Maria Cristina Fumagalli, Bénédicte Ledent & Roberto del Valle Alcalá (eds.)


The Cross-Dressed Caribbean is in many ways a timely book. Though long in coming (I remember seeing the call for submissions around 2007), its publication in 2013 followed a summer in which there was much media coverage both within the Caribbean region and internationally about the murder of Dwayne Jones/Gully Queen—the teenager who, after attending a party in Jamaica dressed in female attire, was chased by a mob and killed. There had also been a recent, much publicized ruling in Guyana’s high court on a motion that challenged a colonial law under which persons could be arrested and charged with cross-dressing for an “improper purpose.” In 2013 cross-dressing was very much on the Caribbean agenda.

At the same time, the essays collected here highlight the fact that cross-dressing has long been part of Caribbean culture, history, and discourse. They trace multiple ways in which it has served a range of ideological, discursive, performative, and political purposes—concealment, subversion, spectacle, symbolism, resistance, rebellion, mimicry, and parody—and has been a key, if sometimes unacknowledged, part of Caribbean identity, politics, and poetics. They consider its role and meanings within colonial and national histories but also raise questions about its radical potential for imagining alternate futures.

Part One, “Revolutions in Drag,” examines cross-dressing, gender, and nation in the contexts of the Cuban Revolution and postindependence Jamaica and in Francophone Caribbean literature. Each essay revises and interrogates “masculinist paradigms” that have defined Caribbean nationalisms and often frame discussions of Caribbean revolutionary traditions. Two rethink the image of the “New Man” central to the Cuban Revolution; others revise masculinist imaginings of maroonage.

The book’s segments do not all constitute contained thematic units. The question of passing, for instance, foregrounded in the title of Part Two (“Passing through Time”) and explored, in its various discussions of gendered, racial, class, spatial, and temporal crossings, is also taken up in Mayra Santos Febres’s lyrical essay, “The Caribbean and Transvestism” and Odile Ferly’s essay, “Defying Binarism.” Santos Febres’s essay (first published in 2004) is, in turn, discussed in essays by Odile Ferly, Roberto del Valle Alcalá, and Isabel Hoving. In highlighting the collection’s multiple returns to various texts and themes, I mean to call attention to the way this book not only analyzes but also performs repetition, crossing, and unsettling of cate-
categories—practices that are read throughout as emblematic of the cross-dressed Caribbean.

This textual complication of categories is played out in one marked way in Part Three. “Theories in the Flesh” stages a discourse on what might be recognized as theory. Among the entries are narrative, lyrical, and critical essays and a short story. Although the editors are keen to note that these selections are “informed by a refusal to distinguish between ‘critical’ and ‘creative’ pieces” (p. 18), I would argue that their editorial move in fact engages this very distinction in order to perform a kind of genre cross-dressing—one that exposes, yet also relies on and thus doesn’t necessarily undo this discursive binary which operates as part of our critical discourse.

Part Four, “Symptoms and Detours,” like much of the book, unsettles and challenges discrete areas of knowledge through its performance of readings across different Caribbean linguistic areas and cultural spaces in essays on multiple Caribbean territories. Thus, this book, like other recent queer Caribbean texts, negotiates an Antillean discourse that is significantly more relational than comparative. These essays variously emphasize syncretism, hybridity, doubling, and repetition alongside their mapping of difference.

Despite key points of continuity with recent queer Caribbean discourse, the book also takes up specific theoretical concerns, including attention to tensions, specificities, and differences that mark the use of terms such as transgendered, transvestite, and transsexual. While essays like Roberto Strongman’s raise questions about the use of “first world terminologies” (p. 216) vis-à-vis creole ones, other essays such as Roberto del Valle Alcalá’s highlight the cross-dressed Caribbean’s “rebellious discursivity”—its opacity and excess which serve to challenge “typification and taxonomy” (p. 54).

Yet the marked focus on questions of discursivity and symbolism in many of these essays may also miss an opportunity for critical interventions on the social experience and implications of cross-dressing. Although the publication of this text follows on events that have served to bring the question of cross-dressing to popular attention, the analysis of it as actual lived experience and social phenomena is subordinated here to the discussion of its symbolic uses and meanings. Yet I am reluctant to position this as a failure of the volume. In many ways this critical focus serves to underscore the way discussions of gender and sexuality in Caribbean Studies have largely been concentrated within literary and cultural studies. The Cross-Dressed Caribbean highlights a need for broader cross-disciplinary engagement in our critical practice.

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