motherhood. All these subjects are virtually absent from "A Caribbean dozen".

The corn and potato, peanut, strawberry:
Who gave them to us, can anyone tell me?

Canoes and snowshoes, hammocks for swinging:
Where did they come from in the beginning?

(...)

Was it Tom and Jerry? No, No,
Sylvester and Tweety? No, No,
Then was it Max B. Nimble? No, No,
Rocky and Bullwinkle? No, No, No,
Then was it Spiderman? No, No,
It must be Superman! No, No, No, No, No! (Agard and Nichols, *A Caribbean Dozen*, 38-39)

(...)

The didactic tone of the poem with its question-and-answer-style is rendered more light-hearted by its list of European and American fictional cultural heroes for children. The longer the list, the more tension is built up who the real inventors were. With all their power, Western cultural heroes did not achieve what the native people of the Americas and the Caribbean invented and cultivated:

The Sioux and the Cheyenne, Yes, Yes,
Apache and Peigan, Yes, Yes, Yes,
The Arawak or Taino, Yes, Yes (...)
The Inca, the Maya, Yes, Yes, Yes, Yes, Yes!
(I said Yes! Yes! Yes!) (39)

While adults may see this poem as less than a literary masterpiece in its repetitive tone and didacticism, it presents new insights for children in a way easy to grasp: it is structured like a question-and-answer- sequence at school where the teacher asks the question and an enthusiastic class shouts “no” or “yes”. It should be read aloud rather than silently.

The picture of Caribbean literature presented in “A Caribbean Dozen” is one of poets influenced by oral forms, delighting in onomatopoeia and repetition. It deals with non-canonical subjects such as child’s play. Humour plays an important role, especially centering on food. Many of the subjects have a universal appeal to children: playing songs, poems about animals and popular heroes. But there is a distinctive non-European touch, for example in the discussion about eating pets. Though cruelties of history are not omitted, the tone of most poems is joyful and light-hearted, and the inventiveness and vitality of Caribbean culture are celebrated.

5. Conclusion

A year after my first encounter with poems by Grace Nichols, and several months after I had started to write about Caribbean children’s literature: what is my conclusion?

I learnt more about issues I had planned to delve into- like post-colonial theory- but above all, about subjects I would never have expected to turn up. I suddenly saw “Doctor

Dolittle”, one of my favourite books as a child, in a new light and was confronted with pervasive patterns of racism and details of colonial history I found very troubling. I also learnt to appreciate marginalized voices- like Black poets- and genres such as nursery rhymes, but above all, I encountered unforgettable characters like Mama Wata, Miss Muffet or Anancy, whose fictional company I thoroughly enjoyed.

I delighted in following Asana’s imagination and discovering her universe, fluid in its geographical boundaries and vacillating between reality and fantasy, and I often chuckled at the inventiveness of Caribbean poets writing back to English nursery rhymes. Theoretical terms like transculturation and “contact zone” became vivid to me in images like the arrival of the breadfruit or the pumpkin under the Queen’s bed who irreverently speaks Black British English. And I enjoyed the sheer fun and vitality of orally influenced onomatopoeic poems like “The Pum Na-Na Frogs”.

Sometimes choosing and interpreting the poems was a tough challenge, as there was no previous criticism on any of the books discussed. And inevitably, my choice and interpretation of these poems shows my own standpoint as a white, female European student, for example in my comparisons to European children’s literature and in my judgments on the literary merit of some poems⁵⁹.

My initial naive desire to experience “the Other” led me to two findings that were surprising to me. First, I found a few texts really “exotic” for Europeans (like the “Chant to Kill a Snake”), but above all, I encountered seemingly exotic text types which thrive in my own culture too. I simply had previously ignored them- children’s literature, nursery rhymes, and performative poetry like skipping rope songs. Second, I realized that the “Other” I had been looking for was already engaged in an inventive dialogue with Western culture. And I sincerely hope that my own stance towards post-colonial writing and children’s literature has changed from an exotist gaze to a more dialogical approach which doesn’t assimilate or dominate the texts discussed.

Of course, many desiderata remain: for reasons of space, I had to omit discussing many other poetry books (the charming “The Poet Cat” (2000)) and anthologies (such as her 2003 volume “Under the moon and over the sea”) by Nichols which would complete the picture sketched in this paper. Further, I had to neglect the issue of the relations of image and text in the picture books, which might be the subject of an article of its own.

At the end, I would like to thank my readers for their patience and say good-bye in the words of a poem by James Berry taken from the anthology “A Caribbean Dozen”, “Bye

⁵⁹ For example, finding some poems about black mothers “sentimental” is a literary judgment that may not at all be shared by the black community.

now” (84). Its genre, again, is unfamiliar for Europeans to find in a poetry anthology: it is a blessing for the road that may be read literally and metaphorically. He wrote it in Jamaican Creole and translated it into English.

Bye now

Walk good
 Walk good
 Noh mek macca go juk yu
 Or cow go buk yu.
 Noh mek dog bite yu
 Or hungry go ketch yu, yah!

Noh mek sunhot turn yu dry.
 Noh mek rain soak yu.
 Noh mek tief tief yu.
 Or stone go buck yu foot, yah!
 Walk good
 Walk good

In English:

Goodbye now

Walk well
 Walk well
 Don't let thorns run in you
 Or let a cow butt you.
 Don't let a dog bite you
 Or hunger catch you, hear!

Don't let the sun's heat turn you dry.
 Don't let rain soak you.
 Don't let a thief rob you.
 Or a stone bump your foot, hear!
 Walk well
 Walk well

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