Heleni Smuha

Faculteit Letteren en Wijsbegeerte

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Deconstructing Ethnic and Gendered Power Relations in Elizabeth Acevedo's slam poems "Hair", "Afro-Latina", "Spear" & "Unforgettable"

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Deconstructing Ethnic and Gendered Power Relations
in Elizabeth Acevedo's slam poems
"Hair", "Afro-Latina", "Spear" & "Unforgettable"

Ik verklaar plechtig dat ik de bachelorpaper, "Deconstructing Ethnic and Gendered Power Relations in Elizabeth Acevedo's slam poems 'Hair', 'Afro-Latina', 'Spear' &'Unforgettable'", zelf heb geschreven.

Ik ben op de hoogte van de regels i.v.m. plagiaat en heb erop toegezien om deze toe te passen in deze bachelorproef.

26/05/2017 Heleni Smuha

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Table of Contents

1. Introduction **1**
1.1 Elizabeth Acevedo: American Slam Poet of Afro-Dominican Descent 2
1.2 Slam Poetry 5
1.3 Research Questions & Methodology 7
1.4 Postcolonial and Feminist Reflections on the Constructedness of Identity 9

2. Textual Analysis **13**
2.1 Narrative Voice & Characters 13
2.2 The Complex Identification Repercussions of a Triple Consciousness 14
2.2.1 A Condemnation of Deracination & Assimilation 15
2.3 A Reclamation of Afro-Latinxs' African and Indigenous Heritage 17
2.3.1 Raising Awareness 18
2.3.2 A Celebration of African and Indigenous Heritage 21
2.3.3 A Call for Educational Revolution 22
2.4 Acevedo Revolts: Intersecting a Postcolonial and Feminist Discourse 26

3. Conclusion **27**

4. Works Cited **30**

5. Appendices **37**
5.1 Appendix A 37
5.2 Appendix B 38
5.3 Appendix C 39
5.4 Appendix D 41
5.5 Appendix E 43
5.6 Appendix F 45

1. Introduction

> Our story is an epic, a saga, an odyssey. We crossed continents and oceans […]. We are the children of bridges – bridges made from our backs, our tears, our sacrifices […] We in the Latino community are among the greatest heroes our world has known. And yet despite all we do and all we are, we find ourselves attacked and demonized and endangered […] all over the world communities like ours are under assault. […] We have to fight for justice. We have to fight for equality.
> All of us must be free. […]
> [O]r none. (Díaz 2016, transcribed by Arreola 2016: n.p.)

These words are an excerpt from the poetic speech "Our Story" (2016) by Junot Díaz, a renowned Dominican author living in the United States (Arreola 2016: n.p.). In his speech, Díaz calls on the community of people of Latin-American descent in the United States to vote, use their voice, at the 2016 U.S. presidency elections and boycott Donald Trump's controversial presidential campaign. His speech is a call to fight for justice and equality by requesting the vital voice of – in this case, racially – marginalized communities. The strength of Díaz's words partly lies in its ability to be applied to any subaltern oppressed group, as a general call for fighting oppression and devaluation (Arreola 2016: n.p.). In perfect alliance with this broader idea for justice, is the slam poetry of fellow Dominican-American author Elizabeth Acevedo – the subject of the paper at hand –, who acknowledges Diaz as a source of inspiration ("About" 2017: n.p.; Davis 2016: n.p.).

This paper aims to provide a thorough literary analysis of four of Elizabeth Acevedo's slam poems – "Hair", "Afro-Latina", "Spear" and "Unforgettable"[1] – in which Acevedo raises awareness about (identity) struggles present within two marginalized groups. The first group is the ethnic community of diaspora Afro-Latinxs[2] living in the patriarchal West, the second a

[1] Co-written by Pages Matam, G.Yamazawa & Elizabeth Acevedo.

[2] Throughout this paper, I will continually intend to use gender-neutral language when referring to the term "Latinx" instead of word "Latino/a", a Spanish word also generally used in the English language when referring to people of Latin-American descent or the American-Hispanic culture. In Spanish – like in most Romance languages – the masculine suffix '-o' is a marked linguistic feature, i.e. it is dominant: it is used when referring to a group of people from the moment one man is part of the group. Many people perceive this as discriminatory towards women as well as queer and non-binary people (Love Ramirez and Blay 2016: n.p.). The term *Latinx*, pronounced

group suffering from injustices affecting circa half of the world's population: women.

In the following sections, first a brief presentation is offered of author Elizabeth Acevedo and her professional accomplishments to date. The poet will be introduced in her social and historical context in which her racially hybrid heritage – and that of her ethnic community – will be clarified. Second, as a background to the slam poems that will be analysed, a small overview on slam poetry and its overarching context of oral poetry will be presented. Subsequently, a third section is devoted to the research questions central to this paper and the methodology used for the analysis of the poems. Finally, a brief overview of postcolonial and feminist criticism, its historical context and key terms related to the notion of identity will be given, these topics being primordial to the understanding of the literary analysis of Acevedo's work.

1.1 Elizabeth Acevedo: American Slam Poet of Afro-Dominican Descent

Elizabeth "Liz" Acevedo is a black Dominican-American (slam) poet, novelist, performance artist and educator currently based in Washington D.C. (Haile 2016: par. 2). She was born in New York City in February 1988 to first-generation Dominican immigrants of African ancestry (Acevedo 2017, "Re: Questions"; Reichard 2015: 1). The New Yorker grew up in the city yet was brought up with the Latinx culture's values and language before heading to Washington D.C. to start her college education ("About Liz": par. 4; Adorno 2016: n.p.).

Acevedo holds university diplomas in both Performing Arts and Creative Writing (Acevedo 2016: 37) and now gives workshops and TED Talks on both subjects, besides touring the world to perform her slam poetry and promote her two poetry collections ("About Liz": par. 1-2). She has performed on notable international stages, including South Africa's State Theatre, the Bozar in Brussels and New York City's reputable Lincoln Center ("About Liz": par. 5).

In 2014, she was proclaimed the winner of the U.S. National Slam Championship (Dingfelder 2014: par. 1) and in 2016, she won the prestigious annually awarded Berkshire Prize by Tupelo Press for her second poetry collection *La Negra's Palm* (Acevedo 2016: 37; "2017 Berkshire Prize"). The Afro-Latinx is thus far the author of two published poetry collections and a forthcoming young adult fiction novel, called *The Poet X*, due 2018 ("About

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"La-teen-ex", has been used as a gender-neutral alternative for the word *Latino* or *Latina* and has widely been used by (feminist) activists, journalists and scholars over the last decade. Therefore, the use of the word forms part of the twenty-first century linguistic revolution in which language is thought about beyond the boundries of everyday gender and racial norms, thus working towards a language that is more *inclusive* of identities (Love Ramirez and Blay 2016: n.p.). By using the term, I align myself with this trend and encourage everyone to do so, in order to accelerate the gender-neutral linguistic revolution.

Liz" n.d.: par. 7).

In the acknowledgements of her first poetry collection, *Beastgirl & Other Origin Myths* (Acevedo 2016: 36), Acevedo claims her main sources of inspiration for writing are the islands Hispaniola and Manhattan, both places in which her roots lie. In a personal e-mail correspondence (see 'Appendix A'), the poet, who has dual Dominican and U.S. nationality, explains that her parents and grandmother moved from the Dominican Republic to the United States in the late 1970s and that both her mother and father are a "mixture of peoples" with an untraceable African ancestry (Davis 2016: n.p.; Acevedo 2017, "Re: Questions": n.p.).

The Dominican Republic is situated on the Caribbean island Hispaniola, which is also home to the nation of Haiti in the West (Buffington 2000: 525). The island's complex ethnographic and political situation is a direct consequence of a long history of colonization and migration. Hispaniola's indigenous people were the Taíno who were exterminated by the Spanish – who conquered the region in 1492 – as a result of European diseases, weapons, forced labour and mass executions. An important motivation for the colonization was the region's economic potential for the sugar industry, which is still one of its most significant sources of revenue (525-526). To work on these sugar plantations, the Spanish colonisers introduced African slaves to Hispaniola (526). The Spanish rulers also introduced a system used to hierarchically grade individuals based on racial genetics – a caste system – known as the *sistema de castas*[3] (Boyer, qtd. in DiPaolo Loren 2007: 23). This ranking of racially hybrid individuals was done according to the colour of their skin and their lineage, with the Spanish colonisers situated at the top of the social ladder, followed by the indigenous people, and only then the African slaves and their descendants, who had the least chance of social acceptance or advancement (DiPaolo Loren 2007: 23).

While the co-existence and miscegenation of different ethnicities resulted in multi-racial states across the Americas, the demographic and cultural situation became even more complex with the later arrival of the French colonisers on Hispaniola. Their large-scale importation of African slaves – approximately 800,000 (Henley 2010: n.p.) – to Haiti has had a marked impact on Hispaniola's present-day demography. In contrast with neighbouring Haiti, the population of the Dominican Republic is generally lighter-skinned. The racial diversity of the Dominican Republic increased even further when in more recent years the descendants of Spanish colonisers, the Taíno and African slaves, were joined by European, Middle Eastern and Chinese merchants, and large numbers of migrants from neighbouring Caribbean countries (Buffington

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[3] See 'Figure 1, Appendix B'.

2000: 525).

In more recent decades, the flow of migration has been largely reversed, a process that is intertwined with American interventions in the politics of Hispaniola, especially following the assassination of dictator Rafael Trujillo in 1961 (Buffington 2000: 526). The migratory flow of Dominicans to the United States caused by the ensuing political instability, remained uninterrupted for over at least three decades, with a climax in the eighties when more than 250,000 Dominicans were legally admitted to the country (Aponte 1999: 3; Buffington 2000: 526), among whom were Acevedo's parents.[4] By the late 1990s, Dominicans were the biggest and fastest growing migrant population in New York City and the second-largest Hispanic community in the United States (Buffington 2000: 527).

Although Dominicans continued to seek employment in the U.S. after the stabilisation of the political situation in the Dominican Republic (Buffington 2000: 527), one third of Dominican migrants in New York City were living in poverty in 2011 (Calcagno 2013: 27). The deplorable economic position of Dominican Americans is attributed to the illegal status of many of them, the language barrier, the relatively low education level and racial discrimination (532). Due to their Afro-Hispanic heritage, many Dominicans are categorised as 'black' by white Americans and therefore encounter the same discrimination that African Americans experience (528). As a result, even within Afro-Latinx communities themselves, there is little ethnic pride to the extent that many deny rather than celebrate their African ancestry (Bolívar Espinosa 2015: par. 1, 8).

As a second-generation Afro-Dominican immigrant in the United States of America and having grown up within the patriarchal Latinx and Western culture, Acevedo is all too aware of the racial prejudice and discrimination black people experience in America. Not only are they often devalued by white Northern Americans, but also by members of the Latinx community itself. Acevedo's experiences are further impacted by the gender oppression women continue to face today, even in the West. In her slam poetry, she addresses the identity struggles encountered by members of her ethnic and gendered oppressed groups in the United States. Interestingly, the focus of Acevedo's poetry is not so much on the discrimination experienced by black, mulatto or indigenous Latinxs in their Western host country, as on the Afro-Latinx community's negation of its African ancestry. As will be explained further below, in her poems "Hair" and "Afro-Latina", she, namely, condemns her community's reluctance to identify as

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[4] As many Dominican residents remain undocumented, the official numbers are, in all likelihood, an underestimation (Aponte 1999: 4).

black, an attitude that is influenced by the white-supremacist attitude the host country adopts towards Latinxs and African Americans alike.

1.2 Slam Poetry

Over the last three decades, *slam poetry* has gained great popularity, mostly in its country of origin – the United States – but also internationally (Kaya 2010: 1) and is showing no signs of slowing down. Helen Gregory (2008: 201) argues that, although the genre is sometimes still considered a "somewhat marginal activity", slam is the most successful poetry movement that exists today. A growing number of venues in small towns and big cities host oral poetry sessions and competitions (Kaya 2010: 1). These are called (*poetry) slams*; organised live poetry recitals in which poets perform their original work within a time slot of about three minutes, competing with other slam poets, after which randomly chosen members of the audience proclaim a winner (Somers-Willett 2009: 51). Everyone is encouraged to react – at all times – to anything happening during the show (Coppoc 2004: 6). This insistence on an interactive audience is what distinguishes slam poetry from other types of poetry. The new art form is being broadcasted at a rapid rate by world tours of performing slam poets and the circulation of slam performance recordings on the Internet, television and even on Broadway, reaching diverse cultures (Gregory 2008: 201).

Oral or *performance* poetry is part of a very old and rich tradition, embedded in many different cultures (Coppoc 2004: 9-10). However, from the twentieth century onwards, oral and even written poetry gradually lost its public as well its reputation as high quality literature in the United States, which was increasingly attributed to prose instead (van den Eijnden 2013: 5). Poetry became institutionalized by academics, who merely allowed written lyrical poetry into the educational establishment. As a consequence, poetry increasingly became arcane to the popular audience who ended up abandoning the genre Coppoc 2004: 10). Literary critics such as Edmund Wilson in the 1930s, Joseph Epstein in the 1980s and Dana Gioia in the 1990s condemned the genre's evolution into a small circle of strictly academic readers, arguing that "poetry was in danger of becoming irrelevant to anyone except poets who were increasingly the people who taught poetry" (Young 2013: par. 2), thus predicting its extinction.

This led to the appearance of resistance movements throughout the twentieth century, whose members rejected the university's hegemony of poetry and wanted to introduce the elements of audience and communality – the basic inherent ingredients of oral poetry – back into the literary genre (Coppoc 2004: 1). The content of these movements' poetry remained

overall the same, but its requirement of *listening* to poetry is considered a revolutionary re-insertion and is the main characteristic of slam poetry (Spun, qtd. in Kaya 2010: 4). The two most relevant of these movements are the *Negritude Movement* and the *Beatnik Generation*.

Nowadays, poetry is still overshadowed by prose, as Gioia and Epstein predicted, but the late twentieth century also witnessed a revival of poetry, with artists moving away from printed poetry to return to its oral origins (van den Eijnden 2013: 6). In 2003, Gioia notes:

> Without doubt the most surprising and significant development in recent American poetry has been the wide-scale and unexpected reemergence of popular poetry—namely rap, cowboy poetry, *poetry slams*, […] performance poetry. These new forms of popular verse have […] become *significant forces in American culture*. […] And all these new poetic forms have *thrived without the support of the university or the literary establishment*. (25, my emphases)

Slam poetry, the most contemporary form of oral poetry, emerged in the mid-eighties when a former construction worker and poet, Marc Kelly Smith, hosted the first *poetry slam* at the Chicago jazz club The Green Mill under the name of 'the Uptown Poetry Slam' (Smith, qtd. in Gregory 2008: 201). Smith's main motivation was to challenge the institutionalization of poetry and letting the oral tradition of the literary genre revive amongst American popular culture, besides boosting the ambience in the club. He thus proposed a number of poets to perform their poetry in The Green Mill and the audience to judge the poems based on the content, style and performance. By the late eighties, the formula turned out to be so successful that The Green Mill was hosting poetry competitions on a weekly basis, leading to the birth of slam poetry (Burrows 2001: n.p.).

In a recent study on slam poetry, Susan Somers-Willett (2009: 52-53), remarks that almost all slam poems are written in first-person narrative and the content of the poems often express the performer's identity. She has also recognized a recurrent pattern of certain literary devices such as repetition, homophonic word play and singing. This gradually led to the creation of a dominant mode of slam writing, regardless of the fact that the genre allows and encourages freedom and experimentation in both content and style, in turn reflecting the free-spirited character of the medium as opposed to academia's restrictions imposed on poetry (Somers-Willett 2009: 52; Coppoc 2004: 5).

Because slam poetry is a phenomenon that discards the idea that poetry should be standardized by academic institutions – which are dominantly directed by the white middle-class community – slam performers often hail from ethnic, sexual, gender and other socially marginalized communities. Poetry slams, therefore, are not merely artistic but also political events, where social issues are communicated, where people of diverse social backgrounds can celebrate their diversity, where the voiceless are given a voice (Somers-Willett 2009: 53-54; Damon, qtd. in Somers-Willett 2009: 53). Slam's emphasis on socio-political issues has been recognized as its major difference with other[5] literary and performance genres, such as rap and hiphop (Joseph 2014: 7; Smits 2010: 14). The latter commercial genres, which originated in New York City's black ghettos, indeed, tend to raise issues such as drugs, money, the sexual female body and violence (Ogg and Upshall, qtd. in Smits 2010: 14).

Even though Acevedo is not a celebrity – in fact very few slam poets are[6] – she has been gaining acknowledgement and popularity at a relatively rapid pace, both in the United States and internationally. She owes this popularity to recordings of her performances on YouTube, some of which – including "Hair" and "Unforgettable" – have gone viral ("About Liz": par. 5). Her work has also been published in various literary journals and magazines such as *Poet Lore, Callaloo, Beltway Quarterly* and the *Notre Dame Review*, amongst others ("About Liz" n.d.: par. 7).

1.3 Research Questions & Methodology

Although Acevedo is in essence a performance poet, this paper aims to analyse the lyrics of Acevedo's slam poems rather than their performance. This decision was made consciously, in light of the lack of academic interest in slam poetry as an autonomous art form of value (Gregory 2008: 201). The few analyses on slam poetry that do exist tend to be dedicated to the performance aspects. It is therefore hardly surprising that literary critics have not yet analysed Acevedo's work. By presenting the first literary analysis of Acevedo's poetry, this paper seeks to draw attention to slam texts as a compelling art form, worthy of academic research and a place in the literary canon.

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[5] Similar in orality, rythm and fluency, the construction of identities (a tough and dangerous one in hip-hop culture) and its intention to create a community that stands up to the dominant culture (Smits 2010: 14-15).

[6] Some acclaimed slam poets are Taylor Mali, Alix Olson and Saul Williams (Smits 2010: 47, 61; Sfetcu 2014: n.p.).

My decision to analyse Acevedo's poetry in particular, is encouraged by my interest in the energetic style of her lyrics and their intersectional content. Furthermore, her critical attitude towards not only white Western prejudices and ideals but also her own Latinx community makes her poetry quite daring and innovative compared to other poetry addressing similar issues. I am also attracted by the linguistic hybridity of her poetry, especially since Spanish and English are my own fields of study.

In my study I will investigate how Acevedo presents the (identity) struggles of diaspora Afro-Latinx and women in contemporary Western society in her poetry. Questions that I aim to tackle evolve around whether the poet suggest the subaltern groups in question – Afro-Latinxs and women – to undertake certain actions in order to fight the oppression they experience, and if so, the kind of action that Acevedo proposes. I will also consider the literary strategies she uses to convey her message. For my discussion, I have selected four of Acevedo's slam poems – "Hair", "Spear", "Afro-Latina" and "Unforgettable" – which address a variety of themes in relation to the notions of power and identity: migration, gender, race and culture. This paper focuses on processes of the social construction of identity in relation to gender, racial and cultural heritage. Acevedo's slam poetry is mainly concerned with struggles of a collective, cultural identity rather than an individual's identity, namely, the identity of diaspora[7] Afro-descendent Latinxs and women.

All poems under analysis are composed exclusively by Acevedo, with the exception of the collaborative poem "Unforgettable", which Acevedo wrote (and performed) in cooperation with slam poets Pages Matam and George Masao Yamazawa. Since these poems have not been published or put on paper by the author, I have transcribed them from audio-visual material found on YouTube myself, with the exception of "Unforgettable" which was transcribed by Foluke Adebisi and which I have edited where necessary (see 'Appendix F'). The formal organisation of the poems will, therefore, not be analysed.

The exact composition dates of the poems are unknown. However, Acevedo has stated that all poems were composed between the years 2009 and 2016[8] (Acevedo 2017, "Re: Questions": n.p.). The dates portrayed in parentheses after the poems' titles, therefore, correspond to the publication dates of the YouTube videos from which the poems were transcribed and to the year of publication of Adebesi's transcription in the case of

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[7] "The voluntary or forcible movement of peoples from their homelands into new regions" (Ashcroft et al. 2000: 61).
[8] Of which none have been published, but an excerpt from "Spear" appears in her chapbook *Beastgirl & Other Origin Myths* (Avecedo 2017, "Re: Questions": n.p.). Naliyah Kaya observes that slam poetry is hardly ever published in bookform (2010: 1).

“Unforgettable”.

The methodology used in this paper consists of a textual analysis by means of *close reading*. This method entails the analysis of a literary work by carefully observing significant facts, details, cultural or historical references and patterns of the text, in order to put forward a certain interpretation of the text as a whole (Cuddon 2000: 62, 142; Kain 1998: n.d.). *Close reading* thus requires inductive reasoning when drawing conclusions or interpretations from the text, because the starting point of the analysis is always the text itself (Kain 1998: n.d.). The narratological, stylistic and discourse analysis of the text serves to support the large thematic analysis of the poems. Specifically, the narratological elements of voice, speaker, focalizer and characters of the poems will be examined. In the stylistic analysis, I will focus on rhyme, tone, trope, grammar and lexicon. The discourse analysis concerns the rhetorical strategies used to convey the ideological meaning of the poems. For the thematic analysis, cultural and historical references and allusions will be carefully examined and supported by insights from existing feminist and postcolonial studies on gender, race, culture and migration, especially in relation to the notion of identity. Those ideas and theories are of paramount importance for this study, as they will be used to clarify to what extent Acevedo’s poetry parallels with or deviates from those theories.

1.4 Postcolonial and Feminist Reflections on the Constructedness of Identity

The *Oxford English Dictionary* (2016) defines ‘identity’ as “the characteristics determining who or what a person or thing is”, which raises the question: which characteristics determine one’s identity, or even a whole community’s? This is when the complexity of the notion of *identity* becomes apparent. It is widely believed that one’s identity is a construction (Hall and du Gay 1999: 5-6, Dowling 2011: 1-2) that is shaped by intersecting identification markers, such as race, gender, age, sexuality, culture, social class, nationality, political belief and spiritual belief (Fearon 1999: 1).

Stuart Hall argues that *cultural identity,* as opposed to personal identity, is an imposed feeling of ‘self’ that “people with a shared history and ancestry hold in common” (Hall 1990, qtd. in Hall and du Gay 1996: 3-4). Moreover, Hall and du Gay (1996: 4) claim that cultural identity in late modern times is fragmented and subject to radical historicization due to the increasingly intersecting multicultural, hybrid societies and therefore constantly in the process of transformation. From this argument, one can conclude that the construction of cultural identities evolves as societies develop, and consequently, different approaches and possibilities

for individuals' identification with a certain community arise.

Postcolonial criticism focuses on "the relationship between culture and power" (Childs and Fowler 2006: 184). Postcolonial literature is mainly concerned with the cultural identity of ethnic communities after or during colonial oppression. It contains a reflection on – usually a condemnation of – the oppression victims of colonisation from European imperial powers (Ashcroft et al. 1989: 2). As Salman Rushdie's famous phrase confirms, "the empire writes back" to the former imperial centre "with a vengeance" (1982: 8). This type of literature can take different forms: some authors focus on the identity of the (formerly) colonised, others on the mental and/or cultural colonisation and others still, on the revision of history (Bekers 2015: n.p.). The same concerns are also addressed by authors with a migrant (colonial and other) background in the West, known as authors from the *diaspora*.

Diaspora authors who originate from African countries often intend to restore African self-consciousness. They do this by reconstructing their ethnic and cultural identity through a re-valorisation of their communities' original culture and thus asserting difference from the dominant imperial culture and ideology (Ashcroft et al. 1989: 4). Many colonised communities, in fact, suffer from an inferiority complex that is imposed on them by the imperialist culture. The widely diffused and privileged culture of Western society in many cases leads the (formerly) colonised people towards mimicry of the dominant culture and, consequently, a whitewashing of their ideals and principles takes place. This is caused by a process of deracination[9] and the desire to be accepted and belong to by the imperial centre, accompanied by the racial belief of *white supremacy*. Many colonised subjects absorb and adopt the Western empire's culture[10], which eventually results into a denial and amnesia of their original culture and heritage (Ashcroft et al. 2000: 60-61).

Several movements of black writers arose in an attempt to prevent their ethnic communities of lapsing into the aforementioned tendency. The method they use consists of implementing the concept of *black consciousness* to its readers in a positive light. Pride and value of an African identity and culture was inserted in the literature in order to dismantle the idea of supposed superiority of white privileged people. The most notable of these literary movements are the *Black Consciousness Movement,* the *Harlem Renaissance* and *Negritude* (Ashcroft et al. 2000: 24, 144-145). The Latin-American movement *Negrismo*, in turn, unites and celebrates people's indigenous and African ancestry (Maguire 2012: 122).

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[9] An alienation from ones national or social environment: its roots (Ashcroft et al. 2000: 60).
[10] A process known by the name of assimilation.

The feminist movement, on the other hand, challenges the *male* domination in patriarchal societies, with the goal to attain equal social, ethical, economical, juridical and political rights for men and woman. Feminist critics and writers pursue this by deconstructing the traditional gender roles or gender *identities* attributed to people, which they claim to be subject to socio-historical construction (van Wetten, qtd. in Coene 2016: n.p.; Hannam 2012: 1, 4). This construction is formed through complex social expectations, norms, prejudice and stereotypical role patterns – concerning, for example, the sexist distribution of tasks like care and labour – society assigns to men and women (Coene 2016: n.p.). The deconstruction of gender roles thus contains a questioning of the established stratification of power and diffusion of gendered stereotypes – in which women have continuously been interpreted as subordinate to men – resulting into a centuries-long tradition of women's oppression and marginalization (Coene 2016: n.p.).

During the period known as the first feminist wave, at the beginning of the twentieth century, feminist militants were mainly concerned with the acquisition of legal rights for women (Coene 2016: n.p.). In the 1960s and 1970s, feminist activists advocated for equal pay, the right to undergo abortions, the use of birth control pills and special attention was paid to women's abuse (Bekers 2015: n.p.). The slogan of the second feminist wave was "The Personal is Political", asserting women's personal experiences of discrimination to be political problems, as these originate from the established unbalanced gendered power-relations in patriarchal societies (Coene 2016: n.d.; Hanisch 1969: n.d.).

During the 1970s and 1980s, African-American citizens started to criticise and denounce the dominantly white, middle-class, heterosexual feminist movement in the U.S. They claimed that the issues on which the members of the movement focused were not representative for all women, such as for black, lesbian and women of low social classes, whose cumulative oppression was ignored. It was not until the 1990s – during the third feminist wave – that the feminist movement shifted towards a broader and multi-layered view of women's unbalanced oppression (Coene 2016: n.p).

Women and colonised subjects have repeatedly been portrayed as 'the other', a subordinate deviation from the dominant subject: the white male in power (Ashcroft et al. 2003: 249). This act of *othering* indicates a psychological tactic in which 'the other' is dismissed as being less human and consequently less worthy of respect (Norriss 2011: n.p.).

The exclusion of people of colour and women from the artistic *canon*[11] up until a few decades ago (Bekers 2015: n.p.) is therefore not surprising. Over the last few decades, a growing body of postcolonial and feminist literature has been emerging, as a reaction against the white male dominance of the English literary canon. Some writers of colour have even taken the opportunity to include both oppressing power structures as main concerns in their literature, proving that (the struggles of) feminist and patriarchal discourses are not mutually exclusive (Somers-Willett 2009: 62).

[11] Another construction invented by white men in order to establish their superiority in the arts.

2. Textual Analysis

The following textual analysis of Acevedo's slam poems "Hair" (2014), "Afro-Latina" (AFL)[12] (2015), "Spear" (2015) and "Unforgettable" (UNF)[13] (2014) is organised by major thematic aspect. Preliminary to the thematic analysis however, a brief narratological analysis of the poetic corpus shall be provided. Subsequently, the identity struggles of Afro-Latinxs and their socio-political origins shall be outlined. Furthermore, Acevedo's two major propositions for resolving women's and Afro-Latinxs' identity struggles in the diaspora will be discussed. Within the discussion of these thematic aspects, the stylistic techniques used and remaining narratological elements present throughout the poetic corpus shall be integrated. Lastly, the discourse analysis shall be presented.

The numbers presented in parentheses after cited passages of the poems under analysis indicate the extracts' line numbers – which can be traced back in the appendices – and not page numbers (differently to the introduction). As the poem "Unforgettable" is organised slightly differently – in drama style rather than poetry – the numbers in parentheses after a quotation refer to utterances per speaker.

2.1 Narrative Voice & Characters

The poems are all narrated by an overt autodiegetic narrator, as is the case for the vast majority of slam poems (Somers-Willet 2009: 52-53). The internal speakers of the slam poems are also always the focalizers of the poems. The speakers appear to have much in common with Acevedo herself, who draws on her personal experiences as an *Afro-Dominican* second-generation *female* immigrant in the United States (Reichard 2015: n.p.). In addition to the explicit references to an "Afro-descendant" ("AFL", 5) in the poems and the speaker's asserted name "Elizabeth" in "UNF", the themes exposed within the discourse are affiliated with Acevedo's personal experiences and political beliefs, thus indicating an autobiographically inspired speaker.

The characters in the poems are all Afro-Latinxs and are addressed with the pronouns "I", "they", "them" or "we", thus remaining anonymous. A three-fold division within this group can be distinguished. Firstly, there are the ones who suffer from black amnesia, those who are

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[12] All further references to the poem "Afro-Latina" (2015) are abbreviated "AFL" and will be inserted parenthetically in the text.
[13] Subsequent references to "Unforgettable" (2014) are abbreviated "UNF".

mentally westernised and consequently suppress their Afro-Latinx ancestry. The second group includes the speakers of the poems, who accept and demonstrate pride towards their original ethnic culture and racial heritage. Lastly, the third group comprises the ancestors of the migrated first and second group of characters mentioned above. These are claimed and lamented to be "erased" out of the first group's "skin" and "hair" ("Hair", 9-10), as a metaphor for the deracination of their ethnic identity.

2.2 <u>The Complex Identification Repercussions of a Triple Consciousness</u>

In 1903, W. E. B. Du Bois introduced the concept *double consciousness* to refer to the complex binary identity of African Americans in 19th century white-dominated societies (Woodard 2006: 897-902). Du Bois illustrates a sense of dividedness experienced by African Americans living in the United States by noting that, one the one hand, they are and identify as American although they are not always being treated as such merely because of their being black. On the other hand, Du Bois remarks that their African identity is also maintained through a deeply rooted African "spirituality" i.e. its history, religion and folklore (Woodard 2006: 900) and obviously through the inheritance of typical African physical features.

One could state that Afro-Latinxs living in the United States experience a sense of *double dividedness*: being black, Latinx *and* American yet not being able to fit into *one* of these categories. Scholars of Ethnic Studies have, thereupon, recently introduced the notion of *triple consciousness* to depict the hybrid ethnic identity of Afro-Latinxs living in Western societies, building on Du Bois' theory. The concept, in fact, "produc[es] that same reconciled dichotomy of individuality" (Rodriguez 2014: 2) but also adds a third layer of identity: being nationally American, racially black, *and* ethnically Latinx (Rivera-Rideau et al. 2016: 11; Rodriguez 2014: 10), the latter which in itself already contains a complex mixture of African, Spanish and Native American heritage.

Frank Bonilla observes that Dominicans who migrate to the U.S. enter a society that "knows only black and white", thus identifying people into merely two racial categories – based on skin color – which further complicates the struggle for an accurate ethnic (self-)identification (Bonilla, qtd. in Torres-Saillant 2010: 52). The conception of *triple consciousness* thus undermines the bipolar Western categorization of people's race, showing that being Latinx and being black is not mutually exclusive. Acevedo illustrates this issue in, notably, the comparison made between, "caught between *orange juice* and *milk* / Between reflection of the sun and whiteness" ("Hair", 22, my emphases), using food imagery as a

metaphor for indicating dark-skinned people (orange juice) on the one hand and fair-skinned people (milk) on the other hand. In "AFL", the speaker questions these limited categories when stating that Afro-Latinxs' hair is "too kinky for Spain / And too wavy for dreadlocks" ("AFL", 41-42), thus confirming that the retrograde, stereotipical U.S. racial categories effectively fail to categorize Afro-Latinxs' ethnic identity. This idea is also explicitly suggested in the figure of speech: "Our [Afro-Latinxs'] stories cannot be checked into boxes" ("AFL", 31).

Due to the racial categorization as *black* and the subsequent increased chances of racial discrimination of dark-skinned Latinxs in the U.S., an increased racial awareness of black Latinxs who live in the West arises (Reichard 2015: 2; Torres-Saillant 2010: 52-53). Sometimes, this confrontation leads to a process of introspection, leading to an increased self-awareness of an African (and indigenous) ancestry (i.e. black consciousness). However, most Afro-Latinxs in the diaspora develop an inferiority complex when being submerged in a white-dominated society, and subsequently, a sense of alienation might arise. As a result, many Afro-Latinxs in the diaspora tend to hide their black and indigenous heritage under the guise of the identity of the term *Latinx*, alienating themselves from their African heritage and assimilating to the Northern American culture. This might also stem from the widespread negrophobic attitude in the West, thus serving as a protection from the racial oppression black people in the U.S. experience (Torres-Saillant 2010: 52-53). Racial and cultural amnesia is, indeed, an acknowledged phenomenon within the diaspora (Afro-)Latinx community (Torres-Saillant 2010: 23, 25). The speaker in "AFL" draws on her personal experiences as an Afro-Latinx woman in the diaspora to portray her transition from assimilating to the U.S. food culture, language and beauty ideals, to a rejection of these. She affirms to have "[c]ursed God I'd been born the colour o'cinnamon" (17) upon migrating to the United States. Furthermore, the tendency of adopting a similar negrophobic attitude has been noted within this group of Afro-Latinxs (Bolívar Espinosa 2015: 1, 8).

The former tendency is what Acevedo supports in her poetry, the latter what she criticizes. The process of deracination and internalization of Western views is illustrated in Acevedo's slam poems "Hair", "AFL" and "UNF", though best developed in "Hair", where the typical physical African and indigenous feature of afro-textured hair is shown to be renounced by a large part of the Afro-Latinx community living in the West.

2.2.1 A Condemnation of Deracination & Assimilation

In “Hair”, Acevedo challenges the marginalised stigma attached to afro-textured hair – also known as *nappy* or *kinky* hair (Yawson 2014: n.p.). The poem starts with a statement of a young Dominican woman, the speaker of the poem, who reports her mother’s instruction to “fix [her] hair” (1). The female speaker then goes on to explain what her mother actually means when uttering that phrase: her dense afro-texture hair must be ironed out, in accordance with Western beauty ideals. The third-person-singular pronoun “she”, that is used when referring to her mother, is gradually replaced with the pronoun “them” in order to illustrate that her mother – also a member of the diaspora Afro-Latinx community – is no exception. Many Afro-Latinxs who have migrated to the West increasingly change their physical features, aiming to look similar to the country’s peoples and accommodating its beauty ideals (Ashcroft et al. 2000: 60-61). In “AFL”, this is discussed through the image of one’s hair: the speaker explains how she used to “[straighten] my hair in imitation of Barbie” (11). “Hair”, however, ends with a straightforward reply of the speaker to the diverted dialogue initiated by her mother at the beginning of the poem: “You can’t fix what was never broken” (45), undoubtedly a strong resolution, in which she condemns her own diaspora Afro-Latinx community’s desire to adapt their physical Afro-descendent features – hair, in this case – to white beauty standards.

The rejection of afro hair stands for the rejection of one’s natural appearance and the betrayal of one’s ethnic origins by accepting the Western beauty ideals. Acevedo thus uses a synecdoche as a literary device to develop the theme of physical assimilation; African-textured hair is the part that stands in for the entirety of one’s original ethnic culture and physical features.

The speaker in “Hair”, furthermore, condemns such rejection by claiming that Dominicans are “the best at swallowing amnesia” (19) because they “do the best hair” (17). The latter phrase is narrated in a sarcastic tone since the good reputation of Dominican hair salons in the U.S. is due to their ability of straightening all the curls out of the hair, identical to the vast majority of natural hairstyles of the people who originate from the West. Repetition is also employed as literary technique to emphasize the multi-layered meanings behind the speaker’s mother’s utterance to “fix [your] hair”; “But what they mean is” (l9, 24, 26, 28, 30) is repeated no less than five times. It is noteworthy to mention that the characters in “Hair” are women. The politics of nappy hair, in the poem, is directed towards women’s hair in particular, since men are expected and tend to have short hair (i.e. stereotypical gender role) and, consequently, Afro-Latinx males are hardly ever reproached for not straightening their hair.

In “AFL”, not only the physical assimilation of diaspora Afro-Latinxs is demonstrated,

but also its cultural traditions: “So I rejected habichuela and mangú, much preferring Happy Meals and Big Macs” (10), the former clearly alluding to Dominican gastronomy, the latter to the Northern American. A direct allusion to cultural amnesia is also provided (32) when the speaker claims that the stories of Afro-Latinxs are “in the forgotten, the undocumented, the passed down spoons full of arroz con dulce at abuela’s knee.”[14] Indigenous and African history is argued to be transmitted merely through an oral tradition, since people in power – white men – do not bother to document them on paper.

The female speaker in “Hair”, moreover, reports and reprimands the reaction of members of her diaspora Dominican community when mentioning having fallen in love with a black man: “‘Why would two oppressed people come together? It’s two times the trouble.’” (29), a straightforward attempt at whitewashing their own children’s bloodline. In “UNF”, the three speakers belonging to an ethnic minority group living in the United States also denounce the assimilation of their own diaspora communities. This tendency is argued to result from accepting the idea that non-Western immigrants are only granted privileges when “dumb[ing] down their identity” to “fit into” the Northern American society (35). In the poem, this is illustrated by showing that immigrants tend to baptise their children who are born in the American diaspora with Anglo-Saxon names. The speakers use their own names as examples and claimed it to have a confusing effect on their self-identification process, conveyed in a sarcastic tone: “my parents named me George […] It [the name George] reminds me of some old, dead, white guy. Being a young, alive, Asian boy, it was hard for me to make the connection” (9-11). The light tone of “UNF” contrasts with the predominantly serious tones of Acevedo’s other slam poems, which are in accordance with the earnest themes. The speakers’ mood, however, is similar in all poems and could be described as angry and determined, though not vindictive, but rather hopeful at times.

2.3 A Reclamation of Afro-Latinxs’ African and Indigenous Heritage

As was stated in the introduction, one’s cultural identity is a construction: it is fragmented and in a constant process of transformation (Hall and du Gay 1996: 4). Golash-Boza and Darity, moreover, insist on the fluidity of self-identifiers (2008: 33). In “AFL”, the speaker reports how she went from rejecting her African and Latinx roots to reclaiming her hybrid racial identity as time passed by, thus suggesting hope for change.

[14] The passed down spoons of rice pudding at grandmothers’ knee.

Instead of denial and rejection, the autodiegetic speakers in Acevedo's poetry argue that the ethnic community should assert pride towards their hybrid racial and cultural identity. Much like the Negritude poets and the Negrismo Movement, Acevedo intends to implement black consciousness and promote the valuable African and indigenous heritage in her slam poetry, as well as self-love. She does this by emphasizing Afro-Latinxs' hybrid ethnic and cultural heritage on the one hand, and by re-evaluating – especially African – features, culture and traditions in a positive light on the other hand. Moreover, Acevedo recommends an educational revolution in the West to be a good solution, since its Eurocentric education program has a large influence on gendered and racial power-relations and thinking patterns and, consequently, on Afro-Latinxs' self-identification process, which often results into inferiority complexes of women and the marginalized ethnic community.

2.3.1 Raising Awareness

To combat black and indigenous amnesia within the diaspora Afro-Latinx community, Acevedo emphasizes their African and indigenous heritage, portraying it as inherent to the Afro-Latinx culture and identity. Throughout the corpus, the racial hybridity of Latinxs is repeatedly acknowledged and emphasized – particularly in the poem "AFL" – by means of direct references and subtle allusions to the importation of African slaves to the Americas – in which mainly the omnipresent *African* heritage of Latinxs is emphasized – as well as emphasizing the cultural hybridity in Dominican food and the community's linguistic hybridity.

The female Afro-Latinx speaker in "AFL" explicitly asserts her hybrid ethnic ancestry when exclaiming "I come from the *Taíno*'s of the río / The Aztec, the Mayan, los Incas, los *españoles* con sus fincas buscando oro / And the *Yoruba africanos* que con sus manos built a mundo nunca imaginado" (19-21, my emphases), thus referring to the miscegenation of Native Americans, Spanish colonizers and African slaves. The geographical – and consequently ethnic – expansion of the speaker's community's heritage in "AFL" is particularly emphasized by means of a personification: "So our palms tell the cuentos of many tierras" (43). Indeed, the Dominican palm trees – bearing in mind Acevedo's country of origin – are reported to tell the stories of *many* lands: African, Spanish, and American. This line is followed by additional nature imagery with the same purpose. The speaker namely invites her audience to "Read our lifeline, birth of intertwine moonbeams and starshine / We are every ocean cross" (44, 45), thus, alluding to the connection of different geographical places and, simultaneously, to Native American beliefs and mythology in which nature plays a central role (Kirwan 1999: 1).

i. Ethnic Hybridity as a Result of Colonization and Slavery

In "AFL" and "Hair", ethnic hybridity is illustrated by slave imagery, alluding to the transatlantic slave trade of Africans to the Americas during the Spanish colonization: "I know I come from stolen gold / From cocoa, from sugar cane / The children of slaves *and* slave masters / A beautifully traject *mixture*, a sancocho of race history" ("AFL", 22-25, my emphases). "Cocoa" and "sugar cane" are the crops that were grown by African slaves on Latin-American farms for colonial profit from the fifteenth century onwards. The direct reference to "slave masters" ("AFL", 24) also alludes to and incorporates the Spanish ancestry of Afro-Latinxs. The reference to "indigenous rape" (27) emphasizes the indigenous blood that runs though Afro-Latinxs' veins and alludes to the same colonial context in which native-Americans were also enslaved.

Another allusion to slavery is found in "Hair", by means of the following synecdoche: "But how do you fix this *ship wrecked history of hair* / The true meaning of stranded" (4, my emphasis). *Hair* here stands for the African slaves who were transported to the Caribbean with ships during the Spanish colonisation of Latin America, through the image of the typical African texture of hair that many Afro-Latinxs have, which is central to the poem. Acevedo's choice of words when referring to a "ship wrecked history", might be a conscious strategy, evoking a subtle allusion to Adrienne Rich's poem "Diving into the Wreck" (1973). In this dramatic monologue, a female speaker takes a dive into an old shipwreck, which symbolises the damage of centuries of patriarchal oppression women experience around the world (Hassan et al. 2015: 247). In "Hair", Acevedo attributed the wreck to the damage of long-lasting colonial oppression and white supremacy.

The identification of the speaker and her lover's hypothetical future children as "The children of children of fields" ("Hair", 34) further alludes to the physical exploitation of African slaves during colonial times. Another style figure used to indict slavery is found in a simile. Namely, in "Hair" (6), tight braids are compared to the tight condensation of African slaves in overcrowded ships when crossing the ocean to the Americas in the fifteenth century.

ii. Cultural Hybridity in Food

One of the tools by which Acevedo emphasizes a hybrid ethnic identity, is through the cultural hybridity in Latinx gastronomy. The Spanish word *sancocho* ("AFL", 25) refers to traditional Dominican dish, in which a multiplicity of ingredients like pork, chicken, corn, potatoes, pumpkin, yucca and plantains are concocted into a stew and abundantly prepared during festivities. Rosario indicates that the roots of this national dish lie both in Spain and Africa and that the term is often used as a metaphor to ascribe the racial diversity of Dominicans (Rosario, qtd. in Eison Simmons 2009: 14-33). Similarly, in "AFL" (25), *sancocho* is used as a metaphor for the racial amalgam present within Dominican or Latinx ethnic identity.

iii. Linguistic Hybridity

The theme of language is enhanced several times in the discussion of cultural assimilation throughout the poetic corpus. In "AFL", the female speaker reports her own experiences as a diaspora Afro-Latinx living in the United States regarding linguistic assimilation. As opposed to her present pride and acknowledgement of her racial and cultural roots, – among which the Spanish language – she admits to have rejected them upon arrival in the United States, due to the humiliation experienced when appearing to be *different* to her American peers: "I was embarrassed by […] my mother's 'ebrokee Englih' which cracked my pride when she spoke" and "My parents' tongue was a gift I quickly forgot […] " (8). The theme of language is, furthermore, placed in a colonial context in "UNF", through a reference to the colonial French language as the dominant language of administration in the central African country, Cameroon (17).

The sporadic insertion of Spanish words in Acevedo's predominantly English poetry is noteworthy. This narrative strategy could be interpreted as recognition of the linguistic and cultural hybridity of diaspora (Afro-)Latinxs on the meta-level. Furthermore, the occasional insertion of syntax typical of the African-American English sociolect (Wolfram 2004: 118, 121) enhanced in the poems, like the infinitive verb form of "go" in "Salsa swagger anywhere she go" ("AFL", 2), "be" in "black holes be the brightest source of light", "imma" and "o" (instead of "of") and "don't" instead of the Starndard English "doesn't" in "UNF" (36, 37, 27), additionally reflect the linguistic similarities of Afro-Latinxs' speech with the African-American English vernacular in the U.S. Indeed, it shows the realistic colloquial language used in Acevedo's poetry, which, in turn, reflects the free-spirited character of slam poetry, in which

freedom of content, style *and* vernacular is asserted (Somers-Willett 2009: 52).

The lexicon used throughout corpus could thus be described as simple, colloquial everyday General American English, occasionally infused with features of African-American vernacular English, but most noteworthy, the introduction of Spanish words. Some of those are slang, such as “prieto” and “cocolo” in ‘Hair’ (27), these being popular terms in the Caribbean community for referring to black people, yet carrying a negative connotation (Gatita 2006: n.p.; “prieto” 2016: n.p.; TWIM 2016: n.p.; Tempo3240 2008: n.p.). “Tumbao” (“AFL”, 2) denotes a particular “African sexiness”, used mainly among Afro-Caribbean communities (Teenylamorena 2007: n.p.)[15]. Acevedo uses these slang words to develop a realistic demonstration of her communities’ terminology and words like “prieto” and “cocolo” to portray the anti-blackness attitude present in contemporary (diaspora) Latinx communities, which Acevedo criticises. Such language in the poetry is, subsequently, indicative of Acevedo’s personal expertise of Afro-Latinx discourse and, furthermore, an additional indicator of an autobiographical speaker.

2.3.2 A Celebration of African and Indigenous Heritage

In the slam poems, physical African-descendent features are acclaimed: “You call them wild curls / I call them breathing”, regarding afro-textured hair (“Hair”, 13-14). With that same purpose, personifications – the attribution of animate characteristics to inanimate objects – are accomplished as such: “Can’t you see them in this wet hair that waves like hello” (16) and “I let my curtain of curls blanket us from the world” (26), with hair being the insensate object in both cases. Furthermore, the alliteration “Black, brown, beautiful — viviremos para siempre” (“AFL”, 49) glorifies dark skin colours which Afro-Latinxs inherit from their indigenous and African ancestry. “AFL” also contains various references to the rich Latinx music culture, like salsa, merengue and cumbia (33, 5), which were largely influenced by beats and rhythms hailing from the African continent (Quintana 2014: n.p.).

An interesting parallel is noted between Acevedo’s “Hair” and the poetry of the feminist African-American poet Lucille Clifton, with whose work Acevedo has stated to be familiar

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[15] Words that belong to the linguistic catergory of *slang* are rarely available in dictionaries and tend to change meaning rapidly. Urban Dictionary, a platform where anyone can give one’s own interpretation of slang terms is therefore the most reliable source available on these Spanish slang terms and is here used as a source. The names in parentheses are nicknames of the people who conveyed their denotation and function of the words, since their official names are untracable.

(Reichard 2015: 2). In particular Clifton's poems written in free verse, "homage to my hair" (1975) and "homage to my hips"[16] (1980) – known as the Clifton's "homage" poems (Rashedi 2011: 27) – show resemblances to "Hair". The speakers of the poems – who are also women of African descent – similarly assert pride towards stereotypical female African physical features: afro-textured hair and curvy hips, thus rejecting white beauty standards (i.e. straight hair and slim hips) (Rashedi 2011: 25-26). In "HHA", the speaker forthrightly asserts pride towards her "nappy hair" (Clifton 1975: line 3) when stating she can "hear the music" when it moves (line 2). In "HHI", a poem in which curvy hips are celebrated, the same literary device as in Acevedo's "Hair" – a synecdoche – is used: the hips refer to the entire body, and even to the entire group of women of African descent living in the West. Clifton transforms this negatively connoted stereotype of large hips into something positive and asserts the mental and physical freedom of black women through the image of large hips. The speaker, namely, states that her hips "are free hips […] / they do what they want to do […] / these hips are mighty" ("Clifton" 2013: lines 6, 10, 11) and that "they don't fit into little / petty places" (lines 4, 5), a metaphor for narrow minded places (Rashedi 2011: 25; NAL, qtd. in Bekers 2015: n.p).

The hiding or whitewashing of typical African physical appearances by Afro-descendants living in the West is hence also denounced in the "homage" poems. Slavery is also an issue referred to in the text (line 8). Clifton thus pleads for a non-racist society and a deconstruction of traditional gender roles, when stating that "these hips" can "put a spell on a man and / spin him like a top!" (12, 14-15), asserting women's power over men (NAL, qtd. in Bekers 2015: n.p.; Rashedi 2011: 27-28) and, consequently, rejecting the idea that women are subordinate to men.

2.3.3 A Call for Educational Revolution

According to Acevedo, another way to achieve a positive re-evaluation of African heritage and equal treatment of people – regardless of one's gender or race – is a change in both public and parental education; the root of the diffusion of racial and patriarchal discourses in the West. Acevedo challenges the selective Eurocentric and patriarchal history classes taught in Western education programs that preserve unbalanced racial and gender power structures. Raising awareness and informing people about non-Western and women's historical achievements and

[16] Subsequent references to the work "homage to my hair" will be abbreviated "HHA" and "homage to my hips" as "HHI". The titles as well as their lines of these poems intentionally contain lowercase letters since Clifton wants to reflect the content of her poetry – a plea for equality – in its form (NAL, qtd. in Bekers 2015: n.p.).

history, is to be acknowledged and diffused through the medium of education.

i. Deconstructing Racial Power Relations

In "Unforgettable", the three speakers of the poem are all American citizens with foreign ancestry who question the U.S. selective Eurocentric education system and plead for an altered education program, in which the histories of the colonised and of the non-Imperial countries are acknowledged.

The Imperialist focus in U.S. education that is criticised in "UNF" is evoked by means of the theme of names and memory. Whereas 'difficult' names such as "Tchaikovsky, Michelangelo, Eisenhower" (8) are widely taught in school "rather than the ones closer to my own", followed by an enumeration of the three speakers' last names: Matam, Yamazawa and Acevedo, which are also the authors' names. The speakers use their own experiences as diaspora students in the U.S. with Asian, African and Afro-Latinx ancestry and explain that from a very young age, this Eurocentric focus in the Western education system leads to a problematic self-identification process: "I realized my first name didn't match my background before I knew how to spell "assimilation" (12).

An explicit example of racial stereotypical thinking patterns and its origin in public education is exemplified in "UNF". The ethnically marginalized speakers assert that when people in their host country – the United States – hear Anglo-Saxon names, the adjectives "power", "class" and "intellect" (33) come to mind, whereas Native American names like "Tatsunokochi", spontaneously allude to the concepts "foreign", i.e. forced into the box of 'the other', "impoverished" and "illegal" (33). They go as far as claiming that those names invite Westerners to think they are not wanted and should "GO BACK WHERE [THEY] CAME FROM!" (32-35). According to Acevedo, the pejorative stigma attached to ethnic names arise from the negative stereotypes infused by the Western media and education programmes, and from the lack of recognition of the non-Western ethnic history in public education. Acevedo, indeed, remarks "[h]ow quickly we forget where we come from" ("AFL", 18) when living in the diaspora. The repetition of the phrase "remind me [of where I come from]" (19) in "AFL" is, furthermore, a call for raising awareness of non-Western ethnic communities' history. The title of the slam poem "Unforgettable", similarly alludes to the theme of memory, in which the speakers assure that they will not give their children Anglo-Saxon names. Instead, they affirm, "Imma name them something special. […] Something to remind their classmates of the last samurai instead of the first president. […] Something real, real ethnic. Something

unforgettable" (37, 40, 41). The responsibility of parenthood, raising one's children in a way that will remind them of their origins, and celebrate it instead of being ashamed is thus also part of the educational revolution appealed for.

The Dominican female speaker called Elizabeth in "UNF" favors indigenous Latin-American names, rather than Anglo-Saxon names (30, 13, 21). She asserts that she "wanted a name of Dominican hills rising, and campesinos [farmers] uprising, instead of 'Long live the Queen'". The speaker approves and encourages the act of naming children of Afro-Latinx descent indigenous names such as "Xochi" and "Anacaona" (13), in order to fight assimilation. The former is the abbreviated name of an Aztec Godess of beauty, sexual love and household arts, Xochiquetzal (Pauls 2006: n.p.). Anacaona was a powerful historical Caribbean figure; she was the female Taíno ruler of various Eastern Hispaniola provinces in the fifteenth century and was executed by Spanish colonizers in 1503 (Vallejo 2013: 19, 20). Acevedo thus teaches her audience women's history and non-Western mythology, which is lamented to be "in the forgotten" ("AFL", 32). Ethnic sounding names are, moreover, granted as powerful statements in the poem, which is illustrated by means of personifications, such as "a name that […] [s]omersaulted into a room and split the air" (13) and "[a name that] was dressed in chain mail […] shot down with short blades" (37).

ii. Deconstructing Gendered Power Relations

Not only ethnic, but also gender-related stereotypes that are diffused by U.S. pedagogic programs are criticized. This is particularly developed in "Spear", in which the role of parental education, the raising of children – a daughter in this case – is central to the poem.

The poem addresses the theme of women's abuse and more specifically of rape, in the context of U.S. culture. Indeed, the poem provides geographical references to *Steubenville*, "a *Cleveland* Basement" (OH) and *Gretna*, a city in the state of Louisiana (3, 9, 13). All these U.S. locations have been publicly identified as places where shocking incidents of women's (sexual) abuse have taken place over the last few decades[17]. These allusions to actual historical

[17] In 2003, Ariel Castro kidnapped Amanda Berry - who was sixteen years old at the time - and kept her hostage in his basement in Cleveland (Ohio) for over a decade. A year later Gina DeJesus was similarly abducted and both girls were raped on a daily basis - Amanda even getting pregnant and giving birth to his baby - until their escape in 2013 (Boyle 2015: n.p.). Also in Ohio, a drunk teenage girl was raped by two male fellow students in the city Steubenville, after which the boys took and circulated nude pictures of the unconscious victim (Oppel 2013: n.p.). In Gretna, Louisiana, a seventeen-year-old boy, Arnold Ross, raped and beat his girlfriends' eight-month-old baby to death ("Infant's Killing" 2009: n.p.).

events imply a particular critique of the rape culture in the United States, yet could be generalized to the atemporal rape culture all over the world, like the abundant raping of indigenous women during Spanish colonization referred to in "AFL" (27).

The speaker of the poem is a future mother (32), with her own ideas on how to prevent her hypothetical daughter from being sexually assaulted. She states, "I can't trust this world to teach their sons how to treat my daughter" (46) and, therefore, reports that she will raise her future daughter in a divergent way from what is expected, enabling her to defend herself from sexual assault. Raising children in *awareness* of the threat of sexual assault is argued to be the way to fight rape culture, to secure women's safety. The speaker asserts that she is determined to teach her daughter how to defend herself, given that nobody else expects women to do so. The passivity attributed to female gender roles is thus perceived as dangerous and in urgent need of deconstruction.

The tone used throughout the poem can be described as very serious, enraged and powerful. The disturbing, explicit reference to forced oral sexual activity in "The cheap vodka may burn her throat / But not how they will, later" (23, 24) is set in a hypothetical yet very realistic plot in which innocent teenage girls drink alcohol at parties and are likely to be sexually taken advantage of by their male peers. The oftentimes used self-justification of rapists "And you can't tell me that they don't know / That her 'no' is not a moan" (27) is heavily criticized and perceived as a thoroughly offensive excuse by the speaker.

As the poem progresses, the female body is transformed into several material objects through the literary technique of imagery. At first, the image of the body as a rope is suggested in "Watch them grab wrists and ankles, she is now a rope they jump" (6). Towards the end of the poem – when the speaker advises other mothers to inform their daughters on how to defend themselves against sexual oppression – the image of a female body is transformed into a weapon, "a sword, a spear, a shield" (47). The speaker asserts that her daughter's body will be "ready to fling itself / And arrow the hands of the first man / Who tries to cover her mouth" (55). The stylistic literary device of enjambments is used in these two last phrases and the only ones extant in the selected corpus of Acevedo's poems. Other instances of weapon imagery is used to convey the female body's transformation into an object of war, in order to "be chiselled prepared for rebellions against her flesh" (52), such as the statement that the speaker's daughters body "will be carved from hard rock", i.e., taught how to wield herself.

Acevedo thus attempts to dismantle the established gender roles attributed to women, who are stereotypically taught to smile politely rather than learn how to physically and mentally defend themselves against the oppression they experience in patriarchal Western

societies. The roles of mothers in the West, expected to embody feminine traits like tenderness and cooperation (Rubin 1998: 2) is also suggested to be in need of deconstruction in the poem. The speaker in "Spear" namely asserts that it is favorable for women to take on a powerful and more active role in society, which will provide them with the ability to change hierarchically gendered social orders, as has been confirmed by the Feminist Movement.

2.4 Acevedo Revolts: Intersecting a Postcolonial and Feminist Discourse

The themes of immigration, ethnic culture and racial power-relations that are presented throughout the poetic corpus – with specific issues like slavery, black or cultural amnesia, negrophobia, ethnic pride and denial – are, naturally, indicative of a postcolonial type of discourse.

The feminist discourse that Clifton asserts in her "homage" poems is also extant in Acevedo's. Female characters are centralized and the female speakers represent empowering figures, women who are masters of their bodies and lives (Rashedi 2011: 26, 27). Acevedo's female speakers make their her own decisions: e.g. choose to raise their children differently from what society expects in "Spear", assert their right to leave and love their natural hair, dare to confront their own community's blind spot and subvert the negative connotations of ethnic stereotypes in "Hair". This opposes the idea of passivity that is required of women, in particular black women in Western gender discourses and imagery (Coene 2016: n.p.). The speakers thus assert difference from the notion of 'the other' that they are forced into in Western society. They instead uphold an active and non-traditional role in parental education and choices regarding their physical appearance. This centralisation and attribution of an active role of black women in Acevedo's poetry is the opposite of what Western societies glorify: white men in power (Reichard 2015: 3). The fixed focalization of these female speakers revolts against the established male gaze of most artistic creations.

The narrative technique of a first-person overt, autodiegetic black, female speaker, confirms Acevedo's strategy of using personal experiences as a reference point in her poetry, through which she transmits a socio-political messages. This strategy alludes to the second-wave feminist slogan "The Personal is Political". The above is indicative of a feminist discourse used in the poems, in which women are granted a voice and unbalanced social gender roles are challenged. The previously mentioned allusion to Rich's "Diving into the Wreck", in which patriarchy is renounced, as well as the centralizing of females and slave imagery enhanced throughout the poetic corpus, reveals Acevedo's strategy of intersecting and attacking

the oppressive systems of patriarchy *and* white supremacy, through a postcolonial and feminist discourse.

Acevedo's revolutionary call is not only reflected in the content, but also in the form of her poetry. Like most slam poems (Somers-Willett 2009: 52), the selected corpus of Acevedo's work is written in free verse. Acevedo therefore naturally does not make use of a certain pattern of rhyme or meter. In fact, rhymes are absent throughout the corpus, with only two exceptions ("UNF", 31 and "AFL", 14-15, 26-27). The rhythm enhanced is also irregular. The absence of rules inherent in the free verse genre might be a conscious choice used by the poet in order to reflect the freedom of mind and body she claims women and Afro-Latinxs lack yet deserve.

3. Conclusion

In "Hair", "Spear", "Afro-Latina" and "Unforgettable", Acevedo uses diverse stylistic devices, such as personifications, synecdoches, metaphors, imagery, intertextual allusions and simple colloquial language to expose the identity struggles of diaspora Afro-Latinxs and women living in a Western patriarchal society.

The hybrid ethnic identity of Afro-Latinxs is portrayed as being problematic for those living in Western societies due to the latter's retrograde binary racial categorization of people which, consequently, complicates the community's self-identification process. Coupled with the racial discrimination they undergo due to their dark skin colour, members of the diaspora community experience a feeling of not belonging, i.e. a subordinate identity as 'the other'. Moreover, the influence of the white supremacist ideology often results into an inferiority complex of Afro-Larinxs in the diaspora. The speakers in Acevedo's poetry assert and denounce the complex consequent process of deracination, cultural amnesia and even the assimilation of a negrophobic attitude. In particular, the assimilation of Western standards by Afro-Latinxs living in the United States – whether it comes to beauty ideals or children's names – is criticized.

Acevedo, thereupon, makes several propositions for a positive re-evaluation of diaspora Afro-Latinxs and women in Western societies and to consequently put an end to their oppression. She calls upon the subaltern ethnic community to start acknowledging and asserting pride towards their – particularly African and – indigenous ancestry, as accomplished by the speakers of the poems. The speakers, in fact, intend to restore an African and indigenous self-consciousness by emphasizing their racial hybridity and by shedding a positive light on the

hybrid Afro-Latinx cultural heritage. To convey this message in her poetry, Acevedo enhances stylistic literary techniques such as figurative language, as well as food, weapon and slavery imagery. The poet, moreover, inserts Spanish – the diaspora community's native language – words and allusions to historical events and figures. Some of these are empowering female of Native-American mythology and history, such as the Goddess Xochi and Hispaniola female ruler, Anacaona. Hence, cultural and historical amnesia of both women and the ethnic marginalized community is combatted.

The oppression and general physical and mental abuse of the second subaltern group in question – women – is a central theme in Acevedo's poem "Spear" and also indirectly addressed in the other poems under analysis, in which unbalanced gendered power relations and stereotypical gender roles are denounced. This theme is developed through historical references and war imagery. In order to combat the established gender relations, Acevedo encourages women to assert an active role – exercising agency – instead of the passive role that is expected of women and marginalized ethnic communities in white-supremacist patriarchal societies.

Acevedo, moreover, argues for a drastic change in education as another proposition for accomplishing change and equality of ethnic and gendered marginalized communities. A revolution in both public and parental education is claimed to be crucial for deconstructing stereotypical gender and racial thinking patterns, ethnic social rankings, as well as black and indigenous amnesia in the West. Acevedo thus indirectly addresses Western governments, suggesting a necessity for change in the selective Eurocentric pedagogical curriculum in order to commemorate the history of women and diaspora communities, i.e. Afro-Latinxs' in this case. She thus argues that complexity of people's origins should be emphasized in pedagogic institutions, without promoting polarization. Furthermore, the black female speakers of the poems argue for a withdrawal from the diffusion of inaccurate, close-minded and pejorative stereotypical thinking patterns – especially towards African heritage – that is deeply rooted in the Western mentality and results into an imposed subordinate identity. This mentality change is also implied to be possible through an educational revolution and changes in parental education.

Acevedo draws on her personal experiences as an Afro-Latinx woman living in the United States to depict these struggles and suggestions, confirmed by the recurrent use of a first-person narration as a literary strategy. The poet thus applies the feminist slogan "The Personal is Political" to discuss racial and gender oppression in her poetry, which is indicative of a feminist discourse in her slam poetry, intersecting with the postcolonial discourse.

Acevedo's slam poetry thus argues for a deconstruction of the practice of subordinating hitherto marginalized communities in the West. Her merit lies in the centralising and intersecting of two marginalized groups in her poetry, the concerns that she is meticulously and touchingly able to address. Her numerous propositions to improve the situation of the diaspora ethnic community, of women in general, in her slam poetry, offers hope for improvement after centuries of unjust oppression, through the medium of slam poetry. This paper, accordingly, intends to emphasize the merits attributable to slam poetry as a genre, and argues for its inclusion within the (English) literary canon, just like the recent admission of people of color and women's writing has been contended for.

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5. Appendices

5.1 Appendix A

Re: Form Submission - New Form - Questions Academic Literary Analysis of your Work (poetry)

Tue 2/14/2017 12:32 AM

Hello Heleni,

1. What is your birth year and date? **February 1988.**
2. Are you part of the first, second or third generation of your family to migrate to the USA? **First generation.**
3. When did your ancestors move to New York/ the USA specifically? **Late 1970s.**
4. Are both your parents African-Dominican? Do you know where specifically your African roots lie? How many generations back? **Both my parents are a mixture of peoples. We cannot trace our African ancestry.**
5. What are the composition/publication dates of your poems "Hair", "Spear", "Afro-Latina", "An Open Letter to the Protesters Outside Planned Parenthood" and "Unforgettable"? Have they all been published? **These were all created during a span of the last seven years. None of these poems have been published, although Spear appears in excerpted form in my chapbook Beastgirl & Other Origin Myths.**

5.2 Appendix B

The operating caste system in Latin America during Spanish colonial rule, in increasing unprivileged order (F. A. 2016: n.p.)

5.3 Appendix C

"Hair" (2014)[18]

Transcribed by Heleni Smuha

1 My mother tells me to fix my hair
2 And by fix she means straighten
3 She means whiten

4 But how do you fix this ship wrecked history of hair
5 The true meaning of stranded
6 When tresses hooked tight like African cousins in ship bellies
7 Did they imagine that their great grand children would look like us
8 And would hate them how we do
9 Trying to find ways to erase them out of our skin
10 Iron them out of our hair
11 This wild tangle of hair
12 That strangles air

13 You call them wild curls
14 I call them breathing
15 Ancestors spiralling
16 Can't you see them in this wet hair that waves like hello

17 They say Dominicans can do the best hair
18 I mean they wash, set, flatten the spring in any lock
19 But what they mean is we are the best at swallowing amnesia
20 In a cup of morir soñando[19]
21 Die dreaming
22 Because we rather do that han live in this reality caught between orange juice and milk
23 Between reflections of the sun and whiteness

24 What they mean is:
25 "Why would you date a black a man?"
26 What they mean is:
27 "A prieto cocolo."[20]

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[18] The date mentioned here is the date of publication of the YouTube video ("Hair" 2014: n.p.) from which the lyrics are transcribed, since this is an unpublished poem and the exact year of composition is unknown.
[19] *Morir soñando* is Spanish for *to die while dreaming*.
[20] *Prieto* is Spanish slang for *dark-skinned person*. (Gatita 2006: n.p.; "prieto" 2016: n.p.). *Cocolo* is a Spanish word, popular amongst Dominicans, to refer to African Americans or simply black people who speak English (TWIM 2016: n.p.; Tempo3240 2008: n.p.). Words that belong to the linguistic catergory of *slang* are rarely available in dictionaries and tend to change meaning rapidly. Urban Dictionary, a platform where anyone can give

28 What they mean is:
29 "Why would two oppressed people come together? It's two times the trouble."
30 What they really mean is:
31 "Have you thought of your daughter's hair?"

32 And I don't tell them that we love like sugar cane
33 Brown skin, pale flesh, meshed in pure sweetness
34 The children of children of fields
35 How our bodies curve into one another like an echo
36 And I let my curtain of curls blanket us from the world
37 How our children will be beautiful
38 Of dust skin, and diamond eyes
39 Hair of reclamation

40 How I will break pride down their back
41 So from the moment they leave the womb they will be born, in love, with themselves
42 My mother that tells me to fix my hair
43 And so many words remain unspoken
44 Because all I can reply is
45 "You can't fix what was never broken."

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one's own interpretation of slang terms is therefore the most reliable source available on these Spanish slang terms and is here used as a source. The names in parentheses are nicknames of the people who conveyed their denotation and function of the words, since their official names are untracable.

5.4 Appendix D

"Afro-Latina" (2015)[21]

Transcibed by Heleni Smuha

1 Afro-Latina, camina conmigo[22]
2 Salsa swagger anywhere she go, como "La negra tiene tumbao, ¡Azucar!"[23]
3 Dance to the rhythm
4 Beat the drums of my skin
5 Afro-descendant, the rhythms within
6 The first language I spoke was Spanish
7 Learned from lullabies whispered in my ear
8 My parents' tongue was a gift which I quickly forgot after realizing my peers did not understand it

9 They did not understand me

10 So I rejected habichuela and mangú[24], much preferring Happy Meals and Big Macs
11 Straightening my hair in imitation of Barbie
12 I was embarrassed by my grandmother's colorful skirts and my mother's "ebrokee Englih"[25] which cracked my pride when she spoke

13 So, shit, I would poke fun at her myself
14 Hoping to lessen the humiliation
15 Proud to call myself American, a citizen of this nation
16 I hated caramel colour skin
17 Cursed God I'd been born the colour o'cinnamon
18 How quickly we forget where we come from

19 So remind me, remind me that I come from the Taíno's of the río[26]
20 The Aztec, the Mayan, los Incas, los españoles con sus fincas buscando oro [27]
21 And the Yoruba africanos que con sus manos built a mundo nunca imaginado[28]
22 I know I come from stolen gold

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[21] The date mentioned here is the date of publication of the YouTube video ("Afro-Lat" 2015: n.p.) from which the lyrics are transcribed, since this is an unpublished poem and the exact year of composition is unknown.
[22] *Camina conmigo* is Spanish for *walk with me* (my translation).
[23] Tumbao means "an indescribable African sexiness or swing" (Teenylamorena 2007: n.p.).
[24] National Dominican dishes.
[25] "Broken English."
[26] The Taíno were an indigenous tribe of the Dominican Republic and other parts of Central America, who were massacred by the Spanish during the fifteenth and sixteenth century (Buffington 2000: 525).
[27] A farm or piece of land (my translation).
[28] And the Yoruba Africans – people originating from South-West Nigeria and Benin (OED Online) – who built an incredible world with their bare hands (my translation).

23 From cocoa, from sugarcane
24 The children of slaves and slave masters
25 A beautifully traject mixture, a sancocho[29] of a race history

26 And my memory can't seem to escape
27 The thought of lost lives and indigenous rape

28 A bittersweet bitterness
29 Of feeling innate
30 The soul of a people past-present and fate
31 Our stories cannot be checked into boxes
32 They are in the forgotten, the undocumented, the passed down spoons full of arroz con dulce at abuela's knee[30]

33 To the way our hips skip to the beat of cumbia, merengue y salsa
34 They're in the bending and blending of back bones
35 We are deformed and reformed beings
36 It's in the sway of our song
37 The landscapes of our skirts
38 The azúcar[31] beneath our tongues
39 We are the unforeseen children

40 We're not a cultural wedlock
41 Hair too kinky for Spain
42 And too wavy for dreadlocks

43 So our palms tell the cuentos[32] of many tierras[33]
44 Read our lifeline, birth of intertwine moonbeams and starshine
45 We are every ocean cross
46 North star navigates our waters
47 Our bodies have been bridges
48 We are the sons and daughters, el destino de mi gente
49 Black, brown, beautiful — viviremos para siempre

50 ¡Afro-Latinos hasta la muerte![34]

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[29] *Sancocho* is a national Dominican stew (Rosario, qtd. in Eison Simmons 2009: 14-33).
[30] Rice pudding at grandmother's knee (my translation).
[31] Spanish for "sugar".
[32] Stories.
[33] Lands.
[34] Afro-Latins until death [comes]!

5.5 Appendix E

"Spear" (2015)[35]

Transcribed by Heleni Smuha

1 It almost curdles my womb dry
2 These stories
3 Girl parties in Steubenville
4 Watch her drink
5 Watch her pass out
6 Watch them grab wrists and ankels, she is now a rope they jump

7 Three girls, no, women now
8 Ten years chained
9 In a Cleveland basement
10 Did each one give thanks when he skipped her?
11 When he visited that one
12 When he got her full of stillborn baby-
13 Baby-girl in Gretna, Louisiana
14 Stuffed into a garbage bag

15 Show me her mother
16 How she clenches her fists
17 It seems we women must practice how to lose our daughters
18 Because I know the boys who will help me carry grocery bags
19 And they will whistle, will whisper, will crook fingers in my daughter's direction

20 And she may flip her hair
21 She may buck her hip
22 She may accept their invitation to chill behind paint-chipped staircases
23 The cheap vodka may burn her throat
24 But not how they will, later
25 When they become more thrust than thought
26 And you can't tell me that they don't know

27 That her "no" is not a moan

28 When she wakes me

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[35] The date mentioned here is the date of publication of the YouTube video ("Spear" 2015: n.p.) from which the lyrics are transcribed, since this is an unpublished poem and the exact year of composition is unknown.
A shorter and slightly different variation of this poem has, however, been published in Acevedo's chapbook *Beastgirl & Other Origin Myths* (2016).

29 Her bed puddled in piss
30 I will scrub these hands raw
31 I will tremble at what they could not prevent
32 I have to hold every smile of my future daughter tipped up to the milk of this promise:
33 She will not walk hunched

34 Fingers playing with one another as if she can create prayers from the sweat between her palms
35 She will not be a girl forced to turn herself into a corner
36 Taught that her body is a place to huddle, hide

37 I won’t raise her to be nice
38 To give her laugh away
39 To smile polite as men plot and plan to turn her body into a weapon of war
40 And if they try she will know how to wield herself

41 Don’t tell me it’s wrong
42 To want to raise a child in this kind of fear
43 ‘Cause I know for every finger that we loosen
44 Another knuckle grows back crooked
45 Another knuckle is looking to crack into my daughter’s skin
46 And I can’t trust this world to teach their sons how to treat my daughter

47 So I will raise her to be a sword, a spear, a shield
48 To turn clasped hands into heated hatched
49 To hold razors between her teeth
50 To cut unkind advances with the sharpest eyes
51 To hold all of this together with leather or lace
52 To be chiselled prepared for rebellions against her flesh

53 My daughter will be carved from hard rock
54 Sharpened, shrapnel, a spear
55 Her whole body ready to fling itself
56 And arrow the hands of the first man
57 Who tries to cover her mouth

5.6 Appendix F

"Unforgettable" (2014)[36]
by Pages Matam, Elizabeth Acevedo and G. Yamazawa

Transcribed by Foluke Adebisi[37]

1 Unison: Teachers used to say:

2 Speaker 1: Your behavior is just like your last name

3 Unison: Unforgettable.

4 Speaker 1: In school, I learned a lot more about other people's names rather than the ones closer to my own, as if Matam

5 Speaker 2: Yamazawa

6 Speaker 3: Acevedo

7 Speaker 1: Were so much harder to say than

8 Unison: Tchaikovsky, Michelangelo, Eisenhower. Like our last names were made of barbed wire, stripping the flesh of those trying to conquer the meanings in their mouths.

9 Speaker 2: See, my parents named me George, but honestly, I always hated the name George. It reminds me of some

10 Unison: Old, dead, white guy.

11 Speaker 2: Being a young, alive, Asian boy, it was hard for me to make the connection.

12 Unison: I realized my first name didn't match my background before I knew how to spell "assimilation" [quotation marks added].

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[36] The date mentioned here is the date of publication of the article from which I retrieved the lyrics – transcribed by Adebesi – since this is an unpublished poem and the exact year of composition is unknown. The slam poem as is transcribed here, was performed at the Washington D.C. National slam poetry competition in 2014 and won the first prize.

[37] Occasionally Adebisi's transcription does not correspond to the 2014 recording ("Pages" 2014: n.p.). I have marked these differences by square brackets in the text. Speaker 1 is Matt Pages, speaker 2 is G. Yamazawa, and speaker 3 is Elizabeth Acevedo.

13 Speaker 3: I always wanted a name that set the bar high. That tumbled out of mouths. Somersaulted into a room and split the air. A name like Xochi, or Anacaona, but although I must have punched inside the placenta, my parents decided on something placid.

14 Unison: Elizabeth.

15 Speaker 3: A name for princesses, pampered women, and perfume. A name full of grace.

16 Unison: A name easily washed down with milk.

17 Speaker 1: Patrick: meaning "leader." Etymology: Irish, and although I speak French, I am from Cameroon. [Parmis lesquelles est toi là, un lion indomptable[38]].

18 I would rather a name that would make a throat swell into a song, rather than a sigh.

19 Unison: Your name is a song!

20 Speaker 1: Now, I call myself Pages so I can write my own story. It is the only name that I have ever owned.

21 Speaker 3: I wanted a name of Dominican hills rising, and campesinos[39] uprising, instead of "Long live the Queen" but shortened my name to Liz so colonizers had less to hold onto.

22 Speaker 2: In Japan, your last name comes first. There's an emphasis on family.

23 Unison: But in America,

24 Speaker 2: Your nickname comes first, because there's an emphasis on accessibility.

25 Unison: Our parents had to dumb down their identity so our family could fit into a straight-jacket [*sic*] society.

26 Speaker 2: On countless occasions, I've introduced myself, and people would say shit like

27 [Speaker 1 & 2]: "But what's your real name though? That don't sound very ethnic."

---

[38] A lion that can't be tamed (my translation).
[39] Farmers (my translation). use capital to open footnote and full stop to close it; here and elsewhere

28 Speaker 2: You don’t look like a “George”.

29 Speaker 1: Or a “Patrick”.

30 Speaker 3: An “Elizabeth”

31 Unison: That’s because my name wasn’t given to me. It was given to the rest of the country.

32 Speaker 1: Because when they hear names like George, Patrick, Elizabeth, what they hear is

33 [Unison:] Power, class, intellect.

34 Speaker 1: But names like Pedamante, Quvenzhané, Tatsunokochi sound like

35 Unison: Foreign. Impoverished. Illegal. What they hear is, “GO BACK WHERE YOU CAME FROM!”

36 Speaker 3: Your name is a dirt pit. It is a black hole, but what they don’t know is that black holes be the brightest source of light.

37 Unison: I’ve always wished my name was dressed in chain mail, that it was a heavy name, [o’] thick-thigh syllable, shot down with short blades, so when I have my own children, Imma name them something special.

38 Speaker 3: Something to make people stumble on, and guilt-trip over.

39 Speaker 1: Something to make their skin a little thicker than mine.

40 Speaker 2: Something to remind their classmates of the last samurai instead of the first president.

41 Unison: [Something powerful.] Something real, real ethnic. Something unforgettable.