Queer Untranslatability in *Cereus Blooms at Night*

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Abstract: This article explores the intersection between the concept of untranslatability and queerness, in order to examine the ways queerness can be thought beyond the binary options of assimilation to the state and the theoretical refusal of politics. Drawing instead on Hortense Spillers' idea of a grammar as delimiting possibility through semantics and syntax, I argue that untranslatable queer affect can be read against specific grammars. *Cereus Blooms at Night* (1996) by Shani Mootoo exemplifies how affect which cannot be translated into the terms of the dominant colonial grammar retains subversive potential. In the novel, this grammar is marked by heteronormativity and 'miscegenation' taboos. When a queer event destabilizes the dominant grammar, queerness is shown to be an underlying current. Rather than 'translating' queer affect into institutionalized grammars, analyzing queer untranslatability as potential points towards an opening that challenges Eurocentric comparative practice. In *Cereus Blooms at Night*, the protagonist embodies untranslatability and her legacy makes possible queer connections, untranslatable to the dominant grammar.

Keywords: Fiction, Untranslatability, Colonial, Grammar, Queer

The term queer has undergone many different semantic translations - from 'strange' to 'homosexual' to buzzword or a radical politics. Rather than providing a stable definition of queer, I am interested in whether queer maintains radical potential without being re-absorbed into the framework of the Eurocentric nation-state. This article is concerned with how queer can function through untranslatability as something that reveals open-endedness, as a possibility towards 'something else'. My starting points are the queer options of either 'assimilation' or 'refusal' through which the Western dominated discourse is often framed. Both are arguably premised on a prior understanding of 'identity', of 'being known'. Both function through the grammar of the nation-state, whether positioned 'inside' or 'outside'. I suggest instead focusing on the spaces in-between and beyond, those that defy easy conceptualisation. To do so, I ground the potential of queer in a grammar that is rooted in a specific history and forms the basis of un/translatability. Drawing on Hortense Spillers' suggestions that places are organised through a grammar which determines the syntax and semantics of what is possible, I am looking at the traces of British colonial grammar in a fictionalised colonial context. Specifically, how queer, hereafter largely synonymous with non-normativity, translates in relation to a dominant grammar.

I am proposing that reading postcolonial works of fiction for instances of queer untranslatability in relation to a dominant grammar can open up what queer means beyond the binary options of refusal and assimilation. Postcolonial fiction can create space for the difficult negotiations between gendered and sexual non-normativity and the remnants of the colonial moment of rupture. Literary inquiry allows for those affects, silences, desires, movements, and negotiations that do not fit into conventional analysis to take shape. This means that what is untranslatable into the grammar through which we make sense of things, is momentarily foregrounded as carrying subversive potential. Silence, nonsense, meanings unspoken or implied, resist association with 'proper' identity formation. I focus on processes of meaning-making, rather than textual aesthetics. The concept of

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untranslatability, as will be explained, is rooted in Comparative Literature which has long been criticised for its Eurocentrism. As such, knowledge production in the academic discipline is not innocent of historical and continuing injustices based on colonial, racist and gendered violence. Anti-Black violence today in the USA, Europe and other parts of the world, is deeply connected to the 'carnal knowledge', of colonial grammars, as highlighted in different ways by thinkers like Hortense Spillers,[1] Audre Lorde,[2] Frantz Fanon,[3] Joan Anim-Addo,[4] Ann Stoler,[5] Saidiya Hartman,[6] and many others. Black Trans people especially are made to bear the consequences of this grammar that normalised such violence. It is important to remember that knowledge production is not just a theoretical exercise, but directly linked to the necropolitics, coined by Achille Mbembe,[7] governing life and death. I understand queer theory as a politics towards liberation from multiple intersecting oppressive systems.

In my reading of Shani Mootoo's *Cereus Blooms at Night* (1996), untranslatable queerness is set against a colonial grammar, which is dominated by 'miscegenation' laws and compulsory heteronormativity. Queerness emerges through the complicated and ambivalent experiences of life itself, rather than through institutional discourse. As a mixed-race non-binary person myself, who benefits from white privilege and is positioned in Europe, my understanding of the cultural contexts of the novel is necessarily limited. I do not attempt 'correct' interpretations, but rather seek out different queer responses to a dominant grammar.

I aim to combine discourses around radical queerness with untranslatability and alternative theories on affect, generating new ways to understand the potential of untranslatability. While I question the need for a universalising theory of queer, I am interested in the relationship between non-normative affect and specific dominant grammars and the untranslatable forms queer can take. This is kept open to include untranslatable language, utterance, affect, silences, and embodiments. I argue that queerness is underlying the colonial Christian grammar in *Cereus Blooms at Night.* A queer event destabilised the social and political order, leading to the main character to embody untranslatability. She is paving the way for other queer affects to challenge the dominance of the white Christian colonial grammar, opening up the possibility of 'something else'.

Queerness and the Grammar

In order to examine the dynamic between queerness and a specific dominant grammar through untranslatability, it is useful to outline what is at stake. Theories on radical queerness often position the queer subject against nation-state, its borders and identity categories.[8] The demand to remain unknown to the state, as prominently proposed by Lee Edelman, asks of queer people to embrace the 'death drive' to resist liberal futurity.[9] This position, however, has been criticised by a 'Queer of Colour Critique' (e.g. José Esteban Muñoz, 2009), to be a possible condition only for the privileged queer subject that already has achieved fundamental protection of their queerness.[10]

The key question is how queerness functions beyond binaries of refusal/assimilation, and prescriptive/descriptive, personal/systemic theory. Rahul Rao, in his recent work 'Out of Time' (2020), argues that focusing on space, and particularly on postcolonial spatiality, can reframe the discourse. Turning to postcolonial spaces opens up a critique of how the conditions that delimit the possibilities what queer means are embedded in global histories. Rao cautions us to not romanticise the postcolonial space through a singular understanding of queerness. He criticises that the arguments which map homosexuality or homophobia onto specific nation-states through reference to the moment of colonisation 'have bought into a common nativism, whereby forms of desire and prohibition that cannot be shown to have existed within the boundaries of the nation are ipso facto illegitimate' (Rao 19).

Pointedly phrased as '"pinkwashing" of the pre-colonial past,' (ibid.) the recent rise in retrieving the archives to argue for the existence of non-normative sexualities risks following a circular logic. Rather than analysing queerness, from a Eurocentric 'modern' perspective, projected onto the past, Rao draws on Hortense Spillers' concept of a state grammar to configure relations grounded in a specific location.

Spillers situates the captive Black female[11] body in the semantics of the symbolic order of the United States, arguing that an 'American grammar' (68) was established through the rupture of the Middle Passage and slavery. Based on her examples of white naming practices of Black kinship formations, she argues that the social position of Black Americans is enabled by the 'laws of American behaviour that make such syntax possible' (79). Considering that states follow specific semantics and syntaxes that derive from particular histories, it becomes clear that conceptual mutations of queer are linguistically forged historical struggles. Spillers demonstrates that what makes a possibility in the present is intrinsically linked to historic violence. Additionally, the colonial roots of this historical violence have arguably affected the gendered dynamics of multiple locations, constituting the specific grammar of various postcolonial spaces. As Rao suggests, 'We might think of the grammar of the state, then, as its dominant symbolic order, 'the ruling episteme' that is forged in the originary foundational violence to which it owes its existence, a violence that marks a beginning but "is really a rupture and a radically different kind of cultural continuation"' (214–215, quoting Spillers 68).

The potential of queer to open up radical alternatives as negotiations beyond assimilation or refusal therefore depends on the historical circumstances that formed the dominant grammar. The colonial roots of the dominant grammar are steeped in the historic rupture of enslavement, and carry its 'cultural continuation' into the syntax and semantics of different postcolonial contexts. Tracing the knowledge systems behind colonial contexts, Ann Stoler argues that colonial taxonomies contribute to reifying 'carnal knowledge' in order to maintain control over colonial subjects.[12] Carnal knowledge describes the colonial management of sexuality, relationships, family, intimacy and affect, especially along the lines of gender and race, by which normalcy and its deviance are institutionalised. Rather than repeating the taxonomies that order the lives of colonial subjects by 'comparing' affect to a fixed notion of 'known' normalcy, 'unruly practices' (Stoler xi) trace the relationship between queer affect and a specific grammar which remains anchored in its history. Such a bottom-up analysis allows us to interrogate non-normative affective negotiations for what they are, opening up new theoretical possibilities.

Re-thinking Untranslatability and Affect

Analysing affect as 'unruly practice', is to examine the struggles between queer intimacies, desires, embodiments, textual openness and a specific grammar that delimits 'what is possible'. These struggles are not necessarily identified as 'queer struggles', or waged through conventional signifiers for non-normativity. Taking up Rao's invitation to form an account of queer postcolonial connectivity that is 'more attuned to desire, intimacy, affect, and movement in those everyday realms in which the state, law, and its genealogies are not overwhelming preoccupations' (Rao 220), untranslatability can open up ways of queer response, negotiation, and resistance to the semantics that translate queerness into either abjection or normativity.

Taking up untranslatability as a political intervention into the perennial discussion on what Comparative Literature is, Emily Apter deconstructs the discipline's 'translatability assumption' (Apter 3) by tending to the constitutive outside, that which is not easily absorbed into the Western claim to universality. Premising the creation of knowledge about the Other as central to colonialism, translation functions as a tool to make the

Other legible on the coloniser's terms. The question arises how untranslatability can be used, in its demand of alterity, to deconstruct the premises of comparison itself, and which forms it can take on as a queer practice. Recent attention to the intersection of queerness and translation has either largely ignored untranslatability[13], or focused on untranslatability[14] and only marginally touched on queerness.

Untranslatability as a disruption of meaning is as a move towards what Gayatri C. Spivak has coined 'planetarity'. Planetarity takes the place of globality, by positioning the planet as the 'species of alterity, belonging to another system' (Spivak 72). While the globe is scattered, overwritten already with hierarchies and universals, 'transcendental figurations of what we think is the origin of [the] animating gift [of being intended toward the other]' (ibid. 73), the planet remains an undivided sphere, a system we can never make sense of, yet inhabit 'on loan' (ibid. 72). Planetarity deconstructs the local/global dichotomy and reminds us of the spaces beyond and in-between. Each intention towards each Other is based on the absence of epistemologies, as much as it is configured within the image of a totalising presence. Paying attention to silences, non-translations, mistranslations or awkward translations, destabilises the supremacy of the dominant grammar. The struggle between theoretical possibilities and practical obstacles, between a dominant grammar and queer lives, opens up 'something else' which makes it possible for untranslatability to function 'not from language to language but from body to ethical semiosis, that incessant shuttle that is a "life"' (ibid. 28).

Reading literature for those affects that are not expressed through a queer politics, or even through spoken language itself, allows for an insight into the movement 'from body to ethical semiosis'. In other words, if untranslatability is central to language translation, it is also central to the systems of meaning-making that are bodily, unnamed, or silenced. Intervening in the mind/body dualism of Western philosophy, affect theories highlight emotive and embodied knowledge. Responding to Sara Ahmed's influential contribution of 'affective economies'[15] in which affects circulate, leaving impressions on bodies, Joan Anim-Addo draws attention to how the specific relations of the plantation economy complicate such notions. Focusing on temporal and spatial dimensions, she argues that 'Neither affect nor community remains a stable category, for each moves through history and time' (18) Localising affect whilst simultaneously proposing that attention to the specificities of colonial encounters changes how affect is embodied, guides 'creolising affect' towards planetarity. Anim-Addo's suggestion to view 'affect as silence, masking and disruptive performance' (7) takes seriously the specific affect of the plantation economy. Affect that is untranslatable, or difficult to translate, into a language comprehensive to the grammar, functions similarly as 'an affective register resistant to instant decoding' (14). That is not to universalise 'creolising affect', but to build vocabularies of untranslatable affects that are specific to their postcolonial contexts. Connected by histories of the carnal knowledge of colonial violence, such registers of untranslatability reach beyond language, but centre resistant body-minds as crucial and resourceful in navigating the dominant grammar's gender regimes.

Cereus Blooms at Night: Queerness underlying Colonial Society

Cereus Blooms at Night by Shani Mootoo is set on Lantanacamara, a fictional island in the Caribbean, during colonialism. It follows the stories unfolding around the life of Mala Ramchandin, the daughter of Indian converts who are themselves children of indentured labourers. The story is framed by and told through her interactions with Tyler, a 'gay' nurse in a home for the elderly in a town called Paradise. Full of queer connections, the novel captures how different characters respond to a queer rupture of the social order which is held up by strict racial hierarchies. Through untranslatable affects, particularly

Mala Ramchandin's 'loss of language', but also through intimacies and gender identities that exist beyond the legibility of the dominant grammar, the colonial order is destabilised. Navigating queer desires and identities, Mootoo's characters transgress the grammars officially available and open up possibilities of reading queerness as a dynamic always already underlying colonial society. Situated in a moment of rupture, queerness here is not in a singular relationship with official institutions and dominant grammars. Instead, the novel portrays a struggle in which untranslatable affect encompasses what cannot be made intelligible, yet forms the ground for possibility.

Colonial society forms its dominant grammar on the rupture that creates the category of 'race'. Implicating gender, class, caste, ability, and so on, race functions as the result of racism, itself fundamental to the epistemological regime that aims to continuously justify the colonial project. Lantanacamara's grammar is based on a Christian colonial order upholding miscegenation laws and heteronormativity.[16] This is exemplified by the central presence of the missionary family, the Thoroughlys. They adopt Chandin, later Mala Ramchandin's father and abuser, away from his family, whom Chandin turns to view as inferior. Converting to Christianity, Chandin mimics the Thoroughlys' behaviour, speech and dress, quickly becoming 'embarrassed by his parents' reluctance to embrace the smarter-looking, smarter-acting Reverend's religion' (Mootoo 30) and ascribing his community's social position to a 'result of apathy and a poverty of ambitions' (ibid. 31). Through 'observ[ing] his new family and listen[ing] to their conversations' (ibid. 32), Chandin takes on their vocabulary. In Homi K. Bhabha's terms, Chandin becomes 'a subject of a difference that is almost the same but not quite' (Bhabha 122). How 'thoroughly' the colonial management of race and gender is manifested in Lantanacamara's grammar is evident through Chandin's courting of Lavinia, the Reverend's white daughter. Chandin's love for Lavinia is accompanied by intensified self-loathing on the basis of race. When the Reverend condemns Chandin's love for 'his sister', the dominant grammar's miscegenation taboo is revealed as a principle semantic.

The emphasis on race in the Christian colonial state grammar is highlighted by the hypocrisy of Lavinia's eventual marriage and divorce from her white cousin in the 'Shivering Northern Wetlands' (Mootoo 38), fictional for England. The same social taboo is re-purposed on racial lines to secure the myth of 'white purity'. Similarly, racial hierarchies play an important role in the securitisation of Trinidad's[17] state grammar. Indentured labourers were seen to join the workforce on their own accord, yet ended up in another form of enslavement. Chandin's father made the journey for future generations to succeed in ways he could not; in the Caribbean 'it was easier to slip out of caste' (ibid. 27). Yet, as the novel makes obvious, discrimination based on race, substitutes casteism in the dominant grammar. The management of intimacies, affects, relationships, and identities holding up the social order is organised around race to reinforce white supremacy. As Grace Hong argues, 'colonial manifestations of discourses on propriety, morality, and sexuality are always implicitly a register of the contemporary effects of economic internationalization and the consequently altered role of the nation-state' (75), and we might add to that, of a colony's grammar. The gossip that ensues in Lantanacamara after Sarah and Lavinia leave the island as a couple, reinforces underlying 'anxieties' that non-normative sexualities evoke for the social order.

The Centre Cannot Hold

The grammar is destabilised, its cracks start showing. This queer event triggers change on Lantanacamara, traced throughout the novel through Mala's horrific abuse and eventual seclusion, as well as through future possibilities. However, the rupture arguably highlights not a beginning, in which queer is either accepted or rejected, but rather 'a radically

different kind of cultural continuation' (Spillers 68), in which untranslatability surfaces, disrupting the illusion of stability. After being rejected by the Thoroughlys for his love for Lavinia, Chandin decides in a rage to marry Sarah, an Indian convert herself. Lavinia's relationship with Sarah that ensues in the shadow of Chandin's gaze, poses a fundamental risk to the social order. Lavinia's queerness destabilises the role of whiteness in the novel and its claim to moral supremacy, which is based on the Christian ideal of a cis-hetero family unit and implied miscegenation laws. The two women's relationship challenges this grammar. It emerges from their close childhood friendship into an intimacy that is expressed through secrecy, 'whispering and giggling' (Mootoo 57) and gestures narrated through the glimpses Mala catches as a child, like 'the tips of Aunt Lavinia's fingers grasping Mama's waist' (ibid. 56). These affective gestures are multi-dimensional and thus hard to classify. Chandin and Sarah's marriage, its intelligibility, rests precisely on the untranslatability of these queer affective gestures. So much so that the gossip that ensues on Lantanacamara after Sarah and Lavinia's escape is spoken 'under their breath and with hands perched at their lips' (ibid 65). The villagers' unease to discuss what happened derived from guilt, 'for they felt as though they were discussing, not the Ramchandins or Lavinia, but rather their Reverend, their church and their God' (ibid.) Doubt about the missionary's knowledge and belief systems functions like a collective and constant current that underlies what can be said. The white Christian colonial grammar is momentarily exposed as a centre that cannot hold.

Yet, there is no possibility of a 'return' to a grammar 'before' the securitisation of race as ordering social hierarchies. The colonial grammar emerged from the rupture of enslavement, indenture, and missionary education which set the realm of an 'official intelligibility'. Mala is later described as someone 'whose father has obviously mistaken her for his wife, and whose mother had obviously mistaken another woman for her husband' (ibid. 109), re-framing Mala's rape and Sarah's queerness through an explanation that relies on a 'mistake' within the norm. The social order situates queerness as grammatically captured by race. While Sarah and Lavinia do not stake political claims against the colonial grammar of Lantanacamara, their relationship reveals the impact of untranslatability to make use of affects, gestures, silences foregrounding the violence upon which the colonial grammar is founded. Queerness as underlying the state grammar is woven throughout the semantics of the social order. Rather than being 'recovered' or 'discovered', it is made sense of through the gaps, or fissures, of the grammar. Instead of searching for an idealised, readily translatable 'authentic' 'native' name for queer affect, Smith points out that 'the local names for things do not inherently promise liberation' (Smith 10). Mootoo herself puts into question the claim to any 'authenticity' by situating her story on fictionalised land. On Lantanacamara untranslatability remains crucial to convey queer affect.

Embodying Untranslatability

Central to the novel is Mala Ramchandin's relationship to language. As such, she embodies untranslatability when Tyler first encounters her at the Paradise Alms House. Miss Ramchandin, seen as 'frightful' by the other nurses, is put in the care of Tyler, who shows patience towards her muteness, interrupted only by 'mournful wailing' (Mootoo 17). She is strapped onto her bed, disciplined and punished for her 'inability' to express herself. Tyler recognises a mutual state of 'being different', which leads him to realise a human connection, despite the heavily institutionalised context, and that his 'actions spoke more eloquently than any words' (ibid.). Her untranslatability is perceived in the institution as a sign for a lack of agency. She does not verbally agree, nor disagree to her treatment, nor does she give clear non-verbal signs through which agency could be conventionally read. Instead, Tyler notices her masking certain affects by noticing his own reaction to

her. Not to appropriate her affective register, but rather, in a move towards 'planetarity', realising his own knowledge systems being put into question through the encounter. He 'felt an empathy for her clenched fists, defiant stare, pursed lips and deep, slow, calculated breathing – am empathy that words alone cannot describe' (ibid. 19). The limits of language are not an obstacle to their connection, but rather make it possible. When Mala starts making the sounds of 'bird, cricket and frog calls' (ibid. 24), Tyler interprets her untranslatability through their 'shared queerness' (ibid. 48), bridging the differences that yet rely on their mutual differentiation from the semantics of the colonial grammar. He accepts her communications, her knowledge and resilience without translating into the grammar of the racialised social order which would see them both othered and institutionalised.

Mala's embodiment of untranslatability occurs after an intensely violent and graphically narrated encounter with her father, leading to Chandin's death and Mala's dissociation from a reality that was too painful to bear. She becomes unrecognisable to her short-termed lover Ambrose, and retreats into seclusion. Having no one to communicate with, her relationship to language radically changes. While the loss of communicable language is a recurring gothic trope of the 'isolated crazy woman', Mootoo details the process, worth quoting at length:

> 'In the phase just before Mala stopped using words, lexically shaped thoughts would sprawl across her mind, fractured here and there. The cracks would be filled with images. Soon the inverse happened. A sentence would be constructed primarily of images punctuated by only one or two verbalizations: a noun tentatively uttered in recognition, a descriptive word confirming a feeling or observation. A flock of seagulls squawking overhead might elicit a single word, *pretty*. That verbalization, she came to understand, was not the feeling itself but a name given to the feeling: *pretty*, an *unnecessary translation* of the delight she experienced seeing the soaring birds. Eventually Mala all but rid herself of words' (ibid. 126, my highlight of 'unnecessary translation')

The reader witnesses this process from Mala's perspective, illustrating untranslatability as a potentially empowering semantic alternative. The 'cracks' in her 'lexically shaped thoughts' reveal the fragility of syntactical language to hold affect, silence, meanings that 'do not fit'. As a conscious process, Mala realises the 'unnecessary translation' of feelings into words, emphasising the arbitrary connection between signified and signifier. Mala embodies untranslatability, thereby disassociating from the possibility of being re-absorbed, neither into a discourse of assimilation, nor of refusal.

Her struggle with the past is also a struggle with the historic violence of the particular colonial grammar. 'Lexically shaped thoughts', first become 'fractured', like the rupture that forms the violence with which different communities are displaced onto Lantanacamara. The images that take the place of her lexicon instead are severed from the demands of the imposed Christian colonial grammar, syntax and semantics become open ended. Seeing birds fly, symbolic for a freedom she cannot otherwise claim, provides an experience of delight. Mala finds comfort in observing her surroundings and her intuitive feelings, rather than recovering a position within the imposed grammar that stopped 'making sense' for her. Giving up on the syntax that ordered life in a way which led to her violation, she furthermore re-orders time through the smell of decay, as the 'aroma of life refusing to end' (ibid. 128), and space, by stacking furniture to hide away the entrance to the room with father's corpse. It is not just Mala who changes, but the whole framework of space-time, thereby disturbing the possibilities of the particular translation necessary for upholding the symbolic order.

Mala's relationships to space and time are strategically untranslatable. 'At ten o'clock in the morning Mala knew the sun would catch on a jagged edge of the back porch roof where the iron was torn' (ibid. 132). The event triggers the moment her mother and

Aunt Lavinia left years ago. As space and time take on radically different meanings, she one day 'began strategizing against it' (ibid.). By first inhaling bird-pepper sauce and then putting it on her tongue, she undergoes intense physical pain, nausea and exhaustion, desensitising herself. 'Her flesh had come undone' (ibid. 134) - It forms a violent bodily disruption of her embodiment of untranslatability, an affective performance to remember that 'she had survived' (ibid.). The physical memory of the particular space and time, altered by the hot sauce, triggers her speaking words, begging to not be left behind. For a moment, she translates the pain she carries into words, evoking an affective memory, as 'alienated property of a body' (Karavanta 14). Mala reclaims her past and future to assert life in the present, and to heal her younger self by invoking her childhood name (Pohpoh) as a figure besides her when the police searches her house. Affective memory disrupts the securitisation of the grammar by highlighting the misrepresentation of space, time and syntax as linear. Mala/Pohpoh 'trespasses' through time and space, when Mala talks to an imagined PohPoh next to her, and lives vicariously through dreams of her childhood self, running through the Thoroughlys house.

Queer Connections

The queer scandal surrounding the Ramchandins stands in close connection to both Tyler's and Otoh's stories of non-normative gender identities. Their identities remain untranslatable as there are no appropriate names available. On Lantanacamara, as in many (post-)colonial contexts, visibly queer characters are not captured by the simplifying binaries of 'authentic versus imposed names'. Tyler, who tells Mala's story, grows to find comfort in himself based on the queer legacy of the latter's story. Her memories are passed on to him through affective gestures, for example her stealing a dress from the female nurses for him to wear. Tyler mentions himself as 'neither properly man nor woman but some in-between, unnamed thing' (Mootoo 71), existing beyond the syntax of the state grammar which does not allow for 'neither/nor', and 'both/and' to be inhabited by one body. Even though his femininity evokes gossip among the other nurses, it allows not only the connection with Mala, but also with Hector, the gardener who uses Tyler as a reference, recognising in him his lost brother. Tyler is aware of his own position with regard to Mala, as well as to the generational legacy of how his 'unnamed', untranslatable self exists in relation. On the very first page, he addresses the reader writing, 'However, I cannot escape myself, and being a narrator who also existed on the periphery of the events, I am bound to be present' (ibid. 3). His presence is not just a sign of accountability towards the story, but also of the queerness underlying Lantanacamara's grammar. Like a palimpsest, non-normativity is a hidden presence, the periphery of the narrative which enables it to become legible, to be written.

Furthermore, Ambrose's son, Otoh's, gender identity is not questioned but instead exposes colonial taxonomies. Otoh's masculinity challenges claims to authenticity and what is considered 'natural' or 'scientific'. He is 'so much like an authentic boy that Elsie soon apparently forgot she had ever given birth to a girl' (ibid. 110). 'Passing' as a boy, Otoh uses the language available to him, without having to refer to a 'prior' state of either the nation or himself. Untranslatability here functions to interrupt the translation between what is considered 'reality' and language. Rather than society questioning the signifier 'boy' in relation to his body parts, the system of translation is deconstructed. 'So flawless was the transformation that even the nurse and doctor who attended the birth, on later seeing him, marvelled at their carelessness in having declared him a girl' (ibid.). The attention lies precisely on the space between signifier and signified, such that 'reality' loses authority. Rather than looking for a scientific 'authenticity', untranslatable queerness reveals a communal difference to the social order, thereby destabilising the science behind

the carnal knowledge of colonialism. When Elsie momentarily foregrounds Otoh as 'different', she does so by referring to his kind of queerness as communal, asking, 'You grow up here and you don't realize almost everybody in this place wish they could be somebody or something else?' (ibid. 237-8). The wish towards 'something else', as an unnamed, yet-to-come condition, unites Lantanacamara's residents in their situation under a colonial grammar which delineates and prescribes the possibilities of language and being. Otoh and Tyler bond through their connection with Mala, itself based on a mutual difference. '*I am different*! You can trust me, and I am showing you that you are the one person I will trust' (ibid. 124). While the particular differences remain untranslatable, it is the 'showing', a relational act, that opens up the possibility for trust.

I have shown that the concept of untranslatability can be used in literary analysis to interrogate queerness as a radical concept. Beyond queer refusal or assimilation politics, untranslatability highlights those affects that are grounded in the specific circumstances of (post)colonial grammars. Such negotiations between queerness and gendered and racialised grammars, illustrate queer politics from a bottom-up perspective, in which language itself always already interacts with unnamed bodily affect and silences. Given that little work has been done on the intersection of untranslatability and queerness, the discourse could be progressed in multiple directions. Further research should be done into the specific modes of (post)colonial untranslatability in relation to grammars. I am aware that untranslatability is a concept with various meanings. It would be pivotal for (queer) interdisciplinary studies to engage different uses of untranslatability in their commonalities and differences. Examining queerness in its relationship with a particular grammar, derived from a continuous (post)colonial history, challenges not only Eurocentric comparative practices, but crucially points towards an opening, 'something else', yet to be imagined.

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Notes

[1] See Hortense J. Spillers, 'Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe: An American Grammar Book' in *Diacritics*, 17:2, (1987), pp.64-81

[2] See Audre Lorde, *Sister Outsider*, (Berkeley: Crossing Press, 2007)

[3] See Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, (New York: Grove Press, 2007)

[4] See Joan Anim-Addo, 'Gendering creolisation: creolising affect' in *Feminist Review*, 104, (2013)

[5] See Ann Stoler, *Carnal Knowledge and Imperial Power*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2010)

[6] See Saidiya Hartman, *Wayward Lives, Beautiful Experiments*, (New York: WW Norton & Co., 2019)

[7] See Achille Mbembe, 'Necropolitics' in *Public Culture*, 15:1, pp.11-40, (2003)

[8] See for example, Puar, Jasbir *Terrorist Assemblages*, (Durham: Duke University Press, 2007

[9] See Edelman, Lee, *No Future*, (Durham: Duke University Press, 2004)

[10] See Muñoz, José Esteban, Cruising Utopia, (New York: New York University Press, 2009)

[11] A body conventionally read as female, although as Spillers also highlights, how the 'female body' is 'made sense of' is not static or singular, depending on historical context.

[12] See Note 5.

[13] See for example, B.J Epstein and Robert Gillett ed., *Queer in Translation*, (London: Routledge, 2017); Brian J. Baer and Klaus Kaindl ed., *Queering Translation, Translating the Queer*, (London: Routledge, 2018)

[14] See for example, Duncan Large et al., *Untranslatability Interdisciplinary Perspectives*, (London: Routledge, 2019)

[15] See Sara Ahmed, *The Cultural Politics of Emotions*, (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2014)

[16] For an overview of the Caribbean's politics of homosexuality and miscegenation, see Smith, Faith ed., *Sex and the Citizen: Interrogating the Caribbean*, (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2011)

[17] The novel is said to be modelled on the island of Trinidad, where Mootoo's parents are from.

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