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Improprieties: Feminism, Queerness, and Caribbean Literature

Vera M. Kutzinski

*M*y essay is, on the one hand, a cautionary tale about the limitations and exclusionary practices of postcolonial feminisms and, on the other, an account of the possibilities that can emerge from contact between such feminisms and queer theory. I begin my tale with a poem by the Guyanese writer Grace Nichols, from her 1989 collection *Lazy Thoughts of a Lazy Woman*. The poem's title, "Of Course When They Ask for Poems About the 'Realities' of Black Women," functions as the first clause of its first sentence:

What they really want
at times
is a specimen
whose heart is in the dust

A mother-of-sufferer
trampled, oppressed
they want a little black blood
undressed
and validation
for the abused stereotype
already in their heads

Or else they want
a perfect song

...

Still, there ain't
no easy-belly category
for a black woman
or a white woman
or a green woman....¹

Nichols' poem helps me raise two questions: (1) what do readers, academic and popular, expect from literature by so-called postcolonial subjects, and why, and (2) is a category such as "woman," or "women," any more reliable than are racialized distinctions such as "black" and "white?" What connects these two questions is the issue of cultural identity, and specifically the relationship between identity construction and performance — social, artistic, sexual, discursive. Concerns about cultural identity are at the heart of Caribbean feminist scholarship and its hostility to poststructuralist and postmodernist theories associated broadly with Euro-American feminist work and queer theory. These amalgamated theories tend to be dismissed, rightly or wrongly, as neocolonial or imperialist misreadings of subalterns' realities. It is important to address this hostility because of the attempt to regulate what may, or may not, be ideologically proper subjects for Caribbean, and other postcolonial, feminist criticism. Just how troubling I find this kind of regulation, in any context, will become clear when I discuss a very different approach to cultural identity in the second part of my essay: *Cereus Blooms at Night*, one of the most evocative and provocative novels written in the last decade. Its author, Shani Mootoo, is an Irish-Indo-Caribbean-Canadian writer, painter, and videographer. *Cereus*, published in 1996 in Canada and the United States, is her first novel.

Mootoo's novel is of particular interest because it is sharply critical of many feminist paradigms and pieties, postcolonial and otherwise, and it explores possible literary applications for concepts that have become increasingly important to anti-essentialist feminists during the past decade. In rejecting the essentialist idea of authentic identity as a state to which former and present subjects of colonization can, and should, aspire (or revert, as the case may be), along with criticizing institutions of heterosexuality such as the family, Mootoo pulls at beliefs and assumptions many (postcolonial) feminists hold dear. First and foremost among these is essentialism. What places Mootoo's work at odds not with her fellow artists but with the majority of Caribbean feminist scholars is Mootoo's refusal to regulate ideas, desires, and practices that do not follow established norms of what a postcolonial subject should be and how he, or she, ought properly to behave — intellectually, emotionally, socially, and sexually. *Cereus* shows how human persons are created by discursively chipping away at seemingly rigid identities, be they imposed or chosen. Scholars sympathetic to the work of Judith Butler and other second-wave feminists usually

discuss this process of unmaking identity in terms of performance and performativity.²

While it is not unusual now to think of gender as a social performance, biological sex still appears immutable to many of us, and it is worth reminding ourselves of just how tricky even biology can be. (This trickiness was tacitly acknowledged by a recent decision to abandon gender testing at the Olympics.) There are many persons, in real life and in literature, who perform socio-sexual identities that are inconsistent not just with their body's biology but with the expectations that their biological makeup, in the form of physical appearance, raises in their fellow humans. This is an important distinction because it leads us away from essentialist ideas about human bodies (and, by implication, about bodies politic) and toward a concept of identity as something that gets transacted between performers and audiences. Certain performances are not just deemed more "realistic" than others but are, in fact, perceived as "real." And they are perceived as real when, and only when, they conform to the beholder's expectations and biases. By being repeatedly validated through what Butler calls acts of performativity, such expectations solidify into social norms and stereotypes. Questions of identity become particularly vexed in situations where performers and audiences differ, significantly and visibly, in terms of class, ethnicity, gender, and even nationality; that is, when they are not only black and white but also green. It is Grace Nichols' category "green" that interests me here, because in it we find all sorts of unclassifiable persons and personae, whose unconventional cultural practices and literary representations tend to be grouped together under labels such as aberrations, pathologies, and perversions. I am referring to anything from homo- and bisexualities to transgending and transvestism. My point is twofold: the categories of "woman" and "women" are both eminently mutable, and, given that mutability, postcolonial feminists cannot limit their concerns to women alone without running the risk of becoming as dogmatic and repressive as they often accuse their Euro-American counterparts of being.

As I mention above, most Caribbean feminist scholarship has been remarkably resistant to poststructuralist and postmodernist theories. One of the main reasons for this resistance, or hostility, is that the politics of authenticity in cultures of postcolonization³ in areas such as the Caribbean is incompatible with the relativistic tenets of these theories. These theories, which include performance theory, would make it impossible for feminist Caribbeanists not to acknowledge that perfor-

mance, in Caribbean society and in the literary representations of local or diasporic sociocultural practices, is not limited to “indigenous” phenomena such as Carnival (in which women, incidentally, have played only very marginal roles until very recently).⁴ Cross-dressing and socio-sexual role play extend well beyond that bounded space of liminality into the most mundane of contexts, in fiction and in real life, and not wanting to address that fact seriously, or at all, is surely a form of intellectual and emotional (self-)censorship. But an avoidance of critical theory (notably, work on performativity in gender and sexuality studies which looks at the construction of those values and behaviors we deem normal, proper, or authentic) can make it difficult, even impossible, to discuss nonconventional cultural practices and literary representations as anything other than aberrations, pathologies, and perversions. What is unmentioned in such a binary scenario is that the roles of actor and audience are, in fact, reversible, so that being a part of the audience does not guarantee one the moral high ground of a stable, uncorrupted identity. Identity, like all commodities, has its price. *Cereus Blooms at Night* asks us to contemplate what that price is, who is willing to pay it and who is not, and why.

Part I

Caribbean literary production, as Timothy Chin notes, “has traditionally maintained a conspicuous silence around issues of gay and lesbian sexuality.”⁵ While this is no longer the case, since many recent Caribbean writers—both male and female—show an increasing willingness to speak of, and speak out against, practices of sexism and homophobia not only in the various locations of the Caribbean diaspora but, even more importantly, in the islands themselves, sexuality remains an issue largely shrouded in silence in contemporary scholarship on Caribbean literatures.⁶ Even feminist critics, such as Carole Boyce Davies, Evelyn O’Callaghan, and Myriam Chancy, are still “searching for safe spaces,” ideologically speaking, when it comes to approaching literary representations of gender and especially of female sexuality.⁷ What spells ideological safety, to today’s feminist scholars of Caribbean extraction, is heteronormativity, whose representations they happily pursue and locate in the fiction and poetry of those writers whose texts are most regularly called upon to deliver authoritative accounts of the sociocultural experiences of Caribbean women: novelists Jean Rhys from Dominica; Jamaica Kincaid from

Antigua; Michelle Cliff from Jamaica; Simone Schwarz-Bart and Maryse Condé from Guadeloupe; and poet Nancy Morejón from Cuba.⁸ By the same token, feminist critics, along with their male colleagues, have neglected the literary work of lesbian writers such as Makeda Silvera, Patricia Powell, Dionne Brand, and Shani Mootoo. This neglect has nothing to do with the quality of their literary work and everything to do with their fictions' thematics of sexual difference. Mootoo, the only Indo-Caribbean member of this small circle, faces the additional difficulty of being part of a chronically under-researched cultural group.⁹ Only Cliff, the most prominent lesbian writer of Caribbean extraction, is a bit of an exception, since her novels, notably *Abeng* (1984) and *No Telephone to Heaven* (1987), have proven less resistant to appropriative (mis)readings on the part of feminist critics insistent on fitting them into popular mother-daughter paradigms while downplaying homosexual thematics, let alone relate homosexuality to narrative strategies. Novels such as Powell's *A Small Gathering of Bones* (1994), which depicts a community of gay men in 1970s Jamaica, have been virtually ignored. One critic, for instance, manages to discuss Powell's uses of Creole without even once mentioning the novel's subject matter.¹⁰ It is equally true that Kincaid's 1997 AIDS memoir *My Brother*, even though it only hints at homosexuality, has not received the kind of critical attention that her earlier work commanded.¹¹ The only Caribbean writers in English to have received even less critical attention than their lesbian colleagues are gay writers from the archipelago, such as H. Nigel Thomas from St. Vincent.

In short, sexual conservatism and repeated endorsements of heteronormativity, frequently in combination with homophobia, characterize most of the current work in Caribbean literary studies. With very few exceptions, feminists in this field appear to be disinclined to rethink their essentialist positions, however strategic, in matters of gender and sexuality; even less willing, it seems, than they are to jettison the racial essentialisms still alive in popular and academic identity formulae such as Afro-Caribbean, African-Caribbean, Africana, or Afrofemcentric aesthetics.¹² Feminist critics, according to Dionne Brand, "[ignore] the 'female self' in anything other than the mother-daughter relation,"¹³ and some of them, such as Hortense Spillers and Carolyn Cooper, are too quick to defend Caribbean texts charged with homophobia—to wit, Paule Marshall's 1969 novel *The Chosen Place, the Timeless People* and Buju Banton's 1992 performance of the song "Boom Bye Bye."¹⁴ The latter controversy culminated in Cooper's dismissing the

U.S. based Gay and Lesbian Alliance Against Defamation (GLAAD) as “imperial overlords.”¹⁵ A softer version of the same stance is Elizabeth Coonrod Martínez’s stated preference for literary practices that “presence” gender rather than “altering” it.¹⁶ Martínez’s tone may be less strident, but her more muted statement comes from the same ideological place as Cooper’s. What defines this place is the unquestioned assumption that homosexuality is never a “native” phenomenon but only and always an “imported” by-product of Euro-American (neo)colonialism. This association is used to justify devaluing homosexuality — never mind other sexual preferences and practices — as a dangerous, offensive foreign “perversion.”¹⁷ Homosexuality is treated much like critical theory: both are socio-intellectual practices presumably alien to indigenous societies, be they West Indian, African, Asian, and so on.

A case in point here is Lizabeth Paravisini-Gebert’s anti-theory polemic, which goes well beyond Elaine Savory’s contention that Caribbean writers have “no need” of postmodernist and other theoretical systems.¹⁸ Citing the case of Rosario Ferré, who changed her cultural and linguistic identity from Puertorriqueña to Latina so as to be eligible for the American Book Award, which considers only work written and published in English, Paravisini laments that the postcolonial book market “has opened a niche for a certain kind of female Caribbean writer whose work can be easily *consumed*, appropriated into a configuration where it serves the narrow purposes of theory, reassuring the reader that he or she understands the Caribbean without having to penetrate its multifarious realities.”¹⁹ That few feminists would figure more complex cultural understanding as a form of penetration draws attention to Paravisini’s oddly unselfconscious use of language in her concern about “Caribbean women’s writing being co-opted, seduced away from its glorious insularity.”²⁰ What makes this insularity so “glorious” remains vague, leaving one to suspect an implicit alliance between authentic female identity and some sort of mythic cultural purity preserved somehow by isolation or insulation.²¹ Jamaica Kincaid, Paravisini’s negative example, is an easy target for charges of co-optation because of her works’ popularity. But Kincaid is hardly the only female writer from the Caribbean to reside and publish in the U.S., the U.K., or Canada; in fact, the vast majority of them do — including Paravisini herself.²²

It is not the mere fact of migration that exposes Caribbean women’s writings to the “frequent misreadings” of which Paravisini-Gebert

complains, especially misreadings of “the striking materiality of Caribbean women’s depiction of the female body.”²³ While it is not difficult to agree that human bodies—all living bodies, in fact—are more than just symbolic constructs, it is harder to see how this logic would apply to a conceptual abstraction such as “the Caribbean woman’s textual body.” This “body,” Paravisini contends (as if there were only one) does not “yield easily to the demands of other women’s theories.” Paravisini seems to be suggesting that textual bodies, somehow, cannot be (re)moved from their state of insularity as easily as their authors’ physical bodies have been. In this scenario, where geography seems to have become destiny, theorizing is a form of “seductive” misreading that “lures” textual bodies away from originary “creative spaces,”²⁴ which is to say, from the ideological places they should properly inhabit. It is as if theorizing about texts written by Caribbean women constituted an act of cultural impropriety, an “unnatural” use of a textual body analogous, in its political effects, to the physical abuse of the female body in rape or incest situations. That, historically, such acts of sexual violation have occurred predominantly, though not exclusively,²⁵ within the presumably safe spaces of Caribbean women’s “own” creative locales is a devastating irony—of which a writer like Shani Mootoo is all too well aware. This irony remains, even as various real and imaginary bodies are confused and conflated in Paravisini’s account, and the locus of pathology shifts from the Caribbean to Euro-American feminist and queer theorizing, with all of its supposed “imperialist” outposts and activities. And in sexual terms, “imperialist” equals “perverse.” In this kind of an argument, the dissolving lines between insiders and outsiders are rigidly redrawn, and the distinction between them is so charged precisely because the majority of Caribbean writers live elsewhere.²⁶ At the same time, this also means that the phrase “other women” is no longer limited to Euro-American women who, through their association with the literary/academic market, have come to occupy the same morally compromised ground that sentimental fiction once reserved for men. “Other women” now significantly includes (once) “native” women who live in voluntary exile. So it matters little who does the theorizing in this scenario, for it is an “unnatural,” neocolonial pursuit in any event, one comparable to the pathological psychology of blacks desiring whiteness which Frantz Fanon outlines in the oft-cited *Black Skin White Masks*. That all this implies unspecified “natural” uses not just of bodies but of texts goes unremarked.

Because Paravisini's argument endorses the idea of naturalness in the form of cultural authenticity, she is unable to consider critically how the reader's expectations of authenticity and normalcy are regularly imposed on textual bodies to make literary representations more continuous with "real" life. She comments at the beginning of her article that "In a climate of multicultural studies in which Black women—given their gender and race—have become the subject of almost feverish study, Caribbean women, by virtue of their race, gender, and post-colonial condition, have become the other's other, a valuable commodity indeed. We—our writers particularly—can be scrutinized in all our pathologies and charming—when not exotic—aberrations, and set forth as examples of this, that, or the other post-something-or-other *condition*."²⁷ She then goes on to specify local concerns, such as "the indivisibility of gender relations from race and class, the intricate connections between sexual mores, skin pigmentation, and class mobility, the poverty and political repression that has left women's bodies exposed to abuse and exploitation," all of which, she argues, are of little interest to "Euro-American theoretical thought," except as "evidence of pathology."²⁸ Attempting to remedy the situation by changing the locus of pathology, not to mention turning "Caribbean women" into an unqualified synecdoche here, into part of the ever-undifferentiated "black women," is no remedy at all. It would be far more useful to the claim that Caribbean women's artistic production is primarily studied as representative of psycho-social "aberrations" to the tendency in all critical discourses on Caribbean women's writing (be they anglophone, francophone, Dutch, or hispanophone) to read fiction as social documentation and to regard female protagonists as "mirror images of bona fide women in the 'real world'" rather than "as the embodiment of female positions on Caribbean issues."²⁹ Paravisini herself commits this very conflation and perpetuates what Kathleen Balutansky calls "the enduring illusion" that certain represented "voices" in a literary text are, in fact, the authentic voices of Caribbean women of different classes and ethnicities. Balutansky helpfully stresses "the notion of perspective, leaving no doubt that the Caribbean female author, regardless of her class, color, or cultural background, is creating a work in which she projects her own intellectual and emotional values as she interprets the Caribbean world. Her text, then, cannot be the repository of an assumed authentic reality; it is an intellectual, artistic construct as problematic and as varied as the world it explores and the issues it raises."³⁰ Denise Narain and Evelyn

O'Callaghan argue, in a similar vein, that it is not enough just "to 'give' the 'Third World woman' a 'voice' and to celebrate it;" we also, they urge, need to ask critical questions about "how/what this 'voice' is saying."³¹

That Caribbean women writers, like women writers worldwide, "frequently use the autobiographical mode" should not confuse readers as to the "realism" of their "confessions."³² Expectations of authenticity reduce the literary writings of women of color to mere testimony of their "conditions" and accounts of victims' resistance to gender oppression in a presumably universal patriarchy. Systematically imposed expectations of authenticity function as vehicles for ideological censorship and appropriation by depriving the artistic statements of women (and other 'victims') of their intellectual and imaginative dimensions. In fact, some critical circles are downright hostile to female *others'* fictionalizations of what readers assume to be the writers' personal experiences.³³ Interestingly, most readers experience discontinuities between literary truth and historical fact as jarring, or even scandalous, only in cases where a narrator seems to resemble an author, that is, in (fictional) autobiographies.

Caribbean writers are increasingly publishing literary texts that oppose the reader's expectations of recognizable and verifiable cultural authenticity, which have, over the past few decades, become the institutionally approved standards for postcolonial literature. Narain and O'Callaghan point out that "some of the most interesting writing by anglophone Caribbean women evidence a move away from linear, 'realistic' narrative and a willingness to challenge conventional generic boundaries,"³⁴ and this is by no means just true of recent texts written by women. Opposition,³⁵ in these texts, is a function of an insistent foregrounding of literature's imaginative dimensions, which is quite in keeping with Wilson Harris' longstanding criticisms of the textual politics of literary realism in postcolonial writing.³⁶ The following passage from the prologue of Pauline Melville's *The Ventriloquist's Tale* is a good example of such self-conscious foregrounding, carried out by a cheeky first-person narrator who "can do any voice: jaguar, London hoodlum, bell-bird, nineteenth-century novelist...:"

Sad though it is, in order to tell these tales of love and disaster, I must put away everything fantastical that my nature and the South American continent prescribe and become a realist. No more men with members the size of zeppelins and women flapping off into the skies—a frequent

occurrence on the other side of the continent. Why realism, you ask. Because hard-nosed, tough-minded realism is what is required in these days. Facts are King. Fancy is in the dog-house. Perhaps it has something to do with protestants or puritans and the tedious desire to bear witness that makes people prefer testimony these days. Now, alas, *fiction has to disguise itself as fact* and I must bow to the trend and become a realist. Ah well, as they say, monkey cut 'e tail to be in fashion.³⁷

The point of this playful riff on magical realism and the hyper-masculinist sexual politics of the novel of the Latin American boom — “men with members the size of zeppelins”! — is to remind readers that realist testimony and so-called facts are but carefully calculated forms of disguise and that “disguise is the only truth,” and not only where Melville’s narrator comes from (the Guyanese interior).

What does this logic make *magical* realism? If, in the realist mode, “the narrator must appear to vanish,” then magical realism might address the narrator’s (re)appearance in a particular kind of camouflage: “Magic is private. It deals in secrecy and disguise.”³⁸ In keeping with this, the “magic” in magical realism may very well be read as a sign for performance and thus as a linguistic marker for a conceptual space where various cultural identities are tried out, and on. Magical realism, as it is used in contemporary Caribbean fiction written in English, allows for what Butler calls “variable construction of identity,”³⁹ where representations of different genders and sexualities intersect with the constructions of hybrid ethnicities that have come to characterize much of the contemporary literature of postcolonization.⁴⁰ Rather than being limited to representations of race and ethnicity, literary performances of hybridity are now deliberately and self-consciously extended to, and connected with, gender and sexuality issues in order to unsettle the regulatory mechanisms of what I tend to think of as hetero-realism.

If gender conventions are not, as Judith Butler and others have proposed, a matter of biological essence but of performative iteration, then what happens to feminism and, in the case of the Caribbean, only fairly recently validated essentialist images of women? Feminism might productively cease being tied to identity politics. Instead of “[constraining] in advance the very cultural possibilities that feminism is supposed to open up,”⁴¹ feminism, especially of the postcolonial (and decolonizing) persuasion, should deregulate fictions of identity rather than locate its *raison-d’être* in establishing normative ideals, for

instance, by redrawing old lines of division between all sorts of bodies, textual and otherwise. Such deregulation would also mean for Caribbean writing that gender and sexual politics not be deemed the exclusive province of women writers, so that feminist discussions can profitably be extended to male-authored texts. Most remarkable among those are Robert Antoni's *Blessed is the Fruit* (1997), Lawrence Scott's *Witch Broom* (1992), and Caryl Phillips' *Cambridge* (1992) and *The Nature of Blood* (1997), all novels whose voices and bodies are by no means unequivocally male and masculine,⁴² and whose cross-gender literary ventriloquism cannot simply be dismissed as just another strategy for containing the threat of female sexuality, as is the case in Patrick Chamoiseau's 1992 novel *Texaco* and other creolist narratives from the francophone Caribbean.⁴³ I agree with Butler that the category of "identity" — sexual, racial, social, etc. — needs to be rendered "permanently problematic" in all contexts,⁴⁴ even in those where strategic essentialism may prove temporarily useful. Because performance "denaturalizes" sex, gender, race, and class affiliations,⁴⁵ it is a particularly rich theoretical concept for my thinking about states, and situations, of radical — that is, unresolvable and irreducible — in-betweenness.⁴⁶ In many recent anglophone Caribbean novels, such in-betweenness takes the literary shapes of what I would like to call narratives of queerness within the non-binary interstices of heteronormativity and homonormativity alike.⁴⁷ Such narratives of queerness foreground processes of identity formation through performances that are deliberately imperfect, so that identity — the character's, the narrator's, and the reader's — is something that remains an open question. Terms such as "queer" and "queerness" are nearly impossible to define, for although the adjective "queer" has popularly come to designate everything non-heterosexual, including gay and lesbian studies, queers are more often identified, and identify themselves, as "other," both to heterosexuals and to homosexuals.⁴⁸ In keeping with this resistance to definition, narratives of queerness seek to unmake identities by turning them into open systems of *disidentification*, inviting readers to think and act against convention and propriety. Narratives of queerness in Caribbean literature tend to be, but need not be, produced by characters who may be transsexuals, hermaphrodites (as Lavren in *Witch Broom*⁴⁹), bisexuals (as in Antoni's *Blessed is the Fruit*), or transgendered gay transvestites, such as Mootoo's Nurse Tyler. Crucially, none of these characters, all narrators, are unproblematically continuous with any of the novels' respective authors. With their very differ-

ent narratives of queerness, each of these novels offers important ethical correctives to the pieties of popular and academic feminisms which dominate Caribbean literary studies. Above all, these texts warn against the standardization of differences, whatever those differences may be. I will do my best to heed this warning as I focus my critical attention on Shani Mootoo's novel, the text I will discuss in detail here.

Part II

Cereus Blooms at Night is a novel that makes quests for identity yield to practices of performance. To that end, it includes several striking accounts of cross-dressing which are central to the novel's narrative of queerness in that they highlight different layers, or levels, of performative activity. The first of two scenes I want to examine focuses on Nurse Tyler, the novel's narrator, and Mala Ramchandin, a purportedly mad old woman committed by court order to the almshouse in Paradise, Lantanacalara, Mootoo's fictionalized Trinidad. A multiply traumatized incest victim, Mala is Tyler's first real professional assignment; she is placed in his exclusive care when the other nurses refuse even to go near her because they believe her to be violent. As part of the closeness that develops between the two characters, Mala honors the unspoken pleasure Tyler takes in wearing drag by stealing a nurse's uniform for her initially uncomprehending friend: " 'Miss Ramchandin,' I whispered, 'what are you doing with that uniform?' ... 'You.' She looked at the ground. 'Me? Me what?' 'You. You want to wear it' " (75–76). Mala's unexpected offering of a white dress and "nylon stockings the colour of black tea"⁵⁰ acknowledges, more than any direct speech act could, the growing mutual trust between Tyler and his charge: "She knows what I am, was all I could think. She knows my nature." In the same way that Tyler's "touch" (11) restores dignity to a body completely invisible when Mala first arrives, strapped to a stretcher, with "only her head...exposed" (9), Mala's reciprocal respect allows Tyler excitedly to revel in the "possibilities" the outfit offers his imagination.

I reached for the dress. My body felt as if it were metamorphosing. 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 trem-

bling inside me. I hugged the dress.... I unbuttoned my shirt and felt an odd shame that my mammary glands were flat. I dropped my pants. My man's member mocked me yet was a delight to do battle with when pulling the stockings against my thighs. I had no corset to hold them up, but it was enough to see the swirl of hairs on my calves and thighs trapped under the nylon. There was something delicious about such confinement. I held up the dress and slowly stepped into it, savouring every action, noting every feeling. I powdered my nose, daubed rouge on my cheeks and carefully smeared a dollop across my lips. I looked down at my stockinged feet and the dress, pressed it with my flat palms against my body and worried that I might look disappointingly ridiculous to my benefactress. I took a deep breath.

"Ready?" I called out in a loud whisper. (76-77)

The nurse's outfit represents to Tyler not so much femininity but performative "possibilities." Wearing these clothes does not mean becoming a woman at the expense of being a man, which would require denying anatomical realities (his penis and the flat chest) whose clash with Tyler's imagined female anatomy (the vagina's "cavernous tunnel" and the "rounded full breasts") are a source at once of shame and of delight. Tyler experiences as pleasurable the disjunction between his publicly known, or perceived, sex and her performed gender. Nothing, it seems, would be further from this character's mind than a sex change operation that would remove such incongruities by making gender fit sex, thus clearing the path, so to speak, toward an unambiguously legible, and hence legitimate, identity. Tyler can play the social role of woman in the same way that he performs the professional role of a nurse, without disregarding or disrespecting the recalcitrant maleness of his body. That the outfit Tyler dons is a nurse's uniform is significant because this particular attire blurs the distinction between professional and personal performance. It implies that what Tyler does outside of Mala's room, when he does not wear the uniform of a female nurse but its male equivalent, is no less of a performance than wearing drag in the relative privacy of this particular space. The difference lies in how any given audience evaluates either performance. Making Tyler into the more "formal" "Nurse Tyler" is important for other reasons as well, for it challenges readers who still think of a nurse as female by default and expect a first-person narrator in a woman-authored text to be of the same gender as the author herself. But there is more to this challenge, for it also effectively swerves away

from late-twentieth-century associations of male homosexuality with disease, which would make gay men into patients rather than care givers (as, for instance, in Kincaid's *My Brother* and in Powell's *A Small Gathering of Bones*). Nurse Tyler is most decidedly not a patient; in his role as a sympathetic and imaginative witness to Mala's predicament, Tyler functions as mouthpiece, mediator, and healer, all in one.⁵¹

Needless to say, perhaps, all performances require an audience, and Tyler's is no exception. Since he is our narrator, he has two separate audiences in this scene, Mala and the reader, and Tyler performs differently for those audiences, at the level of plot and at the level of narrative. In what I have quoted thus far, Tyler does not actually perform for Mala, at least not yet, for he is still concealed from her. The only audience Tyler has at this point is the reader, whom he permits what appears to be a privileged glimpse behind the room divider. The narrative vehicle for this view is an interior monologue, an off-stage performance that is all the more public for pretending to be private. Tyler is by no means a self-effacing narrator; in fact, he is quite the exhibitionist in many respects. His narrative performance in this confined space makes her almost hyper-visible, and we readers, unlike Mala, do not have the choice to avert our gaze (for that would mean to stop reading). By contrast, when Tyler nervously steps out from behind the curtain and becomes literally visible to Mala, he becomes less visible to us, so that the following narrative appears much less theatrical than the preceding one.

When I stepped out from behind the curtain, I saw that Miss Ramchandin had made herself busy. She was piling furniture in front of the window. She glanced at me, made no remarks and kept right on building the tower. I walked over to her and stood where I was bound to be in her vision. At first I felt horribly silly, like a man who had put on women's clothing for sheer sport and had forgotten to remove the outfit after the allotted period of fun. I felt flatfooted and clumsy. Not a man and not ever able to be a woman, suspended nameless in the limbo state between existence and nonexistence. She had already set a straight-back chair on the table in front of the window. On top of that she placed a stool and was now preparing to stand on her bed and place an empty drawer on the pinnacle.

Just as I was hoping the tower would come crashing down and extinguish me forever, a revelation came. The reason Miss Ramchandin paid no attention to me 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.

I took the drawer from her, climbed up onto her bed, and placed it at her tower's peak. (77–78)

At the level of the novel's plot, this scene of Tyler's "coming out" is not a public performance, for it is staged in Mala's room "by the light of one lamp, with the window and door closed." In fact, it is difficult even to talk about this passage as a performance at all, other than in narrative terms. Not only does it lack a certain theatricality, but Mala refuses to play the role of the audience. She hardly pays any attention to Tyler's changed appearance but only "glances" at him briefly. In refusing the role of audience, Mala declines to distance herself from Tyler, either to applaud his performance as a successful construction of a convincing identity or to scorn it as a "disappointingly ridiculous," "horribly silly" self-parody, or as a poor copy without reality effect. Refusing to be an audience is an act of dis-identification, which results in the suspension of judgment. What the narrative stages here is a scene in which Mala and Tyler are either both actors, or neither one is, and this lack of distinction accounts for Tyler's feeling of being "extremely ordinary" (78). "And I quite loved it," he adds, recalling a similar sensation of ordinariness in his first encounter with Mala's doctor (22). Although they share a space that, narratively speaking, is surely a stage, Mala and Tyler do not relate to each other in performative terms. Each is part of a non-performative relationship, one that the reader cannot share, for theirs is a relationship not mediated by the gaze and by language. That this is virtually an impossible relationship in no way prevents it from existing. In this imagined space, existing does not mean being visible to someone else, as it does in Hegelian paradigms of selfhood, for being visible means being legible, and one can only be legible by conforming to the identitarian norms that regulate the construction of a self. To be legible means to have an identity, and thus be legitimate. Mala does not need to read Tyler to affirm his existence. Her refusal to play the role of audience to Tyler's performance amounts to a rejection of the power to confer upon him an identity, and, in the process, to assume one herself. What acknowledges the existence of both characters is not a hierarchical system of gazing and being gazed at (of the self acknowledging its *other* and vice-versa), but the image of the furniture tower they both construct. This tower stands

for processes of imaginative fabrication, in which the element of iterative performativity is minimized or abandoned.

Since the narrative resolutely places the reader at a remove from the space of the stage, which both characters share in this scene, we cannot share Mala's relationship with Tyler. From the reader's perspective, we are the audience to a two-character play set in the space in front of the curtain in Mala's room. In this play, each of the two actors is initially engaged in a set of unrelated activities: Mala is building a furniture tower; Tyler actually does very little beyond walking, standing around, and waiting in vain to have his presence acknowledged. Their activities at length combine into a shared performance when Tyler decides to participate in the construction of Mala's tower. "I would have to pull it all down before Sister's inspection, but right then every instinct in me wanted to take all the furniture in the room and help her build the biggest and tallest tower she needed" (77–78). This precarious, temporary structure ("Every night Miss Ramchandin would build and every morning I would deconstruct") is what symbolically represents their relationship as one of creative mutuality. The sculptural edifice they construct together in this meta-theatrical scene is as a figure for the novel's narrative of collaboration, which privileges neither character. Tyler's role as a narrator does not elevate him above Mala, for whose story he is (also) responsible.

Although Tyler delights in the "ordinariness" that Mala's silence affords him, he nevertheless remains torn between the longing to be self-effacingly unexceptional and the desire to have his performance acknowledged and applauded (perhaps even criticized). The point is that Tyler feels "ordinary" only in Mala's room: "I did not even consider leaving her room as I was" (78). This also means that his ordinariness is predicated upon silence, on the absence, or suspension, of language. Within language (outside of Mala's room), Tyler's gender performance is characterized by "a sense of propriety" on which he depends "for the most basic level of survival": "I changed back into my trousers and white shirt, and rubbed my cheeks and lips clean. I stuffed the dress and stockings behind her dresser, deciding to keep if not to wear it again, at least for the memory of some power it seemed to have imparted" (78). That Tyler plays the role of a man to other characters, notably Sister and his mostly female co-workers at the almshouse, effectively displays, and thus exposes as performative, the supposedly originating masculinity that makes his femininity appear as drag in the first place. Here, masculinity stands to femininity not as

original to copy, but as copy to copy, or as original to original. If anything, Tyler is far less convincing as a male impersonator, and the act's appearance as the poorer copy inevitably chips away at normative masculinity. Not only does Tyler not cite the conventions of masculinity continually and consistently; she never cites them quite properly, that is, without disrupting them, however subtly. Because her displayed maleness comes across as much more parodic than his performances of femininity, most of which are not explicitly represented as "drag," it is important that, while Tyler does refer to himself as a "man" on several occasions, her status as a first-person narrator prevents him from having to refer to himself as anything other than "I" and thus from having to decide between available masculine and feminine pronouns. In other words, Tyler leaves readers to struggle with the issue of pronominal inadequacy, which, in the end, is not resolvable if one aims at consistent usage.

My own practice in this essay eschews such consistency, a version of which would be the dual use of feminine and masculine pronouns that has long become a cliché of political correctness. To represent Tyler as "he/she, or "him/her" (or vice-versa) strikes me as an inadequate response to the novel's call for imagining new ways of being a person with overlapping multiple selves, which would surely include new ways of existing within language. New ways of existing in language does not necessarily mean that we need to resort to neologisms.⁵² Inconsistent usage may, in the end, be the best way to prevent discursive conventions in any language from erasing multi-dimensional, polymorphous selves, since inconsistency keeps language from hardening into ideological norms and imperatives—what Wilson Harris likes to call "callouses." That Tyler's own narrative discourse prefers the feminine mode, though he, like Pauline Melville's narrator, can "do any voice," does not mean that the feminine becomes a default, a new norm, that would allow us consistently to identify Tyler as "she." This change would simply have the effect of assigning Tyler an identity and making him acceptably legible to a particular feminist constituency. Tyler may desire to be ordinary, but she does not long to be normal. The novel discourages, indeed opposes, a conflation of the two terms, or states; ordinariness, unlike normalcy, is not a result of regulation and coercion.

Any discussion of male impersonation in *Cereus Blooms at Night* would be incomplete without the mention of the "breathhtakingly beautiful" Otoh, desired by men and women alike (135), including Nurse

Tyler. Otoh is the child of Elsie and Ambrose Mohanty (a.k.a Boyie). Ambrose is Mala's childhood friend and later lover, whose commentary on the budding romance between Tyler and Otoh is described as "delightfully indiscreet:" " 'Mr. Tyler appears to be painting his face more diligently as time goes by,' I heard [Ambrose] whisper — albeit loudly — to Otoh. 'My boy, I think Mr. Tyler fancies you, wouldn't you agree?' Then he whispered much more softly, 'He is a Mr., isn't he?'" (125). Like Tyler, Otoh is not what he seems, but in a very different way. Otoh's full name includes a mysterious middle initial, the letter "A." The "A" stands for "Ambrosia," for Otoh was born a girl and nicknamed Otoh-botho (short for "On the one hand... But on the other hand") in school for his "vexing inability to make up his mind" (110). Otoh grows up as what the more taxonomically minded might label a bisexual transgendered biological female who passes for male. Even Otoh's parents "hardly notice that their daughter was transforming herself into their son. . . . The child walked and ran and dressed and talked and tumbled and all but relieved himself so much like an authentic boy that Elsie soon forgot she had ever given birth to a girl!" (109 – 110). In my next citation, Otoh dresses up in his father's old clothes, the ones Ambrose used to wear on his surreptitious visits to Mala (as narrated in the novel's Part III). In these formal clothes, Otoh becomes, as Ambrose puts it, "a reincarnation but not of a person per se, merely of a forgotten memory" (144).

Otoh A. Mohanty dressed himself in front of the mirror on the door of his armoire. There was no question in his mind this morning that he would not be wearing one of his mother's dresses to make the monthly delivery. He dressed instead in the heavy, black, pleated dress pants of his father. They fit him as though they had been custom taylored. He angled himself in front of the mirror and, with both hands in the pockets of the slacks, widened his stance, rhythmically rocking back and forth. He looked at his slender, three-quarter profile, tilted his head downward, squinted and thrust his jaw forward to give a sculpture line to his soft face. He puffed his chest and lowered his shoulders to turn his torso into plates muscle. He ran his palms across his two tight, little nipples. He held the nipples between his fingers, squeezed and rubbed them until they puckered into little squares, trying to imagine what Mavis might have felt when she lay next to him and touched his shirtless body. He was grateful for such small breasts. As long as his tightly belted trousers were never removed he had nothing to worry about.

He pulled on a dress shirt made of fine Irish linen. From years of storage the shirt was no longer white but unevenly cream-coloured. Fastening the long row of pearly buttons he wondered on what occasion his father might have worn such a shirt. Buttoned all the way up to his neck it hugged his body and showed off his leanness. He took a red, white and black-striped tie and knotted it loosely around his neck. Next, a black jacket and fedora. He posed.... In his father's get-up, Otoh looked more like a dancer. (140–41)

As if to guard Otoh's "secret" that, as Elsie puts it to him, "you don't have anything between those two stick legs of yours" (237), Tyler's narrative refers to him as "he," here and throughout the narrative, at the same time that he insists on using Otoh's full name in this instance (rather than the casual form Oty), including the residually feminizing middle initial. The narrative's performative suspension of identity at times creates uncertainties about other characters' sexual identities and about what they know of each other. Elsie Mohanty's question about Otoh's girlfriend Mavis, the only character who does not seem to know his "secret," is but one example: "you sure Mavis is a woman?" (238).

Otoh's "secret" is precisely what makes Otoh imagine an emotional bond with Mala, the woman his father once adored and to whom he now sends food every month. Otoh confesses to Tyler that "I felt as though [Mala] 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). Ironically, it is not taking off his clothes that would reveal Otoh's difference, or at least it would very much depend on the kind of clothes he was wearing in the first place. In a scene that is oddly parallel to Mala's stealing and Tyler's putting on the nurse's uniform, Otoh's first, unsuccessful, attempt at sharing his open secret with Mala impels him to wear a dress: "Before he had time to assess his actions he rose and went into the backyard, yanking one of his mother's dresses off the clothes line. In the mirror of his armoire he watched himself pull on the blue-and-white flowered garment, half expecting to resemble his mother, but there was no resemblance" (121). That Otoh is a biological female impersonating a woman here does not make this scene less of a drag act,⁵³ and, to Otoh, a risky one at that, because it may render his gender indistinguishable from his sex. In fact, Otoh is mortified that anyone, especially Mala, might see him in a dress (122). But that Otoh precisely

does not come to resemble his mother, or any woman, by putting on a dress underscores the idea of drag and of a gender performance that contrasts sharply with the image of perfection Ambrose voices in proud delight at the reality effect of Otoh's wearing his clothes: "You are a perfect replica of me in my prime. I have never seen you look so stunningly like myself before" (144).

If we compare the description of Otoh's dressing up as Ambrose to Tyler's own drag act, we notice glaring differences. Unlike Tyler, Otoh dresses in front of a mirror (both times, in fact), and his self-aware posing renders this scene an instance of autoeroticism. There is no audience here other than the narrator (and, of course, the reader), who seems to occupy the usually masculine, and invisible, position of a voyeur. Even the memory of Mavis serves only to reinforce the scene's autoerotic aspects, for, as Tyler remarks earlier, "the sensation of his body being played with was far more arresting and pleasurable to him than was the woman" (110). And unlike in Tyler's case, in which struggle and pleasurable awkwardness are necessary and desired aspects of the transformation, everything is a perfect fit for Otoh, who takes great pains to discipline the contours of his girl's body into perfect maleness: "The transformation was flawless. Hours of mind-dulling exercise streamlined Ambrosia into an angular, hard-bodied creature and tampered with the flow of whatever hormonal juices defined him. So flawless was the transformation that even the nurse and doctor who attended his birth, on seeing him later, marveled at their carelessness in having declared him a girl." Body image, combined with male clothes, supercedes anatomy to an extent that pulls the reader's credulity into the realm of magical realism, where words effectively supplement Otoh's physical lack of a penis to support an overall image of flawless masculinity. Otoh's body is so styled ("streamlined") into an image of masculinity by way of repetition ("Hours of . . . exercise") that it appears as an authentic expression of biological sex. The adjective "flawless," then, marks such authenticity as the point of greatest proximity between style and anatomy, the point where style is naturalized and nature herself turns into a performative effect. Quite unlike Tyler, Otoh is the perfect male impersonator, especially because he copies a very specific identity—that of his father. "It's as if I wanted to redeem my father's name," he tells Tyler, "to rescue [Mala] and be the Romeo he never was" (125). It is as if Otoh were trying to make the copy improve on the original, and, in a way, he succeeds, not because Mala mistakes him for Ambrose (which she does), but because he,

Otoh, is the one who incinerates Mala's house and gardens in Mootoo's revision of the ending of Jean Rhys's revisionary novel *Wide Sargasso Sea* (1966). Otoh's actions are responsible for the homeless Mala's conveyance to the almshouse, where both she and Otoh himself encounter Tyler. "I reminded him often that if it weren't for his intervention, as unfortunately as it may have seemed in the moment, she and I, *and* he and I, would likely not have met" (123).

There is, however, one small detail in Otoh's performance of masculinity which calls attention to the element of imperfection that remains lodged within the pervasive images of flawlessness: "Anxious to meet the woman who controlled the lives of both his parents, he forgot to match his footwear to his clothing. Otoh still wore his red rubber thongs, which exposed the pink edges of his soles" (141). This glaringly red mark of imperfection, which Mala herself does not notice when she takes Otoh to be Ambrose and which recalls Tyler's colorful 'kerchief' (14), is the narrator's way of reminding us that Otoh's disguise, however convincing, is still only partial. With this sign, which is not itself explicitly sexual, Tyler's narrative subtly troubles the image of Otoh's maleness which the scene simulates to the point of rhetorical perfection in concealing the conventions of which its maleness is a repetition. By calling attention to the constructedness of this performative image, Tyler makes Otoh human rather than a work of art. Tyler is smitten by Otoh not because the latter's performance of masculinity is so convincing that he seems to be "the real thing" (and Tyler, by his own admission, is attracted to men). Instead, Tyler is attracted to Otoh because she is able to imagine and appreciate the tantalizing partiality of Otoh's gender performance. What Otoh seeks to conceal, Tyler tends to flaunt, in the same way that Tyler "deconstructs" every night what Mala builds during the day.

Part III

My discussion of specific textual representations of performance opens onto broader questions of narrative performance. Overall, Nurse Tyler functions as an illegible narrator whose role is fundamentally to disorient the reader. The purpose of this disorientation is to suspend, at times through parody, concepts of socio-cultural and sexual identity. Consider, for instance, just how little we know about our narrator. Tyler tells us virtually nothing of his history beyond noting that he is "the only Lantanacamaran man ever to have trained in the profession

of nursing" (6) and that he took courses in the Shivering Northern Wetlands, an ingenious appellation that not only confers vividly unpleasant sensory impressions of the British Isles but also makes Tyler, like Ambrose, a returned exile. The mellifluous Lantanacamará is, by contrast, named for a tropical American shrub (*Lantana camara* in Latin) with showy yellow-orange flowers that evoke the spectacular blossoms of the titular cactus, a transplanted cutting which is all that remains of Mala's splendid chaotic garden—so different from the one we encounter in Kincaid's *My Garden Book* (1999). Only in the last part of the novel does his narrative offer a small piece of physical description, beyond cursory references to the allegorical Wetlanders' perception of him as "exotic." Tyler admits that "hours before the visitors [Ambrose and Otoh] arrive [Mala] and I, I more discreetly than she, are decked out and waiting. . . . I wore lip colour more thickly than usual, shades brighter than my dark lips" (247). But although the darkness of Tyler's lips appears to suggest that this narrator may be of African descent, it is equally the case that Ambrose Mohanty, a dark-complexioned Indo-Caribbean man, is also described as black, from the perspective of a much younger Mala, as Tyler imagines it⁵⁴ (196). Nor does the name *Tyler* help us in pinpointing an ethnic identity for this narrator, as it remains uncertain throughout whether Tyler is a first or a last name. The effect of this persistent uncertainty is that even in the presence of a name, Tyler remains oddly "nameless." It is as if what appears to be a proper name at first does not identify an individual so much as it describes another one of this narrator's roles, for a tyler, we find upon consulting either the *OED* or *Webster's Third*, is a kind of cerberus whose function is, historically, to protect Freemasons' meetings from eavesdroppers or intruders. A tyler, in other words, is a gatekeeper, one who is quite literally located on a threshold—and there are many different thresholds in this novel. When we recall, for instance, that Tyler refers to himself as "neither *properly* man nor woman but some in-between, unnamed thing" (71, my italics), we understand that liminality is, in fact, a state of impropriety. This applies also to the way Tyler narrates—improperly, or queerly. The fact that we cannot make any conclusive determinations either of Tyler's ethnicity or of his gender and sexuality is one of the effects of her improper narrative voice which also declines to offer any of the vernacular inflections that have become the expected linguistic signature of "natives," or "subalterns." Tyler "does" those voices as well, but they do not define him.

The scene of Mala's gift to Tyler and his coming-out performance is directly preceded by Mala's first verbal utterance to Tyler: "'Asha? You know Asha?' she whispered. Her voice was cracked but she had spoken" (75). Notwithstanding Tyler's insistence that "her question has nothing to do with what happened next," presenting the nurse's uniform is a symbolic act of communication that has, in fact, everything to do with Mala's only reluctantly recovered speech (an issue to which I will turn shortly). Mala's repeated questions about her younger sister Asha, who runs away from home in her teens, combines her yearning for (and mourning of) a once close companion, in this case, a sibling, with the acknowledgment of the existence of a different kind of kinship, one that exists in place of Asha's absence and other ruptured family ties. Such elective kinship, based on empathetic affinities and mutual respect, signals the emotional and intellectual possibilities that can emerge when bloodlines and the institution of the family fail to confer meaningful socio-cultural identities. In a narrative gesture parallel to Mala's initial (and repeated) calls for Asha, Tyler opens the novel with an emphatically italicized apostrophe, an appeal to one reader in particular: "It is my ardent hope that Asha Ramchandin, at one time a resident in the town of Paradise, Lantanacamara, will chance upon this book, wherever she may be today, and recognize herself and her family. If you are not Asha Ramchandin—who could, for all anyone knows, have changed her name—but know her or someone you suspect might be her or even related to her, please present this and ask that she read it" (3).

If, to Mala, her absent younger sister represents "the promise of a cereus-scented breeze on a Paradise night" (249), for Tyler, Asha is the figure of the ideal reader of his prose. But his writing is also significantly premised on Asha's absence, so that the desire for her presence is really a form of infinite deferral. Since Tyler is Mala's ideal interlocutor, it is but fitting that he comes to take Asha's place, in fact quite explicitly in the novel's last part, when he reads Asha's recovered letters to Mala in a scene reminiscent of the final scenes of Alice Walker's epistolary novel *The Color Purple*—but with a crucial difference. Mootoo does not stage an international family reunion *à la* Walker; in *Cereus*, the long-separated sisters do not and may never meet again. Instead, Mootoo suspends the very idea of the family in her narrator's "resignifying" of both hetero- and homosexualities as Nurse Tyler imagines what Butler calls "new ways of being a body within the cultural field" of the Caribbean.⁵⁵ In this context, the fact that Tyler's nar-

rative is directly addressed to Asha and extended to include “any other existing relative” of Mala Ramchandin is remarkable for eliding the name of their mother Sarah, who elopes with her lover Lavinia and is forced to leave her daughters with her husband.⁵⁶ This conspicuous elision ruptures, from the very start of the novel, the traditional feminist privileging of mother-daughter bonds.⁵⁷ The violence implicit in such rupturing calls attention to the violence that surrounds Sarah’s and Lavinia’s absence.⁵⁸ For in *Mootoo’s Paradise*, as in Toni Morrison’s *Paradise* (a novel published the year after *Cereus*), traditional marriages are dysfunctional,⁵⁹ and family ties are maintainable only through increasingly violent acts of coercion and expulsion. Consistent with the image of the night-blooming cereus and Mala’s attachment to it as an image of consolation, it is only during her (real or imagined) nighttime adventures, when she surreptitiously enters others’ houses, that Pohpoh can conjure up what amount to unreal, almost technicolor images of family, the only positive images available to her: “she imagined bedrooms with a happy family, a fairy-tale family in which the father was a benevolent king. There would be a *fairy queen* for a mother, and enough little cherub siblings to fill a very large shoe or pumpkin carriage, their fat, pink faces smiling even as they slept” (156, my italics). But, once again deconstructing what Mala builds, Tyler’s phrase “fairy queen” turns this entire fantasy inside out.

Having Tyler as narrator is a crucial part of Mootoo’s complicated reworking of the racial, sexual, and gender paradigms of (post)colonial patriarchies. According to such paradigms, in which “Mimeticism is standardly portrayed as feminizing,”⁶⁰ any indigenous culture is marked either as hyper-feminine or as effeminate, in sharp contrast to the masculine values associated with metropolitan culture. In *Cereus*, patriarchy is represented not only by the Reverend Ernest Thoroughly and his wife but also by Chandin Ramchandin, a “native” Hindu boy the Reverend takes from his family “to raise like his own child” and “to get a profession” (28–29), that is, to be a Christian teacher and a missionary. Chandin is the typical Naipaulian “mimic man” who rejects his lower-class Indian parents and “[embraces] not just the Reverend’s faith but his taste” to the point that he “felt most thoroughly assured of a place . . . in this new family” (29–30). But Chandin, quite unlike Naipaul’s Mr. Biswas, takes his mimicry too far, and in the wrong direction. He oversteps the bounds of his assigned “place” when he becomes sexually interested in his “sister” Lavinia, and her father resolutely invokes the incest taboo as a familiar cover for racism:

"Look here. You are to be a brother to Lavinia and nothing more" (37). Issues of racial purity come aggressively into play as Reverend Thoroughly deploys the rhetoric of (violated) kinship to regulate his adoptive son's sexuality as it threatens to cross the very race and class lines that Chandin's perfunctory marriage to Sarah, a "small, dark girl from the barracks," preserves. Of course, there is a double standard here, because Chandin's adoption by the Thoroughlys is evidence enough that kinship, rather than being a matter of blood or of inheritance signified by blood, is, in fact, discursively constructed as a normalizing social mechanism, one that prevents racial and other forms of mixing (for race includes, and doubles as, class).

Lavinia herself thoroughly rejects Chandin, though her reasons are rather different from what her adopted brother believes when he is told of her engagement to a cousin from the Shivering Northern Wetlands and marries Lavinia's friend Sarah out of a mixture of resignation, self-loathing, and spite. Lavinia at length returns to Lantanacámara to reclaim her lover in this partial novelistic reworking of Mootoo's short story "Lemon Scent," where both lovers are of subcontinental descent⁶¹ — her lover Sarah, that is, and her two young daughters Pohpoh (later Mala) and Asha. The lesbian subplot is hinted at early on in *Cereus* when Tyler narrates that, even as a boy, "Chandin would regard Sarah jealously and wonder what attributes she had that he lacked" (32). It is significant that the novel's representation of a lesbian relationship also involves an interracial couple (which it does not in "Lemon Scent"). The effect is one of double transgression, of the lines drawn to safeguard heterosexuality on the one hand and racial purity on the other. Lavinia, in other words, rejects Chandin because he is male (a condition represented as a lack), not because he is Indian, and to make kinship conventions even more ironic, Lavinia becomes an "Aunt" to his children. Aunt Lavinia's sexuality and her loving relationship with Sarah serve as a significant antidote to the homophobic portrayals of white lesbian characters in other Caribbean novels, notably Paule Marshall in *The Chosen Place, the Timeless People*, which attributes the falling away of orthodox masculine gender ideals to European decadence and, in turn, marks that decadence as (homo)sexually 'perverse.'⁶²

It is worth looking at how *Cereus Blooms at Night* relates performance and (im)propriety to "perversion," for Tyler admits to some initial confusion about how to distinguish the "natural" from the "unnatural."⁶³

Over the years I pondered the gender and sex roles that seemed available to people, and the rules that went with them. After much reflection I have come to discern that my desire to leave the shores of Lantanacamará had much to do with wanting to study abroad, but far more with wanting to 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 was what would be strange. I was preoccupied with trying to understand what was natural and what perverse, and who said so and why. Chandin Ramchandin played a part in confusing me about these roles, for it was a long time before I could differentiate between his perversion and what others called mine. (47–48)

Implicit in this passage is that "natural" and "unnatural" stand for perspectival and contingent performances, since, in human relations, no form of behavior is naturally "natural" or "unnatural." The distinction between them is a matter of convention, of "who said so and why." Chandin, for instance, defines the relationship between Lavinia and Sarah as "perverse." Their homosexuality, like the even less determinate relationship between Tyler and Otoh, as well as between Tyler, Otoh, and Mala,⁶⁴ represents a social arrangement alternative to that of the heterosexual family, and one that serves Chandin to justify his acts of violence and incest. If Lavinia and Sarah were scapegoats who represent what is "unnatural," then Chandin's action, designed to preserve the family, would ironically represent what is "natural." In short, kinship based on family is an oppressive, often violent regulatory fiction in this novel, and Chandin takes this fiction to an extreme. Chandin uses his position as kin to his daughters to wield domestic power, including sexual power, which culminates in his ultimate attempt to enforce Mala's loyalty to his idea of "family" by raping and sodomizing her. The unsettlingly detailed representations of extreme sexual violence in Part III of the novel, which are even more disturbing for being cinematically intercut with scenes of Mala and Ambrose's passionate romance,⁶⁵ end with the additional trauma of Ambrose's running away from a Mala who, he believes, has lost her mind, and with Mala dragging her unconscious, or already dead, father to the former sewing room, the very same space in which Lavinia and Sarah once hid from Chandin to consummate their relationship.

Once truncated, Chandin's "family" becomes a site of extreme oppression, laying bare the violence already latent within this institution from which Sarah and Lavinia flee. As a fortress against the threat their desertion poses, Chandin creates an arrangement that struc-

turally simulates a nuclear family by forcing Pohpoh to play the dual roles of daughter and wife. In a sense, Chandin commits incest with both of his daughters to avenge, and reverse, their mother's "crime": "One night he turned, his back to Asha, and in a fitful, nightmarish sleep, mistook Pohpoh for Sarah. . . . That is how it started. The following night he sent the two children to sleep in their own room, but they both came to know that he would call for one or the other to pass at least part of the night in his bed" (65–66). By way of repeated sexual coercion, Chandin tries to reestablish a position of conjugal power that he never held in the first place, either in relation to Sarah, his legal wife (to whom the narrative never once refers as Sarah Ramchandin), or to Lavinia, his imagined wife. In keeping with this, he reads Mala's romance with Ambrose as analogous to Sarah's elopement with Lavinia, as an adulterous theft of his property.

It bears considering that Pohpoh is depicted as understandably complicitous in her father's depraved endeavor of reconstructing the family as a protective edifice of normalcy. (The only way in which one would not judge Chandin's actions is to give in to the temptation to read him as a mere victim of neocolonial racism, and the novel does not allow that reading to stand). Severely traumatized by her mother's departure,⁶⁶ Pohpoh finds consolation in the "fairy-tale" images of family which Tyler's narration immediately invalidates. Pohpoh, in fact, creates her own version of those images by playing the role of protective mother to her younger sister, whom she screens from their father's sexual advances. Even when Asha's escape further damages the already truncated illusion of family, Pohpoh still refuses to let go of what Butler, with Derrida, would call a "citational practice" that very much works against her. It is only when Chandin attempts to kill both his wife-daughter and her lover Ambrose that Pohpoh, now the young adult called Mala, takes action by killing her husband-father in order to save Ambrose's life. Ironically, it is now Ambrose who feels threatened by Mala, "an unrecognizable wild creature with a blood-stained face" (228), and takes flight into more recognizable regions, much like his "son" Otoh does in his aborted reenactment of the Romeo role, and, to Mala's mind, like her mother did. Repetitions of ruptures and losses abound, and the price Mala pays when her final act of disobedience is unable to arrest their proliferation is the temporary "loss of her sanity." "Long ago" and "today" suddenly converge to create a "bizarre familiarity" (228), and Mala no longer recognizes Pohpoh as an earlier version of herself. What the rest of the town perceives as loss of sanity,

however, is an ultimate gesture of self-protection, for without temporal distinctions, there can be no memory — and no pain. And this, it seems, is the only effective way of breaking the pattern of repetitions that determine, imperceptibly to her, the course of Mala's life. Most fatefully perhaps, Mala is unaware of the troubling similarities between Ambrose and Chandin that Tyler's narrative produces when it parallels their scenes of eating the meals she so diligently, and repeatedly, prepares for these men, both of whom persist in calling her Pohpoh instead of Mala.⁶⁷ The point is not that Ambrose is *like* Chandin but that the narrative positions them similarly *vis-à-vis* Mala to suggest that Ambrose, in his fearful passivity (he sleeps for months on end), may only be a slight improvement, and not a structural change.

The splitting off of Pohpoh from Mala also enables Tyler (who is told parts of Chandin's story by his Cigarette Smoking Nana when he is still a child) to imagine Pohpoh in such a way as to revise Mala's history and to reevaluate her "madness." His narrative connects Mala's perceived loss of sanity with her emotional investment in the lesbian relationship she helps guard against her father's suspicions. The following passage takes us inside Pohpoh's mind through free indirect discourse.

There used to be a photograph of Mama leaning back against the kitchen sink, facing the camera. Perhaps it was only the photograph that caused Pohpoh later to imagine that Aunt Lavinia had also stood there with Mama, because she had an indelible impression of them both leaning on the narrow sink basin, their sides pressed tightly together. The image stayed in Pohpoh's mind, fortified with a memory of Mama trying to send her and Asha out to play, and of Pohpoh feeling something was being concealed.... Pohpoh's heart leapt when she saw the tips of Aunt Lavinia's fingers grasping Mama's waist. She understood something in that instance but save for a flash of an image of her father's face in her mind, she had no words to describe what she suddenly realized was their secret. (55–56)

Nurse Tyler imagines in the character of the child Pohpoh the as yet unarticulated qualities of empathy and/or complicitousness he comes to cherish in the old woman Mala. In the same way that young Pohpoh seeks to protect Lavinia and her mother from her father's jealous wrath — "Pohpoh detected an unusual hardness on Papa's face and she lurched across, placing herself between Mama and Lavinia" (57)—her adult "mad" self facilitates the transgressive romance between Tyler

and Otoh. Mala's "madness" can thus be read as a performance that results from the need to protect an unconventional practice by way of active dissimulation. The Paradise almshouse is a classic Foucauldian environment of discipline only until Tyler re-reads the "madness" of "crazy lady" Mala Ramchandin as dissembling oppositionality. On the basis of that re-reading, he establishes their "shared queerness" (48) and turns the space of the almshouse into a stage for Mala's and his own potentially liberating performances. Mala, like Tyler, is a curiosity with whom nobody wants to have close contact; their bond is one of "common reception." They are both outcasts. "Miss Ramchandin and I, too, had a sort of camaraderie," of the sort that Tyler compares to the relationship she, the "Peculiar Grandson," enjoyed with his maternal grandmother, Cigarette Smoking Nana: "we had found our own ways and fortified ourselves against the rest of the world" (48). This "shared queerness" encourages Tyler "to imagine [Mala] in the roles they had cast her in, for it did occur to me that this unusual woman might know what was going on in my head" (24), and that their nonfamilial performance of kinship might heal the trauma that makes Mala's personality, like her voice, "crack." In the plot and in the narrative, the key to these performances is the ethos of collaborative fabrication that Mala's furniture towers come to represent.

Important to understanding the collaborative process in narrative terms is the fact that Tyler's brief prefatory statements at the beginnings of Parts I and II are both self-conscious apologies in which this (auto)biographer calls attention to herself in the language of playful self-effacement:

my own intention, as the relater 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 the 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. (3; original italics)

For one, we understand from this emphatic disclaimer, hardly an unfamiliar literary device, that Mootoo's novel will be very much about Nurse Tyler, for it is Tyler's "lapses" that make this text exist comfortably, but not complacently, in between genres, interstitially, like Tyler himself — between fiction, *testimonio*, biography, and autobiography.

Tyler's countless "lapses" at first appear to be asides, but they gradually connect into a narrative thread that weaves in and out of the story of Mala Ramchandin. This separate, yet intimately interwoven, narrative charts Tyler's movement from the quiet despondency of "recalcitrant yearning" (20) and public "propriety" to the forms of narrative impropriety which testify to public self-acceptance. But although there are many references to condescension, malice, and "disdain for my ways," even well before we have any explicit mention of Tyler's "girlish ways" and "unusual femininity" (71), our narrator valiantly resists the strong temptation "to be the romantic victim. There is in me a performer dying for the part, but I must be strict with myself..." (15). In addition to recalling to our attention the narrative's investment in performance, the idea of being "strict" resonates ironically with Sister's chiding Tyler for making up "his own rules" (13–14), which is, of course, precisely what he does when he narrates.

Tyler's indeterminate gender performances, along with his insisting that penetration (or too-forceful insertion) is not an appropriate figure for his kind of narrative authority, puts her in league with female autobiographers who "tend to defy traditional gender roles as well as restrictive forms of national and personal identity in their narratives."⁶⁸ The desire for such defiance would make it most attractive for transgendered narrative to avail itself of the form of autobiography. In Mootoo's novel, then, autobiography is used explicitly as a genre that supports *non*-traditional forms of identity and as a vehicle for articulating Tyler's transgressive desire for cultural and literary authority beyond "propriety." As a fictional autobiography that is also a biography, *Cereus Blooms at Night* is a variation on the form of the *testimonio*. But although Tyler may fill the role of Mala's scribe, she does not tell her story in any ordered fashion, nor is she the only one who tells it.

She rambled under her breath all day and all night, as long as she and I were alone.... I came to realize that no response was required yet I knew it was no accident that she chose to chatter only in my presence. For a while I considered this to be merely an honour. Then I began to recognize in her mutterings elements of the legendary rumours.... 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. . . . There was a purpose to it all and to all the chatter, and finally a purpose to my listening and to sifting, cutting and sewing the lot. (99–100)

In fact, Tyler is unable to “cut” and “sew” the lot (one of the instances of the garment metaphor that stands for the imaginative reconstruction of his own and Mala’s life) until he meets and engages in dialogue with Otoh and Ambrose: “From both him and his father I was able to fill in gaps and make sense of things she mumbled” (102). Despite “the temptation to digress from my mission,” which becomes nearly “overwhelming” as Tyler’s involvement with Otoh takes more than imaginary shape, Tyler promises to “exercise restraint” as he applies himself to the role of Mala’s witness and scribe, “fashioning,” as she puts it, “a single garment out of myriad parts . . .” (105, ellipsis in the original). The metaphor of the garment effortlessly pulls together the many passages in the novel devoted to clothing, including Sarah’s sewing room, and helps establish that the pages textured with images of words (and, incidentally, visual, material—semiotic illustrations, of sorts) function as appropriately artistic vestments for our (late) “blooming” narrator.

As significant as the presence of the two italicized pages is their pronounced absence from the novel’s remaining three parts, where Tyler’s body has become so integral to the overall narrative’s texture that she no longer, or not always, needs to dwell on its prefatory margins—that the acceptance of such marginality is strictly, as it were, strategic. Tyler is still different from most of the other characters but no longer, or not always, stands apart from what are really his creations. By the end of the novel, Tyler’s articulated need to exercise “proper” restraint and discipline is readable precisely as dissembling at the moment when it has yielded almost entirely to the exuberance, even self-indulgence, of a second coming out: “I decided to unabashedly declare myself, as it were” (247). As narrator, he has done that all along. Tyler’s two unusually adorned prologues encourage us to appreciate just how much her narrative revels in its own improprieties. Tyler dresses up in someone else’s clothes, be they trousers or dresses, at the same time that he fashions his own narrative garment in an important textual de-emphasis on the figures of voice we would associate with Mala’s inchoate “chattering.” Although there is an inevitable sense of progression in almost any novel, we must keep in mind that the narrative’s movement in *Cereus* is decidedly nonlinear. The non-italicized

apostrophe that (already? again?) appears in the main body of the narrative near the end of Part I, where Tyler's address to Asha doubles as a commentary on his narrative strategies, is only one example: "You see, Asha, I must rationalize your leaving and her staying — and, as many see it—going mad. Otherwise, I must admit to feelings of anger that you left your sister behind" (90).

Given Tyler's position as narrator, it is interesting that the novel's text renders Mala's "chattering" as silence; her words, however inchoate, are not quoted. Relevant in this context is that Mala takes leave of words—presumably a sign of her madness—and only slowly, reluctantly, regains a degree of willingness to speak, especially publicly. "In the phrase just before Mala stopped using words, lexically shaped thoughts would sprawl across her mind, fractured here and there. The cracks would fill with images. Soon, the inverse happened. A sentence would be constructed primarily of images punctuated by only one or two verbalizations.... Eventually, Mala all but rid herself of words...every fibre [of her body] was sensitized in a way that words were unable to match or enhance.... Many of her sounds were natural expansions and contractions of her body" (126–27). It is difficult to decide if this state is pre- or post-linguistic, for it could be either or both. But what is not difficult to see is that this non-human language, as a form of linguistic impropriety, is related to Mala's oddly shaped installations, the furniture blockades "piled several feet thick" (129), which she begins to construct after she locks her father's body (corpse?) in the sewing room. These temporary installations are artful extensions of Mala's body rather than visible representations of a traumatized mind. As such, these sculptures bring home the point that Mala's nonverbal articulations, be they visual or oral, are to be understood as "natural expansions and contractions of her body" only if we qualify, or altogether abandon, any rigid distinctions between "natural" and "cultural" (the realm of the unnatural). As already stressed in my commentary on Otoh's stylized body, it is a certain style, or mode, of perception that "naturalizes" environments, bodies, behaviors, and any other form of social and sexual practices, allowing them to perform as if they were natural. Additional cases in point in this novel are Mala's and the almshouse gardens, both of which are stage settings for the blooming of the cereus, which is no less of a performative event than anything else in this novel. Relatedly, there is Lantanacalara, the island space that is as much of a linguistic artifice as the Shivering Northern Wetlands are. Reading this novel, then, is a

process of decoding unfamiliar languages, some of them almost like Braille. Though mimetic forms of articulation, Mala's insect and bird sounds (which the novel does not actually try to represent in the form of onomatopoeia) function in the narrative as submerged articulations of her "queerness." These sounds function paradoxically as representations of silence, which connect with other, para-textual, representations: the drawings of insects that adorn many a page, and to which I referred above as illustrations of sorts.

The fact that Shani Mootoo is also a visual artist,⁶⁹ whose media are painting and especially videos, should make us attentive not just to represented visual objects, such as the photography which Pohpoh manages to rescue from her father's destructive wrath (116), but to the unusual visual aspects of the text of the novel itself. While most of the small insect drawings mark what would be section or chapter breaks, there are several exceptions, which include one solitary image of a beetle, unaccompanied by any text, at the bottom of the book's final page. Even more conspicuous is the opening page, which features three images: a detailed drawing of a ladybug inserted casually between two sentences as if it were just another punctuation mark; a somewhat larger image of a beetle placed similarly at the bottom of the page; and, most prominently, the gracefully suspended life-size reproduction of a dragonfly across which the page's first few lines flow. There is only one other page like this in this: the prologue to Part II (105). In light of Mala's sounds and the novel's wordplay on insect/incest, it is difficult indeed to read these images as nothing more than random illustrations. It is as if these were images produced by sounds whose actual textual absence, or silence, forces them into shapes other than words. Their insistence on detail notwithstanding, these drawings are not realistic representations of Ambrose's entomological interests or of the denizens of Mala's garden, including the sheet of white moths that covers and consumes her father's dead body. Nor do they simply enhance memories from Mala's school days, notably the graphic scenes of insect torture, which separates Pohpoh from her peers (92). These semiotextual signs call attention to that which cannot be spoken, or written, which is much more than a clear-cut tale of victimization. These drawings of insects, and of the occasional mollusk, are visual representations of the limits of language, of what Janet Frame would call "the edge of the alphabet," which we inevitably reach, for ill *and* for good; for ill, because we are forced to realize what words cannot do; for better, because what cannot be spoken or written can neverthe-

less exist as an intelligible performance of kinship—like that one precious instance when Mala and Tyler together, unencumbered by linguistic and other discursive conventions, build their tower. What I take away from that memorable scene is that, in the case of both fictional characters and readers, subscribing to an identity may help one achieve power, which is admittedly useful at times, but it does not make one more human. The price of such power is the loss of one's ability to imagine oneself otherwise, and to act accordingly by granting others, whoever they are, the same privilege. ●

Notes

1. Nichols, pp. 52–53.
2. For definitions of, and distinctions between, these concepts that have affected my own use of them, see Butler 1993, pp. 12–16; and Geraldine Harris, pp. 72–73.
3. “Postcolonization” is Patrick Hogan’s alternative to the slippery term “postcolonial.”
4. See Burton, especially pp. 198 and 208; and Carole Boyce Davies, “Carnivalised Caribbean Female Bodies: Taking Space/Making Space,” in Davies 1998, pp. 333–46.
5. Chin, pp. 128–29.
6. See, for example, Dash, *The Other America*.
7. I am borrowing this phrase from the title of Myriam Chancy’s 1997 monograph, which I find unwittingly telling in this regard. See also, Davies and Fido; O’Callaghan 1993; Brydon and Tiffin; and Davies 1994. The Index to *The Routledge Reader in Caribbean Literature* (Donnell and Welsh) does not have entries for sexuality, homosexuality, gay, or lesbian, never mind queer.
8. See Shea; Guinness; Stummer and Balme; Anim-Addo; Juneja; Chancy; Newson and Strong-Leek; Renk; Patteson; Balutansky and Souriau; and Magister. The second tier is usually occupied by Olive Senior, Beryl Gilroy, Pauline Melville, and Joan Riley (all U.K.-Guyana), Merle Hodge, Phyllis Shand Allfrey (Dominica), Erna Brodber (Jamaica), M. Nourbese Philip, Grace Nichols, Paule Marshall, Sylvia Wynter, Marie Chauvet (Haiti) and U.S.-Haiti writer Edwidge Danticat, who, like Julia Alvarez from the Dominican Republic and the Cuban exile Cristina Garcia, writes and publishes in English. From Puerto Rico hail Rosario Ferré and Esmeralda Santiago, and the Dutch-speaking Caribbean rim is represented, more or less single-handedly, by Suriname-born Astrid Roemer. If ones wishes to include other parts of the Caribbean rim, there are Elena Poniatowska, Angeles Anstretta, and Laura Esquivel from Mexico (whose books are record sellers in their English translations), as well as Gioconda Belli from Nicaragua. For a brief survey of women writers from the Dutch-speaking Caribbean, see Ineke Phaf’s essay in Cudjoe, pp. 357–64. For more information on francophone Caribbean Women writers, see Condé and Lonsdale. On Hispanic Caribbean writers, see Levine; Pereira; Smorkaloff; and Alvarez Borland 1998.
9. Among the few essays on Indo-Caribbean women writers that have been published since Ramabai Espinet’s “The Invisible Woman in West Indian Fiction” in 1989 (excerpted in Donnell and Welsh, pp. 425–30) is Kenneth Ramchand’s “Coming Out of

Repression: Lakshmi Persaud's *Butterfly in the Wind*" (in Anim-Addo, pp. 225 – 38), which performs precisely the kind of appropriative, simplifying reading that Paravisini-Gebert laments. Persaud's 1990 novel should not be confused with Julia Alvarez's *In the Time of the Butterflies*.

10. See Susanne Mühleisen, "Encoding the Voice: Caribbean Women's Writing and Creole," in Anim-Addo, pp. 181–82.

11. See Kincaid 1997, pp. 7 and 40. Kincaid's *Annie John* has been criticized by Merle Hodge for not reflecting the specificity of the Antiguan experience in her language (Hodge, p. 53), drawing all-too-familiar lines along the cultural insider/outsider axis. That the two texts written by Powell and Kincaid deal with experiences not immediately identifiable as their own would compound the charges of outsiderism.

12. These approaches to race are represented by such essays as Zain A. Muse's (Omisola Alleyne) "Revolutionary Brilliance: The Afrocentric Aesthetic," which focuses on the work of Erna Brodber and filmmaker Julie Dash (in Liddell and Kemp, pp. 239–54), as well as by most other work on black women (Davies 1994; Davies and Ogunipe-Leslie, for instance). Notable anti-essentialist critical perspectives are Smyth and Elia.

13. Brand, p. 45.

14. Chin, pp. 132–35; and Smyth, pp. 142–43.

15. Quoted in Smyth, p. 142.

16. Martínez, p. 277. Although a number of Hispanic Caribbean women writers have "presenced" female sexuality in emphatically erotic literary representations, their textual politics are on the whole much more heteronormative than is the case with anglophone women writers. Some of their male colleagues, notably the Cubans Severo Sarduy and Reinaldo Arenas, have reworked the homosocial aspects of machismo into a literature of baroque homoerotics, which is also frequently interracial. In most of Cuban literature (and literary criticism, for that matter), *mestizaje*, homosocial machismo, male homoeroticism, and misogyny are perfectly aligned (see Kutzinski 1993).

17. An extreme case of this belief is the work of Panamanian novelist and poet Cubena (Carlos Guillermo Wilson), which obsessively and indiscriminately links whiteness and the desire for values associated with the colonizer with homosexuality.

18. Anti-theory pronouncements are not infrequent among Caribbean(ist) feminist critics. See O'Callaghan 1992 and 1993 (Chapter 6: "Woman version": ideological theory). I take Savory's 1998 article (esp. p. 298) to be an implicit criticism of Antonio Benítez Rojo's influential study *The Repeating Island*, whose intellectual paradigms are unabashedly, stunningly masculinist (see Kutzinski 1993). Savory does not mention this aspect of postmodernist critical subject matter and approaches (see Wicht as an example of this).

19. Paravisini-Gebert, p. 162.

20. Loc. cit.

21. See Balutansky, p. 272. The logical, though extreme, conclusion to draw from Paravisini-Gebert's repeatedly stated fears of metropolitan appropriation is that books written by Caribbean women writers in exile should, perhaps, not be published in the first place. Surinam-born writer Astrid Roemer points out, "In our trying to get the attention of publishers, editors, critics, and the rest of the world: our readers, we must play the sublime trickster games by using Western values in behalf of our own interests" (184).

One of Roemer's examples is Michelle Cliff's Harry/Harriet in *No Telephone to Heaven*, not coincidentally a character of indeterminate gender. (Harry/Harriet is also discussed as a trickster figure in Rend, pp. 136–39.) A more sensible objection to publishers' post-colonial feeding frenzy, one of the most egregious examples of which is Chelsea House's 1997 volume *Caribbean Women Writers*, come from Narain and O'Callaghan when they note that "in the rush to catch this trend, material which needs further development and crafting has been published" (p. 625). On publishing issues, see also Joan Amin-Addo, "Audacity and Outcome: Writing African-Caribbean Womanhood," who points out that "the struggle for publication remains, particularly for those women writers interested to explore the Creole voice" (Amin-Addo, p. 215).

22. For a feminist critique of the black Atlantic diasporic paradigm, see DeLoughrey.

23. Paravisini-Gebert, p. 168. Her examples are Marie Chauvet, Julia Alvarez, and Dany Bébel-Gisler.

24. Loc. cit.

25. See, for instance, Joan Riley's novel *The Unbelonging*, which is set in London.

26. See Smyth, p. 144.

27. Paravisini-Gebert, p. 161.

28. *Ibid.*, pp. 163–64.

29. Balutansky, p. 269.

30. *Ibid.*, p. 268.

31. Narain and O'Callaghan, p. 626.

32. *Ibid.*, pp. 629–30.

33. Such hostility conspicuously underlies the recent controversies surrounding *Me llamo Rigoberta Menchú y así me nació la conciencia* (1983), translated in 1984 as *I, Rigoberta Menchú*, a text made notorious by its inclusion in the Stanford University diversity curriculum and by its author's being awarded the Nobel Peace Prize in 1992. For details, see both 1999 pieces by Stoll; Stavans; and Hunsaker, chapter 1. In conversation, Miguel Barnett dismissed my comments on sexuality and gender politics in his *Biografía de un cimarrón* (in Kutzinski 1997) as distasteful. See also Walter, who rightfully complains about the provinciality of research on the *testimonio*.

34. Narain and O'Callaghan, p. 627.

35. I follow Michel de Certeau (and Richard Burton) in my use of the term "opposition" as a practice of contestation from within a given system. See Burton, p. 6.

36. Wilson Harris' critique of realism in the arts dates back to his first collection of essays, *Tradition, the Writer, and Society*, 1968. See also Wilson Harris 1999, pp. 202, 206.

37. Melville, pp. 8–9; my italics.

38. *Ibid.*, pp. 7–9.

39. Butler 1990, p. 5.

40. Although almost all postcolonial departures from the realist mode are universally (and simplistically) classified as "magical realism," we need to bear in mind that the sexual and gender politics of much contemporary Caribbean fiction written in English are notably less conservative than they are in the work of magical realism's most illustrious progenitors, who are Latin American and male: Juan Rulfo, Gabriel García Márquez, and Alejo Carpentier (to reach back a bit farther to "lo maravilloso americano").

41. Butler 1990, p. 147.

42. That Phillips' poems are included in the *Callaloo* special issue signals interests beyond heterosexuality and heteronormativity.

43. My use of the term ventriloquism differs significantly from James Arnold's and is far closer to Pauline Melville's. See Arnold's comments on the "ventriloquized body," that is, a female body through which the voice of the male oral historians speak, and the sexual politics of créolité (p. 42).

44. Notes Elaine Savory Fido in *Out of the Kumbia*: "The perception of literature or of writers from the Caribbean as being able to be confined to large simplicities of race, nationality, color, class or gender is simply a very misguided one" (Davies and Fido, p. 30).

45. Butler 1990, p. 139.

46. Because I do not want to reinvigorate the center-periphery paradigm by focusing on familiar issues of marginality, I am less interested in the gay and lesbian thematics that characterize novels such as Nigel Thomas' *Spirits in the Dark* (1993), Patricia Powell's *A Small Gathering of Bones*, Dionne Brand's *In Another Place, Not Here* (1996), and short fiction such as Shani Mootoo's and Makeda Silvera's respective collections, *Out on Main Street* (1993) and *Her Head a Village* (1994).

47. In her critique of Monique Wittig, Butler notes that heterosexuality is not the only compulsory display of power that informs sexuality (1990, pp. 121–22). See, for instance, Molloy and Irwin, who do not mention any in-between genders or sexualities and whose main focus remains on male homosexuality.

48. Elia, p. 354.

49. This figure of the hermaphrodite is indebted to Wilson Harris, in whose novels, such as *The Infinite Rehearsal* (1987), one can detect the germs of a similar gender play in Robin Redbreast Glass' ability to see inside his mother's womb, to be inside his mother's womb and be aware of it.

50. The details of Mootoo's stockings recall a scene in V.S. Naipaul's *A House for Mr. Biswas*, in which the request of a dark-complexioned African-American woman for "flesh-coloured stockings" produces, much to her horror, black nylons from the Indo-Caribbean shop girl at the Tulsi's store (Naipaul, pp. 83–85). All quotations from *Cereus Blooms at Night* are in textual parentheses.

51. In the role of healer, Tyler is a literary descendent of Michelle Cliff's Harry/Harriet from *No Telephone to Heaven*, a bisexual, non-operative transgendered biological male who "had also been studying the healing practices" (Cliff, p. 171). Yet, Nurse Tyler is not like Harry/Harriet in other important respects. Tyler is far more illegible than Harry/Harriet is, for the indeterminacy of his gender, in combination with his homosexual desires, significantly extends to his ethnicity and class position. The lack of specifics about Tyler prevents readers from imposing race, class, and gender/sexual identities on this character. Tyler also differs from Harry/Harriet in his unwavering sexual attraction to male characters, such as the doctor who comes to look in on Miss Ramchandin, and Mr. Hector, the gardener. By contrast, Harry/Harriet, according to Cliff, not only "wants to be a woman" but "loves women" (quoted in Elia, p. 352). For a discussion of Harry/Harriet as a queer character, see also Elia.

52. Those of us with deconstructionist leanings, myself evidently among them, might attempt to take advantage of certain properties of English to combine familiar possessive pronouns into a linguistic image of Tyler's "unusual femininity," one that retains a degree of masculinity. One possibility is the ambiguously, or multiply, gendered possessive pronoun "hi/r," in which the area to the right of the slash marks a highly unstable place of performative interchangeability where the respective consonants "r" and "s" can produce subtle, though significant, differences. By this logic, "hi/s" would not be the same as "his." The effect of "hi/r" is only visual, for its sound is indistinguishable from the conventional "her." In the case of Tyler's lover Otoh, whose preferred gender role is that of a man, one could use "he/s" as an analogous construction that sounds the gender preference while retaining a space for the possibility of femininity after the slash, where the "s" stands in for the expected "r" and can, at times, give way to it. The personal pronouns "he" and "she" prove more resistant to such modifications, and one could opt to keep "s/he" for both Tyler and Otoh because of its easy compatibility with the above neologisms. Clearly, this would have to be handled very differently in other languages. Rosi Braidotti, in an interview with Judith Butler, notes that "the notion of 'gender' is a vicissitude of the English language, one which bears little or no relevance to theoretical traditions in the Romance languages" ("Feminism by Any Other Name. Interview," in Weed and Schor, p. 41).

53. See Geraldine Harris, p. 58.

54. If we place Nurse Tyler in the literary company of Cliff's Harry/Harriet, he is most easily imagined as a character of mixed European and African ancestry—but even that seems insufficient. No matter how we turn our readings, we remain unable to construct a definitive genealogically- or phenotypically-based identity for Nurse Tyler, and must find a different way to imagine her—however awkward that may seem at first.

55. Butler 1990, p. 127.

56. Smyth notes the possibility that Lavinia and Sarah may have died, which would suggest that they can survive neither inside nor outside of the ironically named Paradise (p. 158fn7).

57. We can similarly read the non-resemblance between Otoh in female drag and his mother as a related disavowal of mother-daughter bonds. But Mala resembles her mother no more than Otoh does his. If Mala Ramchandin is some sort of symbolic repository of a group identity, she certainly is not so in the way in which the language of nationalism usually conceives of women as mothers. Not only is she herself not a mother, her own mother is a lesbian—a "fairy queen" of sorts.

58. This violence "ensures that the novel's utopianism is still implicated in (and resistant to) very real conditions of exclusion and oppression, as does its implicit linking of Mala, Tyler, and Otoh with decolonizing politics" (Smyth, p. 151).

59. In *Cereus*, marriage is not a privileged domain of sexuality. This is as true of the marriage between Chandin and Sarah as it is of the one between Ambrose and Elsie Mohanty, both of which dissolve.

60. See Hogan, pp. 17–18, 22.

61. See Mootoo 1993, pp. 45–57.

62. See also Rigoberta Menchú's locating of the source of prostitution and (male) homosexuality in Hispanic society (Hunsaker, pp. 23–24).

63. According to Smyth, the novel “plays with the designations ‘perverse’ and ‘natural’ in relation to the ‘natural’ world of plants and insects that surrounds Mala’s house. This linking of the metamorphosis of sexuality with the larger metamorphosis of the natural world serves to authorize the location of these marginal characters in Caribbean space” (p. 149). This, to my mind, is not the only function of this “play.”
64. Smyth calls Mootoo’s associating Tyler and Otoh with Mala a “risky move” (p. 148) without really explaining what she means by that.
65. Pohpoh’s adolescent sexual encounter with Boyie/Ambrose Mohanty (see pp. 93, 95–96), whom she treats selfishly as an object of pleasure and consolation, anticipates their later romance.
66. Just how severe that trauma is does not become clear until 132ff, where the specific position of the morning sunlight triggers memories of her mother’s departure and precipitates a recurrence of that initial trauma (p. 63).
67. Related here are also monthly food deliveries that Otoh makes to Mala in his father’s stead.
68. Hunsaker, p. 7.
69. For information in Mootoo’s videos see Smyth, p. 146; and Rashid 1995.

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