
The Caribbean Trans Continuum and Backhanded Re/Presentation

Those who inhabit unconventional genders—whether deliberately or unconsciously and whether through behavior, dress, speech, or some combination of these—are often considered ineligible to be full, legitimate members of Caribbean societies. As in the global North, their sexuality is automatically suspect, and since they are far from ideal citizens, too often the state sees no need to treat them as full citizens or to protect them from others' mistreatment. This chapter argues that there is a continuum of gender-variant experience—*trans* experience—in the Caribbean, the range of which includes people who live as a gender other than that assigned to them at birth and those who perform transvestite carnival characters. Analyzing literature—Shani Mootoo's *Cereus Blooms at Night*, Michelle Cliff's *No Telephone to Heaven*, and Mayra Santos-Febres' *Sirena Selena vestida de pena*—as well as traditional characters from popular festivals in the Dominican Republic, Trinidad, and Barbados, and legal cases in Cuba, Trinidad, and Guyana, I further argue that in the Caribglobal imagination the portrayal of trans people is a backhanded one that acknowledges their existence while refusing them the possibility of full lives or citizenship.

It is important to begin by addressing the terminology that will be used throughout this chapter and by explaining why I have made particular choices. I remain both ambivalent and conflicted about the use of the term *transgender* in Caribbean contexts because it originated in and seems to remain most relevant to North American and European contexts. The term *transgender* is typically attributed to Californian Virginia Prince, who coined it in the 1970s as a distinct alternative to both *transvestite* and *transsexual*. I have chosen not to use the term *transsexual* because it is still largely

understood in relationship to surgical manipulation of the body. *Transgender*, on the other hand, is currently used in the USA as both an umbrella term for any number of transgressive gender practices and as a term which refers specifically to those who claim or exhibit unconventional gender but who are neither transvestites nor transsexuals.¹ Increasingly, individuals in the USA who self-identify as transgender are utilizing surgery and hormones to alter their biology, so it is a somewhat slippery term. But in the Caribbean such methods are sometimes more difficult to obtain. A major exception is Cuba, where in 2007 the state agreed to cover such surgeries.²

Applying the term *transgender* to the Caribbean is also problematic because North Americans and Europeans have historically defined and continue to define Caribbeanness, and especially Caribbean genders and sexualities, in derogatory ways. Such definitions have named Caribbean women as masculine, vulgar, and uncouth and Caribbean men variously as hypermasculine or undermasculine (depending on their race) and as unintelligent. Furthermore, since most of the dominant world powers are located in North America and Europe, their descriptions and definitions of Caribbean sexuality are more prevalent globally than those coming from within the Caribbean region. Therefore, to use terms from these places, terms that Caribbean people have neither created nor always identified with, without paying attention to their etymologies and relationship to power seems to commit a further epistemic violence. Finally, using North American or European terms that do not resonate within the region could be seen as supporting the common Caribbean belief that unconventional genders and nonheteronormative sexualities are foreign menaces that amount to “post-colonial imperialism,” as Suzanne LaFont notes in “Very Straight Sex: The Development of Sexual Morés in Jamaica” (1).

There are some indigenous terms that specifically describe unconventional genders, including: *travesti*, *mati men*, *macha*, *manroyal*, *cambiada*, et cetera. Other terms such as *masisi*, *loca*, and *battyman* are variously used to refer to people exhibiting unconventional genders, engaging in nonheterosexual sexualities, or both. Throughout this chapter I will use the term *trans* as an umbrella term for unconventional genders, regardless of whether the individuals in question have pursued hormonal or surgical body modification. This abbreviation is appropriate because these five letters are the common prefix for various words referring to those who exhibit transgressive genders in English, Spanish (for example, *transsexual*), French (for example,

transsexuel(le)s and *transgenres*), and Dutch (for example, *transgender* and *transseksueel*), the primary languages, with their creoles, of the Caribbean. *Trans* refers to a range of identities and the varieties of strategies people use to choose, inhabit, or express a gender other than that which society assigns to their body. *Trans* references the other words mentioned above while retaining difference, thus gesturing towards the similarities and the distinctions of unconventional gender experiences in the Caribbean and the metropolises that currently dominate gender and sexuality studies.

Conventional gender refers to the socially and culturally dominant correspondences between a specific biological body (typically the binary “female” or “male”), as defined by specific cultural contexts, and a set of behaviors, identities, and dispositions that are assigned to that biological body. Conventional gender is also a form of social control that depends on the oppression of other, unconventional genders. *Unconventional* gender is, therefore, any behavior, identity, or disposition that transgresses or threatens the heteropatriarchal order, including what I am calling trans genders. From this perspective, even a binary gender system implicitly acknowledges other genders—not only trans genders but genders that may exist in racial, ethnic, class, or other communities that are minority or marginal.

The Caribbean trans continuum includes, at one pole, people who feel that their gender is different than—or more complicated than—that assigned to them at birth and who want to be able to express the gender they feel rather than the one they were assigned. At the other pole are those who only occasionally exhibit an unconventional gender and only in contexts that are culturally sanctioned (such as carnival and other festivals). As will be discussed later, at this end of the spectrum, unconventional gender performances typically relate to an individual’s identity only insofar as they reinforce the individual’s conventional, heteropatriarchal gender. In between these poles are, of course, any number of behaviors and identifications, such as those who practice transvestism for erotic purposes or those who are drag/draga/travesti/travestiet performers. Of course, those at either end of this spectrum might vehemently complain about being included on a continuum with the others. Nevertheless, these very different gender performances are linked not only because they typically involve some form of transvestism but also because all are implicated in backhanded deliverance.

The reader will have noticed that I have not mentioned sexuality in relationship to the Caribbean trans continuum. Not only are gender and

sexuality not the same, they also do not always correspond as one might expect, and being located on the trans continuum does not per se indicate or rule out any particular erotic choice, though gender and sexuality are often conflated in the popular imagination. Furthermore, the complexities of trans genders can challenge conventional notions of sexuality. For instance, when Cubans Ignacio Estrada (a self-identified gay man) and Wendy Iriepa (who underwent gender reassignment surgery) married in 2011, their marriage was legal and was legally a heterosexual one. However, the couple made their nuptials very public (they were covered by the BBC News, Al Jazeera, *Huffington Post*, and many other venues) and proclaimed it “a step forward for the gay community in Cuba.”³ Indeed, trans bodies—especially those that cannot pass—literally embody gender as well as sexual transgression, even if they perceive their sexuality as heterosexual.

A final important note regarding the scope of this chapter is that it focuses on “male to female” experiences of the Caribbean trans continuum. The dearth of representations of “female to male” Caribbean trans experiences in literary texts, festival characters, and other popular sites necessitated this restriction. This absence points to the insidiousness of androcentrism and patriarchy; even in a supposedly radical realm that troubles gender, the focus remains on biological men. This absence also points to the threat that biological women who exhibit trans identities pose to the stability of patriarchy. Thus, this chapter must be read with the understanding that its argument and conclusions are based on the limited available archive. I hope that ongoing research by myself and others will uncover more Caribbean “female to male” lives and experiences and will enable scholars to analyze them as a group and in comparison with others in the trans continuum.

This chapter first addresses the poles of the Caribbean trans continuum, analyzing trans characters’ portrayals in contemporary Caribbean literature and as traditional carnival characters, respectively. At the close of the chapter, I reconsider Fanon’s (in)famous mention of Martinican trans people in *Black Skin/White Masks* (1952) and analyze the implications of several recent legal cases involving Caribbean trans individuals.⁴ The thread that connects all of these experiences and portrayals is *backhandedness*; though at first glance portrayals of Caribbean trans people may seem to be progressive, that sense is often subverted by details of the portrayals or treatment that restrict the life possibilities of all Caribbean trans people—or those of particular colors, races, and classes.

Caribbean Trans Characters in Literature

Trans individuals have appeared in several Caribbean novels, though not always as full, nuanced characters. As stated earlier, one end of the Caribbean trans continuum includes those who actively and publicly embrace a trans gender. The texts examined here all include characters who express—or want to express—a gender that differs from that assigned to them at birth. But there are also a number of Caribbean texts which explore the range of genders within this continuum, such as feminine men whose gender identity or expression differs somewhat from conventional norms but still largely corresponds to their biology; these works include Faizal Deen’s memoir *Land without Chocolate*, Achy Obejas’s *Memory Mambo*, Shani Mootoo’s *Out on Main Street*, and Hilton Als’ *The Women*. In this chapter I am focusing on the latter extreme because addressing more obviously contentious gender transgressors more readily leads to analysis of the structures and ambiguities of Caribbean binary gender. With such a small body of sociological and journalistic publications examining trans lives and experiences in the region,⁵ Caribbean fiction can provide important—though necessarily limited—insight into trans experiences in the region.

This section’s subtitle has a number of meanings embedded within it that I will briefly lay out here and to which I will return throughout the chapter. To begin, *re/presentation* refers to representations of trans people by themselves *and* by others. It also refers to revised *re/presentations* of the self as the “true” self; situations in which trans people change—override, if you will—their external presentations of their bodies to more accurately reflect their internal (their mental and emotional) selves. Finally, but no less importantly, this phrase refers to the *re/presentation* of the “other.” In Caribbean fiction, trans characters are frequently used to *re/present* conventional gender, the trans person’s *other*, as itself a myth fraught with contradictions.

In Caribbean fiction, trans characters are also typically portrayed as *delivering*, as being in service to, conventionally gendered men and women characters whose assigned biology corresponds with their gender expression. Trans people most often deliver these characters to safety, to a better understanding of themselves, and to their “true” destinies, feelings, or histories. This deliverance can occur physically, when a trans person actually delivers someone from bodily harm. It can also occur emotionally, when the trans character reveals or facilitates the recovery of memory, truth, or history, and

it is typically manifested in some form of storytelling to the trans person or to the person being revealed but ultimately also always to the reader. Trans deliverance as the midwifing of selves and stories is sometimes, especially initially, resisted or resented by the one who is being helped. It is not incidental that deliverance also has a religious connotation. As scholars such as Tinsley have noted, people with unconventional genders are often seen as having special skills, powers, insight, or access. In some circumstances, particularly in communities that practice Santería or Voodoo, this privilege gives trans people the opportunity to spiritually deliver others.

Trans individuals also deliver other individuals—and sometimes themselves or each other—in the sense of *rebirth* to a truer incarnation or a better understanding of themselves. This linking of deliverance to trans people incorporates unconventional genders into Caribbean social orders by having them literally *serve* the dominant, conventional genders in the social hierarchy. The literature thus accepts trans characters as part of Caribbean culture but does so in a backhanded maneuver that keeps them in subservient, marginal roles.

In Caribbean literature, trans characters are also typically portrayed as tortured but benevolent angels. They suffer greatly for being trans, but despite the turmoil and danger they experience in their own lives, they reach out to help others, usually someone who is secure in a socially sanctioned gender and often someone who is in less immediate and physical danger than their trans savior. On the surface, portraying trans people as having special insight and abilities to help others may seem positive—and even progressive—because it places them in a position of power and shows them using that power to benefit others. However, as I will detail below, the deliverance is backhanded because Caribbean trans characters are also consistently kept on the margins of the texts and are deprived of their individuality. In the same way, Caribbean authors reveal little about the lives of trans individuals, even while describing in detail how trans people heal or save conventionally gendered men and women, revealing to them their forgotten or buried memories, hopes, longings, and histories. As a result, Caribbean literature generally treats trans people as not fully human (or as somewhat more than human) tools in service of “normal” men and women who *are* fully human, complete with limits *and* flaws. Representative Caribbean stories of trans deliverance, and of backhanded re/presentation include Shani Mootoo’s *Cereus Blooms at Night* (1996), Michelle Cliff’s *No*

Telephone to Heaven (1987), and Mayra Santos-Febres' *Sirena Selena vestida de pena* (2000). These novels were published within fifteen years of each other—and at the beginning of the twenty-first century, at a time when trans identities were being acknowledged more in the Caribbean and elsewhere, in and outside of literature and academia.⁶

Cereus Blooms at Night

The trope of trans deliverance is obvious in Shani Mootoo's celebrated novel *Cereus Blooms at Night*. While Mootoo was raised in Trinidad, *Cereus Blooms* is set on the fictional island of Lantanacamara.⁷ Throughout the novel, Nurse Tyler, "the only Lantanacamaran man ever to have trained in the profession of nursing," tells Mala Ramchandin's life story, including her unintentional abandonment by her mother and sister, and the sexual abuse she suffers at the hands of her father (Mootoo 6). The first words of the novel are as follows:

By setting this story down, I, Tyler—that is how I am known, simply as Tyler, or if you wanted to be formal, Nurse Tyler—am placing trust in the power of the printed word to reach many people. . . . Might I add that my own intention, as the relator of this story, is not to bring notice to myself or my own plight. However, I cannot escape myself, and being a narrator who also existed on the periphery of events, I am bound to be present. I have my own laments and much to tell about myself. It is my intent, however, to refrain from inserting myself too forcefully. Forgive the lapses, for there are some, and read them with the understanding that to have erased them would have been to do the same to myself.⁸

Tyler speaks the first and last words of the novel, framing it. His task is both to announce and to efface his own presence—yet he "cannot escape" himself and, notwithstanding the niceties and apologies, *refuses* to erase himself.⁹ Indeed, he insists he is "bound"—both likely and required—to be present in the narrative. His unwillingness to erase himself from a text that will "reach many people" means that the reader cannot escape Tyler either. But it is also clear in the first pages of *Cereus Blooms* that Mala, a victim of physical and sexual abuse, a recluse, and eventually Tyler's patient, is the *true* focus of the novel. Tyler's introductory note declares that his primary purpose is as a device, as the teller, the deliverer, and the narrator of Mala's

story. And while this position entails some power, it is not enough to reveal as much about his own life as he does about his ward's.

There are other instances in the novel which remind us whose story is being prioritized. For example, after being mocked by the other nurses for feminine accessorizing and behavior, Tyler says, "I am aware of the subtleties and incremental degrees in hostility—from the tight smile to the seemingly accidental shove—and I have known the gamut. But what would be the value of laying it all out before you?"¹⁰ Tyler knows there is no value attributed to his story; while his presence facilitates the telling of Mala's story, that presence is accompanied by a backhanded maneuver that literally and metaphorically makes Tyler *stay in his place* as narrator but not join the narratives as a protagonist. The implication is that in order to relate Mala's abuse and pain, Tyler must repress his own.

The reader learns that Tyler is the only nurse willing to physically touch Mala, since the others fear her as wicked, either believing she murdered her violent father or that she is somehow contaminated by the longtime sexual abuse she suffered. But Tyler earns Mala's (and the reader's) trust as a caring, gentle nurse. He, not the other (conventionally gendered female) nurses, is willing to loosen the straps that restrain Mala when she first arrives at the home. And Tyler alone figures out that Mala refuses most of the food she is offered because she is a vegetarian. Though he was trained as a nurse and has been working at the Paradise Alms House for some time, Tyler is relegated to overseeing the upkeep and repair of the property—traditionally more "manly" activities than nursing. He is put in charge of Mala only when all others refuse to treat her. Mala comes to depend on Tyler and communicates with the world only through him.

Tyler recalls that once he realized there was some sense to be made of Mala's whispers and mutterings,

I started to jot down everything she said, no matter how erratic her train of thought appeared to be. When she saw me awaiting her next word and writing it down as soon as she uttered it, she drew nearer. I soon got the impression that she actually began to whisper in my direction, that *I had become her witness*. She spoke rapidly and with great urgency, in a low monotone, repeating herself sometimes for hours without end. There was little doubt that I was being given a dictation, albeit without punctuation marks or subject breaks.¹¹