Re/Presenting Self & Other: Trans Deliverance in Caribbean Texts

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As I have mentioned elsewhere, transvestism is a more than 100 year-old tradition in Caribbean carnivals. Characters such as the loca and the dame lorraine both of which are men in women’s dresses with padded or exaggerated breasts and buttocks, make regular, traditional appearances in the annual Festival Santiago Apóstol in Loíza Aldea, Puerto Rico and the carnival celebrations in Port-of-Spain, Trinidad, respectively.

Tracing a history of “transgender” Caribbean identities outside of carnival performances is much more difficult, though a tiny archive exists. Caribbean intellectual Frantz Fanon, not well-known for his liberal thinking regarding gender and sexuality, in his 1952 Peau noire, masques blancs (published in English in 1967 as Black Skin, White Masks), remarked in a footnote on “the existence of what are called [in Martinique] ‘men dressed like women’ or ‘godmothers’ ['Ma Commère’ in the original]. Generally, they wear shirts and skirts.” In the full quote he goes on to claim he has not observed “the overt presence of homosexuality in Martinique,” and he insists that he is “convinced that [Ma Commères] lead normal sex lives. They can take a punch like any ‘he-man’ and they are not impervious to the allures of women.” Although Fanon is consumed by the search...
for gender and sexual neuroses and pathologies, here he normalizes Martinican “men dressed like women,” while insisting that Ma Commères exhibit conventional masculinity in every way except that they often wear skirts.  

More recently, and in a different country and context, mainstream press in Trinidad and Tobago (and several international outlets) reported Jowelle De Souza’s successful court case. A Trinidadian trans woman who had a surgical sex change as a teenager, De Souza won a settlement against the Trinidadian state for unlawful arrest and police harassment and received sympathetic local press coverage after she confronted a photographer for taking pictures of her without permission. Despite these few examples, unfortunately Caribbean trans lives and histories – especially those of biological women who flout gender norms – remain largely under-examined. Though popular and scholarly documentation and analysis of Caribbean unconventional genders is rare, it is not so difficult to hear about or see areas within or on the edges of urban areas where biological men who dress and/or live as women gather – unfortunately often for prostitution (for instance in the Woodbrook area of Port-of-Spain, Trinidad). Thus the presence of Caribbean trans persons in particular areas contributes to their perceived and enforced absence in the “general” population.

It is important to address the terminology I will use throughout this chapter, and why I have made particular choices. I remain both ambivalent and conflicted about the

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on the other hand, I have known several Martinicans who became homosexuals, always passive. But this was by no means a neurotic homosexuality: For them it was a means to a livelihood, as pimping is for others.” Frantz Fanon, *Black Skins, White Masks* (New York: Grove, 1967) 180.

4 I translate the original “la plupart du temps” as most of the time, rather than “generally.” I insist on using the term Ma Commère not only because it is culturally specific, but also because in contemporary Martinique it is now an equivalent of the North American “faggot,” as “maco man” is in some parts of the Anglophone Caribbean. This complicated term and Fanon’s quote are discussed in detail in the chapter focusing on nonheteronormative sexualities.

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*. Transgender is currently defined 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 are neither transvestites nor transsexuals. But even as it is defined rather generally, it is used rather specifically. Increasingly, individuals in the USA who self-identify as transgender are utilizing surgery and hormones to alter their biology. But in the Caribbean – and in most of the rest of the world – such methods are rarely available, particularly for the express purpose of sex adjustment. Similarly, I have chosen not to use the term *transsexual* because it is still understood in relationship to surgical manipulation of the body.

The history of the term transgender is further problematic for its application within the Caribbean because North Americans and Europeans have historically and continue to define Caribbeanness and especially Caribbean genders and sexualities in derogatory ways. Furthermore, since North American and Europe constitute dominant world powers, their descriptions and definitions of Caribbean sexuality are more resonant than those coming from within the region. Therefore to use terms from these places that Caribbeans have neither created nor identified with, without attention to their

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6 See, for instance, Viviane K. Namaste’s *Invisible Lives: The Erasure of Transsexual and Transgendered People*.

7 Such definitions have named Caribbean women as masculine, vulgar, and uncouth and Caribbean men variously as hyper-masculine or under-masculine (often depending on their race), and as unintelligent. See, for instance, Suzanne LaFont, “Very Straight Sex: The Development of Sexual Morés in Jamaica,” *Journal of Colonialism and Colonial History* 2.3 (2001).
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 prevalent Caribbean belief that unconventional genders and nonheteronormative sexualities are foreign diseases or menaces inflicted on Caribbean states.  

Throughout this essay I will use “trans” as a prefix for man, woman, people, etc. This abbreviation is appropriate because these five letters are the common prefix for various words referring to those who exhibit transgressive gender in English, Spanish (e.g. transsexual), and French (e.g. transsexuel(le)s and transgenres), the primary languages (with their creoles) of the Caribbean. *Trans* refers to a broad identity that includes 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 and gesturing towards the similarities and the differences of unconventional gender experiences in the Caribbean and the metropoles that currently dominate gender and sexuality studies.

Conventional gender refers to the socially and culturally dominant correspondences between a specific biological body (often “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 anything that contradicts or threatens this order, including what I am calling trans genders.) Thus even a binary gender system implicitly

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8 For instance, “Many Jamaicans believe that the international pressure to liberalize their sexual mores is a form of post-colonial imperialism.” LaFont 1.
acknowledges other genders – not only trans genders, but genders that may exist in racial, ethnic, class, or other communities that are minority or marginal.

As this chapter will demonstrate, in Caribbean contexts trans genders can serve as a kind of bridge to conventional gender – to make someone who is “abnormal” and challenges social order “normal” and complicit with the social order. We will also see how trans Caribbean genders can point the way to the validation and normalization of multiple genders, much as Fanon normalizes Ma Commères as part of Martinican culture and society.

With such a small body of sociological and journalistic texts examining trans lives and experiences in the region, Caribbean fiction can provide important (though necessarily limited) insight into trans experiences in the region. Gender identities can be considered a continuum, with on one end those who conform to a gender identity and expression that corresponds to society’s expectations of someone with their biological sex. On the other end are those who actively and publicly embrace a gender identity or expression that differs from the one attributed to their assigned biological sex. The texts examined in this chapter all include characters who live, or want to live expressing 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

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9 A Jamaican study notes that “transgendered individuals (especially men to women) maintain a very low public profile due to the overwhelmingly negative attitudes toward them, and are therefore not commonly subject to public scrutiny. While cases of abuse do occur, no personal statements exist to document them.” Anthony Hron, Philip Dayle, Ian McKnight, Robert Carr, “Report on Persecution of Sexual Minorities in Jamaica.” 24 May 2003, <http://www.laccaso.org/pdfs/impunidad_jamaica_glbtpdf>. Similarly, a study on sexuality in Puerto Rico states that “As in other parts of the world, transvestites and transsexuals do exist in Puerto Rican society. However, scientific data on the extent of this population and its practices are unavailable.” The missing voices and analysis of trans lives in such studies points to their vulnerability and marginality, as well as to the low priority many sexual minority advocates place on their well-being. Luis Montesinos and Juan Preciado, “Puerto Rico (Estado Libre Asociado de Puerto Rico),” The International Encyclopedia of Sexuality, ed. Robert T. Francoeur. (New York: The Continuum Publishing Company, 2001). Oct 2005 <http://www2.hu-berlin.de/sexology/IES/index.html> This article is the only one in the International Encyclopedia about a Caribbean country.
“masculine women” and “feminine men” whose gender identity or expression differ somewhat from conventional norms, but still largely correspond to their biology. In this essay I am focusing on the latter extreme because addressing more obviously contentious gender transgressors more readily leads to analysis of the strictures and ambiguities of Caribbean binary gender.

Re/Presentation and Deliverance

This chapter’s title has a number of meanings embedded within it which I will briefly lay out here and will return to throughout the essay. To begin, “re/presenting self and other” refers to representations of trans people by themselves and by others. It also refers to re/presentations of the self as the “true” self, in which trans people change – override, if you will – their external presentations of their bodies to more accurately reflect their internal (mental and emotional) selves. Finally, but no less importantly, this phrase refers to re/presenting 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 typically portrayed as delivering, 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 can occur when a trans person physically delivers someone from harm. Emotional deliverance occurs when the trans character reveals or facilitates

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10 Such texts include Faizal Deen’s *Land Without Chocolate*, Achy Obejas’ *Memory Mambo*, Shani Mootoo’s “Out on Main Street,” and Hilton Als’ *The Women.*
the recovery of memory, truth, or history. Emotional deliverance 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. *Deliverance* also, of course, has a religious or spiritual connotation. In this sense it typically refers to bringing a person from a state of unholiness or lack of grace or enlightenment into the opposite state. Trans deliverance or the midwifing of selves and stories is sometimes, especially initially, resisted or resented by the one who is being helped.

Trans characters are typically portrayed in Caribbean literature as tortured but benevolent angels. They suffer greatly for being trans, but despite the turmoil and peril of their own lives, reach out to help someone else, someone who is usually secure in a socially sanctioned gender, and who often is in less immediate and material danger than their trans savior. On the surface portraying trans people as having special insight and ability to help other people may seem positive and even progressive because it places them in a position of power and shows them using that power to benefit other people. But these portrayals are also problematic because Caribbean trans characters are also consistently kept on the margins of the texts and deprived of their individuality.

In the same way, Caribbean authors describe trans people capable of healing or saving men and women characters of conventional gender, and revealing to them their forgotten or buried memories, hopes, longings, and histories without revealing much about the lives of trans individuals. As a result, Caribbean literature generally treats trans people as not fully human (or somewhat more than human) tools in service of “normal” men and women who are fully human, complete with limits and flaws.
Trans individuals also deliver other individuals – and sometimes themselves or each other – in the sense of rebirth, that is to a more true 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 accepts trans characters as part of Caribbean culture, but keeps them in subservient, marginal roles. Representative Caribbean stories of trans deliverance, and of re/presenting the self and other, include Mayra Santos Febres' *Sirena selena vestida de pena*, Michelle Cliff’s *No Telephone to Heaven*, Shani Mootoo’s *Cereus Blooms at Night*, and Severo Sarduy’s *Cobra*. With the exception of *Cobra*, these novels were published within 15 years of each other – and of the beginning of the 21st century, at a time when trans identities were being acknowledged more in the Caribbean and elsewhere, in and outside of literature and academia.\(^{11}\)

Researching this topic, I have been surprised and frustrated at the almost complete lack of portrayals of and information about Caribbean trans individuals who are assigned a female biology but embrace a male gender. This absence does not, of course, mean that no such persons exist within the region. In Jamaica, for instance, the term “man royal” refers specifically to biological women who exhibit masculinity.\(^ {12}\) Nevertheless, there is a popular belief, in the Caribbean and elsewhere, that biological men who exhibit

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\(^{11}\) These times were marked by, for instance, the increased addition of a “T” for transgender to the acronyms for “gay and lesbian” organizations and movements, the DeSouza case, the founding of JFLAG (the Jamaican Forum for Lesbians, All-Sexuals, and Gays), and the increased policing of nonheterosexual gender and sexuality in the Caribbean (see M. Jacqui Alexander’s “Erotic Autonomy as a Politics of Decolonization: Feminism, Tourism, and the State in the Bahamas” in *Pedagogies of Crossing* (Durham: Duke UP, 2005).

\(^{12}\) Importantly, regardless of their sexual practices. Alexander points to this term as a possible “third space” for gender in Jamaica (Alexander 339).
unconventional gender are more policed than biological women who flout gender expectations and stereotypes.

Patricia Powell’s novel *The Pagoda* does have as its protagonist Lowe, a biological woman who lives much of the time as a man. But Lowe’s gender is constantly manipulated by others through force. Lowe is raised as a boy, later sold as a wife, escapes dressed as a man, is forced to live as male under threats of becoming a prostitute, and later a lover tries to coerce Lowe into presenting a female gender. The novel is centered around Lowe’s attempt to discover the self: who Lowe is and wants to be. While the characters in other texts choose to exhibit a trans identity even under threat of violence or rejection, Lowe is manipulated and sometimes violently forced *into* a trans identity. The difference is important; given the aforementioned belief that unconventional genders are not indigenous to the region, this essay focuses on Caribbean characters whose motivations for assuming a trans identities are less coerced.

The absence of literary and scholarly material on women who flout their assigned gender means that such actions have been policed into silence. This silence points to the insidiousness of androcentrism and patriarchy; even in a supposedly radical realm that troubles gender, the focus remains on biological men. This silence also points to the potential of biological women who exhibit trans identities to destabilize patriarchy. Thus this essay must be read with the understanding that its argument and conclusions are based on the limited available materials.

*Bound to be present*
The trope of trans deliverance is most 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 Lantanacamara. Through 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. 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. (4)*

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. 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 Ramchandin, victim of physical and sexual abuse, recluse, and eventually Tyler’s patient,

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13 *Lantana camara* is the scientific name of a flowering shrub (not the cactus cereus) indigenous to some tropical areas; in Trinidad it is sometimes called white sage. The leaves change color as they age and the plant can spread widely, causing some to consider it a pest.


15 The original is completely italicized; here the lack of italics points to my emphasis.

16 Throughout this chapter I will use the same pronouns to refer to characters that the characters use to refer to themselves.
is the *true* focus of the novel. Tyler’s introductory note declares that his primary purpose is as a device, the teller, the deliverer, 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 Mala.

There are other instances which remind us whose story is 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?” (15). There is no value attributed to his story – while his presence facilitates Mala’s story, he must literally and metaphorically *stay in his place* as narrator but not protagonist. The implication is that in order to relate Mala’s abuse and pain, he 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. 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 she refuses most of the food she is offered because she is a vegetarian. Though he has been working at the Paradise Alms House for some time, Tyler was relegated to upkeep and repair of the property – 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 her 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. (99-100, emphasis added).

Tyler has made Mala’s mutterings readable to us. He is clearly chosen to tell her story, not only by circumstances, but also by the true protagonist – Mala – herself. Mala and the reader must choose to trust or question Tyler’s account and his editing of her life.

Thus, notwithstanding numerous asides throughout the novel, the emphasis remains on Mala’s story. We learn little of Tyler’s family or childhood, outside of a few mentions of his grandmothers, and we learn even fewer details about other aspects of his life before he began working at the Alms House, save that he has never had a romantic or sexual encounter “outside the realm of [his] fertile imagination” (105). This lack of information about his personal history and aspirations for his future – except, significantly, “to be – and be treated as – nothing more than ordinary,” serves to keep him just a bit more than an outline, in comparison to Mala’s very (literally and metaphorically) fleshed out story (22). Throughout, Tyler remains a sketch of a character; we know little about him, and most of what the reader does learn relates to his gender and sexual identities, while he relates – delivers – Mala’s life in great detail.

Tyler is identified as a man by himself and others and wears men’s clothes – albeit often with the “feminine” flairs of scarves or perfume – for most of the novel. Yet Mootoo makes it clear that Tyler is a trans person, that neither his gender identity nor,
increasingly, his gender expression fit the conventional Lantanacamaran expectations of manhood and masculinity. Our first hint is the gender transgression of his career choice – the emphasis on his being “the only Lantanacamaran man ever to have trained in the profession of nursing” (6). Also early in the novel and in Tyler’s work at the home, he notices “The home’s regular yardboy, Toby, stood watching from afar, sucking his teeth and shaking his head and spitting low curses in my direction” (7). Tyler is himself aware of his “unusual femininity” and his attraction to men, and laments what he considers to be his condition – “neither properly man nor woman but some in-between, unnamed thing” (71). His disappointment in his feminine attributes is directly linked to the fact that when these traits are not the source of outright hostility, they are only grudgingly accepted. It is this lack of acceptance that encourages his studies abroad, so that he would “be somewhere where my ‘perversion,’ which I tried diligently as I could to shake, might either be invisible or of no consequence to people to whom my foreignness would be strange” (47-8). He assumes both that his unconventional gender and desire will be more accepted in the colonial power (in *Cereus Blooms*, named the Shivering Northern Wetlands) and that any racism or xenophobia there would be preferable to heterosexism in the Caribbean. Yet while he does not describe discrimination of any kind abroad, he still returns to Lantanacamara, presumably preferring home to a foreign land and/or gender and sexuality-based oppression to racism and ethnocentrism (perhaps combined with heterosexism). Even so, until caring for Mala, Tyler is isolated, lonely, and depressed.

Nursing profession and caring demeanor aside, it is precisely Tyler’s “condition” as a trans person that connects him with Mala, who has long been ostracized in her
community. Tyler describes their affinity after observing the other nurses’ hostility towards Mala: “I fancy that she and I shared a common reception from the rest of the world” (19-20). A reception that treats both of them as morally aberrant, he for his femininity, she for the stigma of her father’s incest and her mother’s lesbian affair. Later he continues “we had found our own ways and fortified ourselves against the rest of the world … [he had a] shared queerness with Miss Ramchandin” (48).

Otoh, son of Mala’s childhood friend and onetime love, is the other trans character in *Cereus Blooms* and the only biologically female trans character in the texts discussed here. Otoh also has a role in delivering Mala, albeit to physical safety and not emotional stability. He is born biologically female, but from childhood continuously presents as male such that everyone, including his parents, believes him to be or treats him as a biological male. Otoh’s mother Elsie “fully expected that he (she) would outgrow the foolishness soon enough. But the child walked and ran and dressed and talked and tumbled and all but relieved himself so much like a boy that Elsie soon apparently forgot that she had ever given birth to a girl. And the father…seemed not to remember that he had once fathered one” (110). Indeed, Otoh is able to pass as a man to such an extent that he lies shirtless with girlfriends (he has “muscled breasts”) and the nurse and doctor who delivered him “on seeing him later, marveled at their carelessness in having declared him a girl” (110). Unlike Tyler, Otoh is sure of and confident in his gender identity, a reality that is surely due to his parents’ support, his physical ability to pass as a man, and his community’s deliberate amnesia and more or less willful ignorance of his biological sex.
Like Tyler, Otoh feels an affinity to Mala, whom he knows of long before her arrival in the home. He explains his desire to befriend her by saying “I felt as though she and I had things in common. She had secrets and I had secrets. Somehow I wanted to go there and take all my clothes off and say, ‘Look! See? See all this? I am different! You can trust me, and I am showing you that you are the one person I will trust” (124, emphasis in original). Once, when he approaches Mala at her home, Otoh wears a dress for the first time in his adult life – again out of a desire to reveal his secrets, himself, to this woman. On his next attempt to see her, he arrives dressed as his father, and sets off the chain of events that lead to Mala’s arrival at the home.

Later, Tyler and Otoh’s deliverance of Mala, saving her from mistreatment, is revealed as inadvertently also benefiting themselves. Mala is the catalyst for Tyler to begin wearing women’s clothes; she steals a nurse’s uniform and some stockings for him to wear. Significantly, as he puts on the dress, his body felt as though it was changing. He explains, “It was as though I had suddenly become plump and less rigid. My behind felt fleshy and rounded. I had thighs, a small mound of belly, rounded full breasts and a cavernous tunnel singing between my legs. I felt more weak than excited but I was certainly excited by the possibilities trembling inside me…” (77). When his patient and friend does not acknowledge his transformation, Tyler is disappointed until he realizes that “the reason Miss Ramchandin paid me no attention was that, to her mind, the outfit was not something to either congratulate or scorn – it simply was. She was not one to manacle nature, and I sensed that she was permitting mine its freedom” (77). At the end of this section he remarks, “I had never felt so extremely ordinary, and I quite loved it” (78, emphasis added). The donning of the dress both transforms him and feels extremely
ordinary – in delivering Mala he enabled her to deliver him to a fuller expression of not only his gender, but himself.

Linking Tyler and Otoh to Mala may endear the trans characters to the reader, since Mala is an innocent victim and a very sympathetic character. Unfortunately, this link between trans individuals and incest survivor also encourages reading unconventional genders as abnormal – Tyler tells the reader that “it was a long time before I could differentiate between his [Mala’s father’s] perversion and what others called mine” (47-8). The implication is that Mala’s father is responsible for her victimization, and that some unnatural force, or perhaps the devil or Tyler himself is responsible for his unconventional gender. And in the end, if Mala is saved by the two trans people, they are in a sense saved from themselves by falling in love with each other, and thus conforming to heteronormativity, both in biological gender and in gender expression.

_Nuh mus’ give dem what dem expect?_

Like Tyler and Otoh in _Cereus Blooms at Night_, Harriet’s function in _No Telephone to Heaven_ is primarily to deliver the protagonist, Clare, to a deeper sense of herself, of Jamaica, and of her role in the country. Known as Harry/Harriet for most of the novel, this trans character is first introduced as the “medical officer” for a group of revolutionaries that includes Clare. Through flashbacks we learn that Clare’s introduction to Harry/Harriet is one of caretaking – Harry/Harriet holds and soothes Clare when the latter becomes sick after drinking too much at a party.

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18 “Harry/Harriet” is a name the character uses to refer to the self until choosing “she” and “Harriet.” Thus I will use Harriet when referring to the character after her choice and Harry/Harriet when referring to her before that choice is made.
But Harriet’s more important deliverance of Clare – who feels caught between black and white racial identities – is to greater knowledge of the plight of poor Jamaicans, to Clare’s personal history and to the violent history of the island. Harriet constantly encourages Clare to return to Jamaica from the USA and Europe, and is the one who takes the latter to her childhood home and to the revolutionary guerillas.

We learn even less about Harriet than we do about Otoh and Tyler. The child of a wealthy white Jamaican and his dark maid, Harriet is raised by her father and his wife. While at 10 he is raped by a white policeman, Harry/Harriet is adamant that the rape “did not make me the way I am. No, darling, I was born this way, that I know. Not just sun, but sun and moon” (Cliff 128). As an adult, and before he chooses to live completely as a woman, Harry/Harriet openly dresses as a woman in his obviously male body – “Harry/Harriet in his/her Pucci bikini, his/her furry chest getting the odd stare…panties cradling his cock and balls” (Cliff 89 & 21). He also performs a hyperbolized femininity, drawing laughter from those around him. As Harry/Harriet and Clare grow close, she wonders aloud why Harry/Harriet would make such a scene. He explains “is nuh what dem expect from me? Nuh mus’ give dem what dem expect? Battyman trash. No harm. Our people kind of narrow, poor souls. Foolish sometimes. Cyaan understand the likes of me” (Cliff 128).

As in Cereus Blooms, the trans character and the protagonist are emotionally linked. But in No Telephone, Harriet functions somewhat as an older, wiser sister who teaches Clare about the socioeconomic realities of her country and helps her to come to

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19 Race is the most prominent theme in the novel; Harriet’s father, like Clare and her father, have black ancestors but are considered white in Jamaica because of their very fair skin. Though they share a similar racial ancestry, Harriet displays no complex about her racial identity; she acknowledges the privileges her father’s skin and money provide, but identifies with darker and poorer Jamaicans.
terms with her mixed-race identity. Clare stumbles around the world, sometimes passing for white, sometimes embracing her blackness. All the while Harry/Harriet writes to her, imploring her to return to Jamaica and fight for justice there. One letter is signed “I find myself closer to my choice, girlfriend. How about you? Jamaica needs her children…Love & kisses, H/H” (Cliff 140).

Eventually, Harry/Harriet – now simply Harriet, succeeds. Clare arrives heartbroken and ill from a miscarriage; Harriet, now a nurse, delivers her friend back to physical and emotional health. The two travel together to the country farm passed down to Clare. Harriet midwifes Clare’s first rebirth in a rural creek as a repatriated Jamaican, and her second as a militant revolutionary. Throughout the novel, Harriet listens to Clare’s stories and fears and nurtures and encourages her. Clare, though, is too self-involved to reciprocate this support or to ask Harriet anything about her life, and appreciates her friend’s attentions and intentions only slightly more than she resents them. When she returns to Jamaica, Clare calls Harriet “Harry” and is corrected: “Harriet, now, girlfriend…finally.” The conventionally-gendered woman asks, “’Then you have [had the surgery] done?’ ‘No, man. Cyaan afford it. Maybe when de revolution come…but the choice is mine, man, is made. Harriet live and Harry be no more… But, you know, darling, castration ain’t de main t’ing…not a-tall, a-tall’” (Cliff 168). Harriet has resolved her issues and her happiness without Clare’s help or support, and we do not know enough about Harriet to know whether anyone else supported her. In the end Harriet is a far more sympathetic character than Clare. But like other Caribbean trans characters, she is made to work hard and to deliver a non-trans person for that distinction, in the end remaining a good, but largely unknown character.
Mayra Santos Febres’ *Sirena Selena vestida de pena* swings between portraying trans characters – here the main characters in the novel – as individuals struggling to live the lives they want and as stereotypically mythical beings who deliver others by revealing their deepest desires. The Spanish title of the book (translated into English merely as *Sirena Selena*) can be read as Sirena Selena, dressed in sorrow or trouble. The title character is at once dressed in, caused pain by other characters’ actions and is inherently clothed in trouble because, dressed as a travesti she is given trouble by other people and is treated as a travesty.

Santos Febres is the only author discussed here who places well-developed trans characters at the center of a novel. “La Martha,” Selena’s most recent mentor, is introduced to the reader as “a real lady” (“toda una señora”), albeit one who has breast implants and takes hormones to make her “fabulous.” This notion of “real” can simultaneously be read as the narrator’s embrace of trans identities and genders as true and not approximations, and as the specific embrace of trans people who can pass and therefore support conventional genders and existing social hierarchies. This tension highlights the problematics of gender authenticity, which I will address later in this chapter.

If Martha is already real, “La Sirena” is preparing to go through the world and specifically New York City “as who he really is” (Santos-Febres 3). What Selena believes to be her truth is bound up not only in gender, but also in a desire to leave Puerto Rico, and in financial if not class status. She repeats to herself: “I’m not about to live as

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a mere kept woman. And I’m never, never going back to the streets” (Santos-Febres 47). Sirena Selena wants to be a woman, but specifically a beautiful, wealthy, powerful woman. It is an understandable desire for someone who has lived on the streets, who has collected cans and has prostituted herself to survive.

But while Serena is content to dress as a woman, Martha also strives to fully “reconcile herself with her own body” by having gender reassignment surgery. Without it she is plagued with anxiety that outside of el ambiente (the gay scene) she will be exposed as “an imposter,” that someone might shout “Look at that. That is not a woman” (Santos-Febres 13, 10). She thinks to herself: “Having the operation isn’t the same as dressing up – this was something she knew deep within herself. To be able to take off her clothes and see herself, finally, from the waist below the same as from above the waist, with tits and candy. Together. To finally be able to rest in a single body” (Santos-Febres 10-11). Though Martha describes the desired operation first in terms of her own emotional well-being, the “rest” she refers to also implies a freedom from fear of exposure and physical violence in a society hostile to trans people. After the operation, she continues, “There would be no more dreams in the middle of the night of sleeping naked in a circus tent while everyone paid to look at her, the main attraction, chained to a pink post adorned with Christmas garland” (Santos-Febres 11). The understandable goal of nearly all the trans characters in Sirena Selena is to pass, to leave the maligned, marginal position of draga and travesti and become toda una señora. Martha’s success in passing is, however, rare; other characters are beaten by the police, harassed at airports, and often dress as men if they need to go outside of the areas where they live and work.
But even though the harsh realities of life for trans people are referred to throughout *Sirena Selena*, there is not much more detail regarding their internal lives than what was described above. Instead, much ink is spent portraying trans individuals – especially, but not only Sirena Selena – as mythical beings. This starts with the very beginning of the novel.

“Coconut shell, melancholy and restless, from the gods you came, sweet Selena, succulent siren of the glistening beaches; confess beneath the spotlight, *lunatica*. You know the desires unleashed by urban nights. You are the memory of distant orgasms reduced to recording sessions. You and your seven soulless braids like a *selenita* bird, like a radiant bird with your insolent magnetism. You are who you are, Sirena Selena…and you emerge from your paper moon to sing the old songs of Lucy Favary, Sylvia Rexach, la Lupe, sybarite, dressed and adored by those who worship your face…” (Santos-Febres 1)

The phrase “from the gods you came,” implies a polytheistic myth, whether from Santería, Ancient Greece, or the generic gods of generic myths. Similarly, the statement “You know the desires” points to an omniscient knowing attributed to the supernatural, and to a carnal knowing – she knows the urban nights because she worked them as a prostitute.

*Sirena Selena* is viewed as mythical because of her voice, the body that it comes from, and because of the affects this has on those who hear her. The narrator reveals that “So many people had told [Selena] so many things about her voice,” praising its abilities to reveal the listeners’ desires, even as Sirena herself only wants to use it to escape reality for a while, and to escape poverty permanently. Other trans individuals believe her voice sings their pain; they “never tire of telling her how a trickle of tarnished melancholy flows from the center of her chest, but it was always fresh, as old and as fresh as the perennial pain of love on the face of the earth” (Santos-Febres 5). An admirer sighs “Your voice smells like honey. Your mouth is a piece of fruit,” conflating her voice and...
body as he tries to embrace her (Santos-Febres 5). And Hugo Graubel, who decides to fall in love with her and is willing to pay for the privilege, believes Sirena Selena is a “being of fantasy,” “a magic well,” and the narrator proclaims that Sirena Selena looks “perfect to everyone who drank in her passion” (Santos-Febres 45, 83, 168). All of these fans and clients objectify Sirena Selena and her voice for their own purposes.

Solange, Señora Graubel, is afraid Sirena Selena is “bewitching” her husband, and another listener tells Solange after a performance, “that fabulous singer, Solange, she really seems to be from another world” (Santos-Febres 103, 173). Indeed, even Solange, who recognizes Sirena Selena as her rival for Hugo’s love and attention, is affected by the young trans singer, and we can see in their relationship yet another example of trans deliverance.

Solange calls Selena a “freak,” a “monster,” and an “animal,” but even full of hate she cannot escape the power of Selena’s voice (Santos-Febres 127, 135). The magnate’s wife “Doesn’t want to remember, but can’t help feeling again how that voice caressed her soul, hypnotizing her too, transporting herself to a timeless place where only her dreams existed …[inviting her] to give in to the weight of her own desires” (Santos-Febres 171). By reminding the older woman of her dreams and longings, Selena also reminds Solange why she has those dreams. While she was still a child, Solange’s father drank and gambled the family into poverty, and virtually sells his daughter to the wealthy Graubels’ effeminate son. Solange must learn the manners of aristocracy, but “Now she is a señora for real. Now she has a house and forks and calla lilies and heirs. She has property in her name, has invested in jewels that she doesn’t wear” (Santos-Febres 129). And after she has settled into this role Sirena Selena comes along, reminding her “You can never be
what you want to be, not even with your elegant hairdos, or with the croissants you eat in the morning” and “you are rich but you suffer, there are memories embedded in your soul that you can’t shake” (Santos-Febres 133). Sirena Selena delivers people to a deeper sense of self, but one that is often full of painful memories and harsh truths.

While everyone else who hears Sirena Selena is similarly delivered to a transcendent, if disturbing emotional state, only Solange resents it so strongly. What I call deliverance she calls stealing – she believes Sirena Selena “was stealing their sense of peace, stealing the safety her guests had come to the party with” (Santos-Febres 172). These perspectives, though, are not opposite; by “stealing” some guests’ sense of peace and safety, Selena also gives back to them, delivers them to their greatest buried or forgotten desires. And it is precisely in order to be delivered to his utmost desire that Hugo so single-mindedly pursues Sirena Selena.

First introduced as a wealthy businessman, Hugo’s ambivalent sexuality is revealed later. While he can purchase any indulgence – alcohol, drugs, “sleeping with seven thousand mulatas...in the Turkish baths, bridges, and alleys of foreign countries” – he still seeks and fears complete sexual abandonment and fulfillment – “the terror of his body” (Santos-Febres 106). Although Hugo has “never given it to a man,” in Sirena Selena’s body and song he sees his opportunity (Santos-Febres 82). Several times he repeats to himself and to Sirena Selena, “I will love you, Selena, as I have always wanted to love a woman” (Santos-Febres 44). Hugo is “curious” about homosexual sex, and about the “muchachito who knew exactly how to convert himself into the living image of desire, into the woman of his dreams, into the impossible” (Santos-Febres 83). But the deepest source of his attraction is that he identifies with Sirena Selena and her songs; “He
saw Selena…dressed in her anger and her pain, just as he was dressed in his” and he believes that she identifies with him, that she can love him as he wants to love her (Santos-Febres 137).

This, in fact, is the secret of Selena’s voice; that it moves people in every possible human condition to remember old and forbidden desires, “distant orgasms,” “old hatreds,” “lost causes,” (Santos-Febres 1, 134, 164). Ironically, Selena discovers her gift by accident, trying to surpass fear of returning to prostitution after being raped and badly beaten by a “client.” While the client is sucking her penis, Selena – then living as a male “rent boy” called by his given name, Sirenito – sings not because he likes his voice or the boleros, but because they remind him of his abuela, in whose presence the young Sirenito felt safety and love. He soon learns that while his voice delivers him to emotional safety, because of its affect on others it can also bring him money and the marginal physical and financial security that cash can provide. Transforming himself into Sirena Selena, she knows that “Her voice is the only thing she has that can get her anywhere in life” (Santos-Febres 6). After Sirena Selena’s performances, her audiences mourn repressed sorrows and abandon themselves to forbidden passions. Sirena Selena is the agent of their revelations, but once they have been delivered to a heightened emotional state, most of them forget the “otherworldly” singer. They remain consumed with themselves, and Sirena Selena must search for another audience to pay her to deliver them.

*What good is it to be queen of the Lyrical Theater of Dolls...if at the sight of my feet men run away?*

Any text dealing with unconventional genders in the Caribbean must contend with Severo Sarduy, whose oeuvre repeatedly – directly and indirectly – addresses
Sarduy’s work is steeped in surrealism and his own fantastic sense of humor. It self-consciously rejects traditional narrative, and one scholar writes that “it is impossible to ‘describe’ a text like [Cobra] without betraying it, but this…is also the point.” As such, it operates on a different plane from and poses different challenges (and nets different rewards) than the largely realist fiction discussed so far.

I will take one example from this complex novel. In the first sections of Cobra the main characters are described as transvestite performers living in a brothel-cum-palace run by “the Madam.” While gender is not often explicitly discussed in Cobra, bodies often are. The novel’s first major storyline is that Cobra, “queen of the Lyrical Theater of Dolls” and those around her are obsessed with reducing the size of her feet, thereby making her more beautiful. Cobra and the Madam apply poultices, create potions for Cobra to drink, and consult doctors, all to no avail. Cobra’s single-minded desire for smaller feet is not unlike Martha’s desire for sex-change surgery and Solange’s yearning to belong among the upper class. These obsessions can, of course, be seen as common and generic dissatisfaction with one’s human condition. But they are also a metaphor for trans identities. Large feet are not only a stereotypically male attribute, they are also popularly linked to large penises, to hypermasculinity, of which the trans and coquettish Cobra would understandably want to rid herself.

Given Sarduy’s writing style, readers may not be surprised that his portrayal of the deliverance trope flips what we have seen in more realistic texts. Instead of a trans

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21 I will refrain from discussing Sarduy’s essays here, since they focus on drag performance – on gender performances not meant to pass, not meant to be everyday, meant to be spectacle, to entertain and draw laughs. For an insightful reading of transvestism in Sarduy’s work, see Ben Sifuentes-Jáuregui’s Transvestism, Masculinity, and Latin American Literature: Genders Share Flesh.
character delivering a non-trans person to a transformative state of being, *Cobra* shows trans and non-trans people making great efforts to deliver the title character to an “improved” self. Sarduy’s work is useful in providing a counterpart in style and content to other Caribbean texts with trans characters. As a counterpoint, though, his writing underscores the more usual portrayals of trans people in Caribbean fiction texts as in service of the personal revelations of men and women whose assigned sex and gender correspond.

**Playing with transgressive gender**

My examination of trans deliverance can be compared to Toni Morrison’s objective in *Playing in the Dark*, which she describes, in part, as exploring “the way black people ignite critical moments of discovery or change or emphasis in literature not written by them.”

Clearly, I am interested in how trans characters are portrayed in and used as catalysts in Caribbean literature, but I am less interested in (though only slightly less concerned about) the authors’ personal identity than Morrison for two reasons. First, I do not believe that the writers’ identity *necessarily* leads to a reductive portrayal of trans people. Secondly, less than a handful of texts portraying Caribbean trans people were written by those who publicly identify as trans, in part because gender identity is often neither as readily apparent nor as readily discussed as race.

Indeed, it is remarkable how much the trope-heavy portrayals of trans people in Caribbean literature are similar to those of black people in US texts. Morrison writes that

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25 Sarduy, who describes an experience of transvestism in the first person in *Written on the Body* is, if we can assume that the “I” is in fact him, the prominent exception. The extreme dearth of publicly self-identified unconventionally gendered Caribbean people is a concern because it points to the continuing imperative to secrecy for such persons and the social and cultural realities that require such imperatives.
“…black or colored people and symbolic figurations of blackness are markers for the benevolent and the wicked; the spiritual…and the voluptuous; of ‘sinful’ but delicious sensuality coupled with demands for purity and restraint” (Morrison ix). We have seen in *Sirena Selena, Cereus Blooms at Night, No Telephone to Heaven*, and *Cobra* the mythical, and in *Sirena Selena, Harriet*, and *Otoh* how myth is combined with “wickedness” and forbidden, but desired, sexuality. A significant difference between these collections of texts, though, is that the Caribbean ones do not encourage restraint, but instead giving in to the desire, the “sin,” the fear and the pleasure. They imply that relationships with trans people are a way – if not the way – to discovering one’s own “true” self, and that after emotional (usually not sexual) involvement with a trans person, “regular” people can go on to lead more self-aware, more truthful, and sometimes better gender-normative lives.

Another area in which the texts I analyze and the ones discussed in *Playing in the Dark* intersect is in the recurrence of nurses within them. Tyler and Harriet’s medical careers concretize their presence in the texts as metaphorical and emotional nurses. They deliver their charges back to reality, nurse them to health and/or understanding, and then deliver their stories to us. *Sirena Selena* can also be seen as a “nurse” – albeit a sadistic one – fulfilling a similar function, but bringing her clients, her “patients” to knowledge via her singing and the pleasure and pain it causes. Of course, just as caretaking in general is a stereotypically female trait, nursing is itself a feminized and predominantly female profession. As such “women’s work,” it is often an undervalued, thankless job. Morrison writes about black nurses in white American texts,

> And if you are bent on dramatic gestures of self-reliance, eager to prove that you can go it alone (without complaining), a nurse who chooses or is...
paid to take care of you does not violate your view of yourself as a brave, silent sufferer. Needfulness does not enter the picture; asking for help is always out of the question, and the benefits that derive from the attentive, expert care do not incur emotional debt. (Morrison 81)

In other words, because the caretaker is of a socially inferior status, the “patient” is not required to emotionally repay, or even acknowledge the service performed. This is certainly the case in No Telephone, in which Clare resents Harriet’s caretaking, and in Sirena Selena, in which cash and material goods are considered payment enough. Only in Cereus Blooms does a mutually loving and caring relationship derive from a trans person’s deliverance of other individuals.

In Cereus and No Telephone, trans characters are central to the narration and plot, respectively, but are kept in the margins of the novels as minor characters. In short, even when they are telling the story, trans people do not get to tell their own story. But in their absence, a trace of trans presence remains, looming.26 Large and small details of conventionally-gendered lives which are mater-of-factly presented remain, for trans characters, hidden. Readers often do not know who trans people love, who they desire, or what they think and dream of besides living unmolested in the external expression of their internal gender. In No Telephone, Harry/Harriet explains a self-ridiculing public performance by saying “Nuh mus’ give dem what dem expect?” (Cliff 128).

Unfortunately, avid readers of Caribbean literature will find that they can expect trans characters to be mere sketches, devices used to flesh out and deliver conventionally-gendered protagonists. The problem is not that individual authors choose to create trans characters in supporting roles. What concerns me is that collectively Caribbean authors

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26 Just as the absence of biologically female trans characters looms large in Caribbean literature and studies.
create trans characters who serve conventionally-gendered men and women without themselves being portrayed as full human beings.

While I am tempted to applaud the mere presence of positive Caribbean characters in the region’s literature, I am also moved to criticize the creation of an archetypical, biologically male trans caretaker, an outline of a character who delivers the true protagonists to safety or knowledge and is then pushed back into the shadows. This literary treatment of trans individuals mirrors their portrayal in popular culture. Transvestite carnival characters mentioned at the start of this article appear – and are sanctioned – only once a year, and then for the entertainment of ostensibly “real” men and women. At other times trans people are largely ignored, as long as they are invisible, either because they remain in areas well-known as locales for drag performers, trans prostitutes, nonheteronormative living, or, less often, because they can pass for a “natural” woman or man.

**Who is el hombre, la mujer? The Ambiguities of Caribbean Binary Gender**

Even in service roles and portrayed as incomplete characters, trans people in Caribbean fiction reveal the ambiguities of Caribbean gender. For instance, in *No Telephone*, Harriet makes a crucial statement to Clare. When Clare says she feels an affinity for then Harry/Harriet because both “are neither one thing nor the other,” Harry/Harriet responds, “At the moment, darling, only at the moment … I mean the time will come for both of us to choose. For we will have to make the choice. Cast our lot. Cyaan live split. Not in this world” (Cliff 131). Harry/Harriet chooses to become Harriet, even at the expense of her relationship with (and some of the financial support of) her wealthy family. The notion that “in this” Jamaican – and by extension Caribbean
– world, one must choose between two gender or racial poles is very important. It is in all of the texts, though the need to choose is not stated as clearly as in No Telephone. This idea is also significantly different from contemporary US discourses, in which the trope of self-invention extends to “third” (and fourth and fifth) gender options and hyphenated “new” identities.27

Indeed, it may seem that these texts are remarkably capable of portraying unconventional genders and trans characters as agents of deliverance without challenging the system of binary gender. Most characters’ goal is to pass, to inhabit gender stereotypes and be as “real” as possible, even when they know that “real” gender is itself a construct and an ideal few can achieve. Interestingly, unconventional genders both reveal the conventional genders and provide examples of genders outside of those bounds.

The first step in understanding how trans individuals reveal and reinforce ambiguities in Caribbean binary gender is recognizing how they deconstruct that system. Martha, Serena, Tyler, Otoh, Harriet – while all of these trans characters re/present other characters to themselves, they each also (eventually) represent themselves, their trans selves, as their true selves, the women and men they know and believe themselves to be. Yet trans characters in these Caribbean texts also re/present the idea of gender itself by deconstructing the myth of the “real woman” and the “real man.” On the surface trans expressions of gender may seem to be travesty and highlight that which they are not – “authentic” or conventionally-gendered men and women. But in fact trans individuals, set up by others as myths, ironically reveal “true” and “real” genders as profound myths –

27 For instance, “transgender” is to some an outmoded term; “gender queer,” “aggressive,” “boi,” and “gender fluid” are some of the terms used now.
even for conventionally-gendered women and men. This revelation then opens a space for the recognition of other genders.

*Cereus Blooms at Night* troubles Caribbean binary gender by portraying trans characters who more fully embody conventional gender stereotypes than men and women whose biology and gender correspond. In this novel, the biologically male, male-identified characters share major moral failings that hurt the women closest to them, the ones whom they are traditionally expected to protect. Brooding over his unrequited love for Lavinia, Chandin marries her best friend Sarah as a substitute. But he is largely indifferent to this woman, and when she and Lavinia run off together he takes revenge through physical and sexual abuse of his daughters Mala and Asha. While Chandin makes others suffer because of an abundance of misdirected aggression and sexuality, Ambrose (Otoh’s father) makes others suffer because of his lack of aggression. As a boy instead of offering protection he runs from the bullies who taunt and attack Mala and her sister (marked as “indecent” because of their parents’ sexual transgressions). Even worse, as an adult he runs away from the knowledge of her father’s physical and sexual abuse and her eventual breakdown. While Ambrose sends a box of food to Mala via Otoh every week, he does not venture to her home himself, nor does he try to protect her from years of isolation and slander, later from the police and mob who call her a murderer, or finally from the home to which she is confined.

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28 Even before we learn of Chandin’s incest, gender ideals in *Cereus Blooms* have already been fractured by race. Lavinia, Chandin’s adoptive sister and a foreign white woman, is universally admired for being physically strong, an intellectual, and aggressive. But Sarah, his wife from a poor Indian background “knew better than to be seen” emulating her friend (and subsequent lover) (Mootoo 55). Chandin himself remarks that he “admired things in Lavinia that he would have been ashamed to have his wife do” (Mootoo 55). These comments acknowledge that the colonial social order mandates different conventional genders for different races.
In contrast, the trans people excel in realms in which their conventionally-gendered counterparts fail. Tyler is more caring and more emotionally intuitive than any of the female nurses or other male or female characters save protagonist Mala. And Otoh takes great measures to provide Mala the protection his father was too scared and lazy to even attempt. Thus In *Cereus Blooms at Night* and *No Telephone to Heaven* the trans characters are the moral centers of the novels. Otoh and Tyler’s gender “transgressions” hurt no one – in fact they deliver Mala to safety – while the abuse conventionally-gendered men wreak on those around them is the true travesty. Similarly, in *Sirena Selena* the trans characters themselves steal and lie, but they are still portrayed in a better light than Graubel and Solange’s father, willing to sell their souls or their children for their own pleasure.

Also in Santos Febres’ text, Hugo’s wife, Solange, a “real,” conventionally-gendered woman tries just as hard as the dragas and travestis to assume the role of ideal woman, doña, and wife. Solange’s machinations and feelings of inauthenticity are due to her lower class upbringing, which she wants to keep hidden because it is anathema to the stereotypical upper class woman. Two quotes reveal the draga and doña’s similar masquerades. The first is Solange getting ready for a party: “Not a single detail can escape me, not a single detail. …it would be better to wear the Kenzo dress…it will soften my figure a little … Careful not to overdo the perfume, it’s so concentrated… But that’s what everyone is wearing these days” (Santos-Febres 74). The second is Serena in her visual transformation from male to female, getting ready for an audition: “The base was a fundamental weapon in the war declared against nature…More powder to avoid beads of sweat and to fix the work…After arduous deliberation [she chose] the long
evening dress...the matching pearl-pink high heels...the eye shadow to use was definitely the Lancôme…” (Santos-Febres 31-33). Although Solange does not see this connection with Sirena Selena, the latter does. The trans woman thinks to herself “You can never be what you want to be…just like me” (Santos-Febres 133).

With Martha described as “a real lady” and Solange as “a señora for real,” the “real woman” is simply the one who succeeds the most in embodying that impossible ideal (Santos-Febres 2,129). As Doña Martha observes, “everything in this life requires rehearsal. Everything!” and “If you look like a professional, you are a professional. The rest is choreography and acting,” performance and performativity (Santos-Febres 15, 214). In these texts, gender is something everyone aspires to and no one achieves.

Choreography and acting also imply education or training, and while above we see both biological and trans characters trying to become “real” women, several boys in Sirena Selena are taught or try to learn how to be “real men.” When Hugo’s millionaire father notices that his adolescent son has no girlfriend and is identified as “that feeble white boy who looked like a girl,” he arranges for a prostitute to “make sure” Hugo is a “stud” (Santos-Febres 103, 106). Hugo remembers that while his body responded, his mind escaped and he learned to hide his desire for other men. Also in Sirena Selena, two young men discuss the difference between hombres and mujeres. The older boy, the mentor, explains to Leocadio that when two men dance, the bigger one is not always the man – rather, “El hombre is the one who leads, the one who decides. The other one is la mujer, the woman” (Santos-Febres 203). Later Leocadio muses on this lesson: the one with the money is the man “And if he dances and the other one leads, then he’s la mujer. But what if it was she who convinced him to dance… Then who is el hombre, la mujer?”
This exchange takes place near the end of the novel, and reveals that binary gender is not nearly as rigid as it is generally portrayed. As these texts reveal the ambiguities of binary gender, they also reveal the existence of multiple genders within Caribbean social hierarchies. Depending on the circumstances, “el hombre,” the person with power, could be a conventionally-gendered man, a trans woman, a biological woman, or someone else entirely.

While portrayals of trans deliverance recur throughout the Caribbean texts discussed here, individual trans characters experience different levels of acceptance. Otoh, in Cereus Blooms, is able to pass and live as a man with the support of his parents, while Tyler is beginning the process of living as a woman without guaranteed safety or acceptance. Michelle Cliff’s Harriet eventually passes as a woman, and is ostracized by her family for that choice. Harriet lives with the knowledge that violence or even death could confront her if she is found to be biologically male. And in Sirena Selena we see a variety of trans lives – prostitutes, businesswomen, kept women, those who have left el ambiente, and those who live completely within it.

Cliff confronts the issue of acceptance through her description of khaki clothes, which the revolutionaries in No Telephone to Heaven wear as a kind of uniform:

These people – men and women – were dressed in similar clothes, which became them as uniforms, signifying some agreement, some purpose – that they were in something together – in these clothes, at least, they seemed to blend together. This alikeness was something they needed, which could be important, even vital to them – for the shades of their skin, places traveled to and from, events experienced…ones they loved, living family, varied widely, came between them. (Cliff 4)

The uniform is meant to override their differences; what, then, is the baseline of acceptable “alikeness” or similarity – and of acceptable difference? It is not only the
khaki, but gender itself. Even while they attempt to reject race, class, and other
differences, “these people – men and women” remain committed to binary gender.
Harriet challenges the system with her presence as a trans person, but reinforces it by
largely conforming to her society’s notion of womanhood. Gender, then, is not only part
of the “alikeness,” it is also part of an “agreement” to which one must consent to be
considered and accepted as a true Caribbean subject.\(^{29}\)

29 Alexander points out that citizenship “continues to be premised within heterosexuality and principally
within heteromasculinity” and that after independence, Caribbean women were expected to “uphold a
respectable femininity.” “Not Just (Any) Body can be a Citizen: The Politics of Law, Sexuality, and

In small societies – like those in most Caribbean countries – acceptance matters
more than in larger or more densely populated places. Reinventing yourself is a greater
practical problem because the space around you is smaller and the familial and social
networks are more intertwined (there are fewer “degrees of separation”). Trans people
can flee the country for the city, as many in Sirena Selena do. Or they can flee to a
different small town, as Tyler does. Or they can stay within their communities, as Otoh
does. Either way – for those who cannot or will not go abroad – they remain in relatively
small communities with few other trans people and sometimes no trans (or otherwise
nonheteronormative) community. In these circumstances, unless you are willing to live
completely within “el ambiente” (assuming one exists), you must decide how much you
can or want to try to pass. And you must make that decision while considering your
friendly, familial, and work relationships – and your personal safety. Caribbean trans
people negotiate these paths every day. Significantly, several trans characters live and
function in non-trans communities, not gay or trans “ghettos.” Notwithstanding their
particular trials, however, Caribbean trans lives, while different from the status quo, have all the richness and nuances of other human lives.

This is where the texts fail us. The physical danger, social ostracization, and resulting emotional pain described in the texts remain all too real. But the “holes” in the authors’ portrayals of trans characters – the absence for many of a social, love, or sex life – and the almost complete absence of trans men, do not correspond to reality. The mere presence of trans characters in Caribbean novels means that the literature is becoming more diverse. But human rights activists and intellectuals have often pointed out that diversity and inclusion are very different. The failure to portray full trans lives keeps them marginal – reinscribing conventional heteronormative gender – and avoids exploring how the presence and acceptance of trans individuals could challenge Caribbean gender hierarchies. Unfortunately, many of the human details and much of the possible impact of Caribbean trans lives remain largely hidden – even in the region’s literary imagination.