

Alterity, Recognition and Performance: The Queer and the Animal in Makeda Silvera's "Caribbean Chameleon"^{1,2}

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ABSTRACT

This article explores notions of performativity in the story "Caribbean Chameleon," published in Makeda Silvera's collection *Her Head a Village* (1994). The story emphasises problems of performing with regards to the categories of race and gender as they pertain to the lived experience of Anglo-Caribbean migrants in Canada, a country which, in spite of its ostensible positive engagement with difference, is nevertheless still systemically hostile to migrants. Being able to adequately "perform" race or gender in a non-threatening way for the system becomes imperative for migrants, which the story

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2. I would like to acknowledge and thank my reviewers and editors for their thoughtful comments and suggestions on this piece.

highlights framing its critique of racial profiling within the conventions of the stage. This opens the door to examining the types of performativity with which “Caribbean Chameleon” engages. In this article, I discuss how notions of performance, performing and performativity interact with representations of queerness and animality, which provide and constitute modes of alterity that intersect with questions of race, gender, and (un) belonging that are raised in the story.

Keywords

Performance; Makeda Silvera; Queer; Animality; Race; Gender; Alterity.

Makeda Silvera’s “Caribbean Chameleon,” included in the short story collection *Her Head a Village* (1994), follows one woman’s return to Canada, where she lives and works, from Jamaica, whence she hails and where she was taking a vacation. The journey ends dramatically as she is taken into custody after an unfounded search of her person and belongings at Toronto Pearson Airport elicits an enraged response from the woman, who reacts against the racist profiling of the Immigration officers.

Although a short story generically, “Caribbean Chameleon” is in fact framed like a play. Both in terms of content and form, the story begins in the manner of script headings by defining the scene’s setting (“Yard. Xamaica. Jamdown. Jah. Mek. Ya. JA. Airport”) and characters (“Gunman, mule, don, cowboy, domestic, refugee, tourist, migrant, farmworker, musician, political exile, business exile, economic exile, cultural exile, dreadlocks, locks-woman, fashion-dread, press-head, extension-hair, higgler”), followed by the common action of the characters (“Leaving the Caribbean for the North Star”) (Silvera, “CC” 27). If the opening lines mimic an author’s stage directions, the second page in the story lists its characters in order, in the style of *dramatis personae*:

Travellers dressed to kill.

Woman in red frock, red shoes, red extension hair, black skin.

Dreadlocks, Clarke’s shoes, red, green and gold tam, smoking one last spliff.

Cowboy in felt cap, dark glasses, nuff cargo round neck to weigh down a plane.

Woman in black polka dot pant suit. Black winter boots high up to knees, drinking one last coconut water.

Tourist drinking one last Red Stripe beer inna sun hot. (28)

It is notable that the initial “roll call” of characters (Lamont 335) that appears in the would-be scene headings does not exactly match this second list of individuals provided in the makeshift *dramatis personae*. The five characters it features, around whom the story’s action revolves, are described in 20 phrases divided unequally among them. Although some of the descriptors used,

like "dreadlocks" or "cowboy," are, because of their repeated use, immediately linked to one or other character, the lack of information on the travellers beyond a basic appraisal of their physical appearance leaves the task of distributing the remaining labels to the reader. The reader's lack of information to differentiate the characters that could pose an actual threat—like the "gunman"—from those who would be innocuous foreshadows the central drama of the story, that of the woman in the polka dot pant suit. This woman is criminally profiled by prejudiced border officers and driven to what is depicted as a fit of madness in response to the unfounded search of her person and belongings after she is singled out as suspicious. Because the travellers are all "stock characters" (Lamont 335) representing a cross-section of individuals who may conceivably gather at an airport at any given moment, they become empty signifiers on which the reader is free to pour their assumptions, much in the same way that the customs officers in the story do. In a narrative that is crucially concerned with outside perception, Silvera's withholding of further illustration of her characters plays with the different diegetic frames in the story to place the reader in the shoes of the Immigration officers and leave them alone to discern which of the presented individuals fit the descriptions provided at the beginning.

Beyond the scriptwriting conventions hitherto discussed, the story's connections with the stage are made explicit after all characters are (im)properly introduced: "Theatre, live at the airport" (Silvera, "CC" 28). Within this frame, this storyfied piece of theatre would consist, I argue, of three acts marked by the characters' geographical location: in Jamaica at the airport, where the story begins; in-flight on the plane from Jamaica to Canada ("[a]pproaching the North Star" [29]); and at Pearson International Airport's border control in Toronto ("Plane fly low. North Star light pretty, shining all over di land. Immigration" [30]). Already in the presentation of the different locations there are subtleties that may betray Silvera's own situatedness: Canada is positively, but arguably somewhat obliquely, referred to as the "North Star," whereas Jamaica is broken down phonetically ("Ja. Mek. Ya" [28]), as if to make it palatable or accessible to someone unfamiliar with the country. The breaking up of words is also a linguistic feature typical of Dread Talk, the speech of the Rastafari, that uses wordplay as way of bringing about new ways of understanding.³ Breaking up the word "Jamaica" thus situates Silvera's writing within a specific social, linguistic and epistemic tradition that stresses the Caribbean roots of the story and its protagonist, foregrounding Jamaica against Canada from the beginning. The story further focalises on the Caribbean experience by only alluding metonymically to the flight's destination, Toronto, using the more indirect reference "Pearson

3. See Velma Pollard. I thank my editors for bringing this to my attention.

International Airport," one of the first points of entry for migrants into the country. The fact that the setting of the story does not move away from airports one way or another can be read, precisely, as a comment on the precarious status of Caribbean migrants in Canada, around whom the story revolves. In his influential book of the same name, Marc Augé identifies the airport as a typical instance of "non-place," which is, paradigmatically, "the traveller's space" (Augé 86). Non-places represent a break in the individual's experience of place where, against the latter's subjective inscription, there is a lack of signification that breeds both solitude and anonymity. Because "the user of a non-place is in contractual"—not affective—"relations with it (or with the powers that govern it)" (Augé 101), and because a user never *inhabits* the non-place or owns it, they are permanently threatened with expulsion. This makes the relation of the individual with the non-place precarious: if users are compelled to "interact only with *texts*, whose proponents are not individuals but 'moral entities' or institutions" (Augé 96, emphasis mine), then it follows that it is not just compliance with the norms of the institution that becomes of vital importance for those within the non-place, but, more significantly, their ability to *read and interpret* the norms of the non-place, which may or may not be explicitly stated.

In this understanding of how a non-place works, to "interpret the norms" takes on a specific performative meaning that is explored in Silvera's story. Because migrants are already in potentially fraught relations with the powers inserted in Canadian airports (like customs officers representing the Canadian state), their ability to *interpret*, that is, not only to understand the spatial text but to *perform* it adequately, becomes of pivotal importance. The meaning of "performing," in this case, is threefold:

One, it refers to the action of reading the implications of the non-place for the situated relations of the migrant with its regulating powers, i.e. to understand adequately what is expected of them in their by the governing authorities and from their unique subject position;

Two, it refers to the enactment of the assigned role in a demonstration that the migrant is aware of the norms that codify not only the non-place and the migrant's relations with it but also the norms that codify their very existence as migrants (and so, too, their relation with the powers that be);

Three, it points to the success of the former two operations, i.e. that the spatial/governmental text has been read successfully and that its expectations have been understood and adequately met.

Although all users of a non-place must successfully navigate its textual and contextual implications to abandon it and be granted access to place (which is emotionally codified and significant), the precarious position of migrants with respect to the governing bodies of their destination countries imbues the carrying out of these performances with a gravity unknown to the traveller or tourist,

whose contractual relations with the non-place are transactional and uncomplicated. The emphasis on the necessity for migrants to perform, already betrayed in the title of the story where the migrant ("Caribbean") is identified with the shapeshifter ("chameleon"), together with the story's explicit connections with the performing arts that have been already laid out, opens the door to questioning what other types of performativity "Caribbean Chameleon" may be engaging with. In resisting the prejudice of the white Canadian border officers, the Jamaican woman who is the focaliser of the story ends up transforming into the irrational "beast" which has characterised the racist representation of Black people in the discourses of modernity⁴ and which has served to perpetuate the idea that Black people are inherently predisposed towards criminality⁵. In this case, her turn to animality is demeaning and oppressive, forgoing the potential positive alliances that may exist at the intersection of blackness and animality⁶. It is not just her blackness, but the gender expression of the protagonist that affects her negative perception by the Custom officers. Gender and sexual expression, particularly in the form of dress, is also inescapably tied to the Antillean origins of the woman: Jamaica's historical uses of cross-dressing complicate the symbolism of the polka dot pant suit by which the protagonist is identified, and also negatively inform the way she is perceived upon her arrival in Canada.

Animality, race, gender and queerness are constructed as forms of alterity: they are "written" by and "read" from the hegemonic normative perspective. "Animal," "Black," "woman" and "queer" are categories formed differentially that exist only from the point of view of the human, white, heterosexual subject, who controls the norms that codify them and polices the fulfillment of these norms. Because the climax on the story hinges on the prejudiced expectations

4. Smedley and Smedley explain how the term "race" evolved from its use primarily within the animal domain to reference human groups, highlighting one of the early pejorative links that colonization established between blackness and animality, for "[t]he identification of race with a breeding line or stock of animals carries with it certain implications for how Europeans came to view human groups" (38). Tommy L. Lott discusses how one of the most-used metaphors for Black people in modern discourse is the "Negro-Ape," which lives on in the popular cultural imaginary and characterizes Blacks, especially Black males, as savage, animalistic and hyper-aggressive.

5. Khalil Gibran Muhammad, in *The Condemnation of Blackness*, outlines how European colonial anthropological efforts sought to justify racism based on the "biological inferiority" of Blacks by approximating them to "beasts," and shows how, among others, the ideological efforts of scientific racism have been instrumental in criminalizing Black populations.

6. See Bénédicte Boisseron, who also thoroughly explores the negative links between animality and blackness.

of the Customs officers—their prejudiced apprehensions of “animal,” “Black,” “woman” and “queer”—, in the pages that follow, I aim to discuss how notions of “performing,” “performativity” and “performance” are entangled in the drama that the protagonist faces as a subject whose expression—of gender, race, sex—is fundamentally and tragically misunderstood or ignored. Here, I echo Édouard Glissant’s own breakdown of the word “understand” (*comprendre*) as both “comprehend” and “take” (Wing xiv). Against Glissant’s productive, relational “giving-on-and-with” (*donner-avec*) oppressive forms of understanding are bent on appropriating significance and disempowering otherised subjects by negating the validity of their manifestations of subjectivity. The white gaze, furthermore, fosters concrete notions of “performance” and “performing” that increase the pressure to which otherised subjects are submitted, being forced to act in accordance (comply) to what is *understandable* or *graspable* by white authority—and can, thus, be appropriated or seized by them, as the polka dot woman is at the end of the story.

My essay is divided into five parts: “Animacies and the Construction of Alterity,” “Co-constituting Selves: The Animal Gaze,” “Ritual, Redress and Recognition,” “Queer (Cross-)Dressing,” and “Chameleons and Migrants,” which explore, in turn, questions on the formation of alterity, the construction of the self, the role of performance in ethical acts of affect and recognition, gender and sexual-affective performance through acts of (cross-)dressing, and the symbolism of the chameleon in the title of the story. With these, I aim to show how the diegetic and performative tensions in Silvera’s story lead to the protagonist’s final conversion, in the eyes of the white Canadian gaze, to the less-than-human subject which this gaze codifies for otherised identities, finding common ground with animality in the less-than-human prejudiced portrayal of alterity.

Animacies and the Construction of Alterity

In an illuminating homonymous volume, Mel Y. Chen puts forward and expands the linguistic notion of “animacies” to explore their queer and racial matters. Chen defines animacy as “the extent to which we invest a certain body (or body of entities) with humanness or animateness” and the way it is “implicated in political questions of power and the recognition of different subjects, as well as ostensible objects” (8-9). Animacies describe broadly logocentric movements of categorisation through the endowment of relative sentience that allow us to articulate some of the ways in which otherness, particularly animal otherness, is differentially constructed (Stanescu 569). This creates a “governmentality of animate hierarchies” (Chen 12) that cements forms of oppression against the others of the naturalised white male subject. As some of the paradigmatic

Alterity, Recognition and Performance:
The Queer and the Animal in Makeda Silvera's "Caribbean Chameleon"

others of this Vitruvian model, women, racialised and queer subjects, and animals become focal points of analysis. Because all of these categories share some degree of animacy in their construction as alterities, they offer a possibility for their combined study, revealing the ways in which multiply oppressed collectives have been differently construed as subhuman—as beasts, monsters or freaks—giving way to a long and ominous history of chimeric representation on the sliding scale of (non) human animateness.

The protagonist of Silvera's story and its presumable "Caribbean chameleon" is a Jamaican woman who is only ever identified by her choice of dress, a "black polka dot pant suit." In her identification with an animal (the chameleon) and a piece of clothing (the pant suit), Silvera is already situating her protagonist in the lower tiers of animacy: the logocentric model of animacy renders non-human animals, by their lack of access to human language, less animate than human others, although more so than inert matter like the pant suit. My analysis follows this order of animacy from the chameleon to the pant suit to explore how animality and dress may be related among them and to the construction and performance of alterity.

Silvera's story begins and ends with animals, from the "chameleon" of the title ("CC" 27) to the cock that crows in its final paragraph (32). The fact that animal animacies frame a story that criticises racial prejudice already raises relevant questions regarding the way race and animality have been connected through history. The legacy of representations of racialised others, in particular Black folk, with animal figures or metaphors is well-documented. It spans a broad catalogue that goes from the false "sub-evolutionary paradigms" that liken Black people, seen as underdeveloped, uncivilised humans, to simians to, perhaps more strikingly, the calls to consider Black individuals like "domestic animals" so as to garner sympathy for the abolitionist cause, exemplifying the many complications of race, animality, and affect in historical discourse (Fielder 488). The connection between animality and human alterity is one that is alive and well; indeed, Chen succinctly acknowledges an extensive body of critical and historical work in highlighting how

vivid links, whether live or long-standing, continue to be drawn between immigrants, people of color, laborers and working class subjects, colonial subjects, women, queer subjects, disabled people, and *animals*, meaning, not the class of creatures that includes humans but quite the converse, the class against which the (often rational) human with inviolate and full subjectivity is defined. (95, emphasis in original)

While acknowledging the historical grounding of the protagonist's racialized representation as an irrational, violent animal, here I will focus on the ways

in which race and animality, as categories of “the other,” have been linked in the philosophical theorization of alterity. As noted in the introduction, the negative relations of blackness and animality originate in racist colonial rule and are reinforced primarily by white scientists and philosophers, whose input has informed the representation of animals and non-whites for centuries. Indigenous and diasporic writing such as Silvera’s, which destabilises the relationship between the imperial margin and centre, has enormous transgressive potential to expand and contest the epistemic tradition with which it is confronted.

Co-constituting Selves: The Animal Gaze

Jacques Derrida, in his oft-quoted essay “The Animal that Therefore I Am,” sees the “absolute alterity of the neighbor” (11) reflected in his relationship with the animal gaze. It is the gaze of a cat that *confronts* him, not only because it looks at but because it is *in front of* him. In apprehending that which is looked, the looker becomes ubiquitous for the self that is looked at. The spatial relationship of the self with respect to the other’s gaze situates the self in the world insofar as it locates it *in relation* to the looking animal: “The animal is there before me, there next to me, there in front of me ... It surrounds me. And from the vantage of this being-there-before-me it can allow itself to be looked at, no doubt, but also ... *it can look at me*. It has its point of view regarding me” (11, emphasis mine). Thus, the acknowledgement of the “absolute alterity” of the other is at the same time, and necessarily, an acknowledgement of the otherness of *one’s own self*, which constitutes itself in a double act of relational regarding that is both scopic (it looks) and affective (it recognises). This simultaneous self- and otherness exists because one can only exist relationally, i.e. what we understand by ‘self’ is not a pure, self-contained identity that precedes its relations (Haraway 6) but something that is constructed in the hybridising act of knowing oneself to be looked at. Although the relational existence of the self is no novelty in philosophy, and is central to theories of Caribbean culture and identity (see Glissant’s poetics of relation), what is unique about Derrida’s formulation is that the act of co-construction of alterity and selfhood is crucially brought about by the animal gaze. Because, as mentioned above, Silvera’s story is framed through the lens of animality, it seems imperative that we take into account a framework such as Derrida’s in the consideration of how otherness is formed in relation to the story’s animal others, and in relation to the looking others.

The story ends with the double crowing of “*the cock*” (Silvera, “CC” 32, emphasis mine). This unlikely event for the airport setting and the use of the definite article “the” point to this last reference being, in fact, a diegetic frame which, as Fraile-Marcos has argued, posits the protagonist as a Christlike figure. In “a

clear allusion to Peter's repeated denial of Christ" (Fraile-Marcos 81), the black polka dot pant suit woman's compatriots and onlookers ignore her suffering at being harassed by the customs officers, and she is carried away by the Mounted Police. The fact that, in common language, these acts of dismissal are known as "turning a blind eye" adds complexity to an analysis of the gaze in the construction of otherness. The reaction to the scene offers a list of characters and highlights their shame and embarrassment: "*Eyes vacant. Open wide. Sister. Brother. Cousin. Mother. Aunt. Father. Grandparent. Look the other way*" (Silvera, "CC" 32, emphasis mine). In offering the characters as a list of familial relations, the story seems to recall the supposedly affective ties that lie at the heart of the family and that are precluded in these acts of (not) looking, problematising relations of kin- and allyship which we will explore in the coming sections of this paper. In focusing on the reaction of the other characters, the story also brings to the fore the derivative relation of agency with respect to selfhood, that is, the belief that, to some degree, our capacity for acting emanates from our—and others'—acknowledgement of ourselves. In the polka dot woman's final outburst, by which she reclaims her agency over the mechanisms of oppression that police her existence in (the non-)place, she is also offered a last moment of opportunity for asserting her *self*. This opportunity, however, is lost as the gaze of the other is averted, undercutting her moment of radical resistance, which hints at the necessity for not only a social construction of subjectivity, but a hybrid, affirmative, and non-differential one. Averting the gaze condemns the polka dot woman to perpetual alterity as her self is denied recognition because it is denied co-constitution. The Derridean interpretation of the scopophilic (following Foucault) dimension of selfhood in Silvera's study is politically relevant, as recognition and visibility play a fundamental role in the identity construction of migrant bodies and their successful integration in their destination countries.⁷

Ritual, Redress and Recognition

M. Jacqui Alexander's article on the policing of sexuality in Trinidad and Tobago and The Bahamas, which has informed a hefty volume of scholarship on Caribbean writing, including that of Makeda Silvera, uses the phrase "[to] offer up" (6) to refer to the way in which the fabric of the nation-state accesses

7. For discussions of the Black diaspora and Canadian citizenship, see for instance M. Jacqui Alexander, Wiebke Beushausen, Amaryll Chanady, David Chariandy, Andrea Davis and Patricia E. Roy.

queer bodies for their systemic mistreatment. This sacrificial language opens new links between race, queerness and animality that not only hark back to the history of human and non-human “offerings” to the God(s) but that, again, refer to ritualistic practices that cement the grounding of our analysis on the concept of performance. “Caribbean Chameleon” offers opportunities for analysing the performative and sacrificial through the aforementioned moment of martyrdom and negation that elevates the black polka dot woman to a Christ figure. The avenues for interpretation here, I think, are twofold. First, the fact of the Biblical reference bears noting in light of the relationship between Jamaica and Christianity. Silvera and others have remarked how the Bible is of paramount importance in Jamaica and other enslaved colonies, as it is not only the point of entrance of the oppressor’s Western culture but tightly weaves it into the everyday life of individuals as biblical texts become the main point of access to literacy (Silvera, “Some Thoughts” 523), making colonial epistemic violence an everyday occurrence. Hence, I surmise that “giving up” the black polka dot pant suit woman as a Christ figure is a provocative way of animating race and queering the ethnocentric, patriarchal religious discourse imposed on enslaved populations. Furthermore, in carrying out this identification through the crowing of the cock (“Jesus Christ ... The cock crowing once, twice,” [“CC” 32]), Silvera returns the discussion of animality to these acts of queering. As mentioned, framing the story within the realm of animality and stressing the link between the construction of selfhood and otherness in the presence of the animal, it is this repeated crowing, in the manner of the cock that crows in the New Testament after Peter denies Christ, that allows the reader to understand that the black polka dot woman’s own transfiguration has taken place. Second, the black polka dot woman’s outburst may also be read as a recuperation of Caribbean religious-cultural traditions. Although this landscape is rich and heterogeneous, religions of the Caribbean share a relevant history of trance possessions, which serve a number of purposes such as accessing revelations, receiving force from a deity or substantiating their existence, or cementing cult hierarchies.⁸ In Jamaica’s Myal tradition, for instance, spirit possessions involve “trances labeled as ‘getting wild’ or ‘senseless madness’” (Murrell 255) which fit within the scenario of the short story: “Polka dot woman mad like rass. Mad woman tek over. Officer frighten like hell. Don’t understand di talking of tongues” (Silvera, “CC” 31). The “talking of tongues” that is associated with demonic possession also signals the inability to apprehend the ritualistic moment and the impossibility of communication between the black polka dot

8. See Murrell for a comprehensive account of Afro-Caribbean religions, their origins and individual complexities, which cannot be adequately accounted for within this piece.

woman and the Immigration officer, who is bent on misreading the woman and continuing their frantic search in spite of the lack of proof ("Tear away at suitcase. Throw up dirty drawers. Trying to find drugs. Only an extra bottle of white rum" [31]). The failure to communicate is stressed by the repeated mentions of the physical impossibility to articulate language ("Tongue-tie. Tongue knot up. Tongue gone wild" [31]). At the climax of the story, the polka dot woman tears away at her own clothing and "foam[s] at the mouth" (32) as she is escorted away from the scene.

The story bursts with symbolic possibility as, in both movements described, Silvera has a chance of rewriting the myths that, as per her own account, have bound Jamaican lives with racism and misogyny ("Some Thoughts" 523), and offer some redress within the confines of her narrative. In the Bible, it is Saint Peter's denial and Jesus Christ's willing surrender to his fate that ultimately offer an opportunity for redemption. And although, as mentioned, recognition is denied in Silvera's story by the onlookers' lack of reciprocity, like that of Christ, the polka dot woman's martyrdom activates the possibility of recognition for the reader.⁹ The community's rejection ("Dem close eyes. Look other way. Dem shame. Black polka dot woman nah get no support" [31]) that disavows the black woman's selfhood also enables recognition without the diegetic confines, because the reader, as spectator of the story, is looking at the Jamaican woman.

Moving from myth toward the discussion of performance, I contend that the preclusion of recognition within the frame of the story is rooted in the failure of the black polka dot woman's ritual, whose redemptive function is, as a practice that is rooted in community, stymied by the black polka dot woman's disavowal by her peers. Nevertheless, the ritual does serve to build another bridge between different forms of alterity, insofar as the sacred and the abject approximate because of their "constitutive ambivalence" that both affirms and negates and reconciles "life and death" (Braidotti 65). The abject alterities of the (mad)woman, the monster and the migrant that the polka dot woman is a sign of find her expression in the ritual outburst. Even if this outburst can save neither the polka dot woman nor the onlookers from their heightened vulnerability in an environment that precludes connection, her act of possession serves to expose the shortcomings of the Canadian state: before the proverbial curtain falls, we are offered a backstage peek at the workings of a system that will not look its people in the eye. The cry "What you looking for? WHAT YOU LOOKING FOR?" (Silvera, "CC" 31) as the officer's gaze is diverted from the polka dot woman to her belongings begs us to consider where the focus of the governing powers' looking practices is, and how it denies migrants

9. I thank Dr. Ana María Fraile-Marcos for bringing this to my attention.

the acknowledgement that the ethical and actualising dimension of selfhood demands.

Queer (Cross-)Dressing

If the performative has been a fixture of language studies that has had a bearing on the construction of “race” as a working category—social, political, or epistemic—, it has also been immensely relevant in postmodern approaches to gender, particularly through the work of philosopher Judith Butler, whose theory of performativity, as expanded in her seminal work *Gender Trouble*, informs my analysis. I draw on Butler’s assertion that the body “is a materiality that bears meaning, if nothing else, and that the manner of this bearing is fundamentally *dramatic* ... [meaning that] One is not simply a body, but, in some very key sense, one *does* one’s body” (“Performative Acts” 521, emphasis mine). Because, as Butler remarks, the agentic I and the body are one and the same, and neither preexists the other, performing the body is an act of assertion of the self. However, insofar as material conditions influence the possibilities for a performance of the body (Butler, “Performative Acts” 521), they pose constraints to individual assertion, limiting the possibilities for realisation and, potentially, constituting their own systems of oppression. Here, I contend that Silvera’s theatrical frame serves to highlight how the self is constituted through acts of performing up to the climax of the action, where the clash with authority that imposes its own prejudiced constructions of selfhood collapses the socially acceptable identity of the black polka dot woman—a legal immigrant and domestic worker—, to which she clings during the search, into what is coded as a monstrous self. The woman’s struggle illuminates the possibilities for reclaiming agency as well as the constraints for the self-assertion for bodies who exist outside the normative margins of the state.

In discussing the performative with regards to the construction of gender, Butler reminds us that gender is also “constituted through the stylization of the body,” and so even what she terms the “mundane way” in which individuals conduct themselves in their day to day, including “gestures, movements, and enactments of various kinds,” is relevant to a discussion of how ideas on gender are formed and (re)presented (“Performative Acts” 519). Dress has been one of the important loci of gendered (self-)expression and subversion, and one that has been intimately related with making explicit the links between gender, sexual orientation and performance. In particular, practices of cross-dressing, where performance and performativity play a central role (Fumagalli, Ledent and Del Valle Alcalá 15) have called attention to the artificiality of gender constructions and have very often been associated with non-heteronormative

sexual expression. Cross-dressing has historically been common in the Caribbean, where clothes have "always had a strong symbolic function" (3) and where cross-dressing has stood at the crossroads of liberation and repression (15) for marginalised and non-normative subjectivities. Ronald Cummings, in his examination of the figure of the "man royal" within the Caribbean context, points to the fact that one of the most identifiable traits of the man royal is that "she is seen in men's clothing" (136). Silvera also acknowledges the links between choice of dress and the expression of homosexuality in her account of her childhood in Jamaica; for instance, her description of her neighbour Miss Jones, who made advances toward Silvera's grandmother, underscores Jones's performance of masculinity through her appearance: she was "[a]lways dressed in pants and man-shirt that she borrowed from her husband" ("Some Thoughts" 526).

Although no mention is made of the sexuality of the central character of "Caribbean Chameleon," she is also tellingly described only by her choice of attire, which happens to be a pant suit. Writing "pant suit" as two separate realities leads us, from the beginning, to imagine not a woman's onesie but, rather, a two-piece ensemble in the style of men's suits, which is confirmed at the end of the story, when the woman takes off a jacket, shirt and pants (Silvera, "CC" 32). Arguably, this choice of attire opens a possibility for a queer reading of the protagonist, especially because "black polka dot pant suit" is the only name by which we know the protagonist woman. The lack of other descriptors also makes present the silences that loom over the story. For instance, the polka dot woman is queried at customs because of her choice to vacation in a hotel rather than stay with her family. The woman refuses to explain the reason behind this and only fires back: "What yuh saying, sir? Black people can't tek vacation in dem own homeland?" (30). Because family rejection has and continues to be one of the main problems facing LGBTI+ people, we may speculate that the polka dot woman's queerness may be what's behind her separation from her family during her visit to Jamaica.¹⁰ This is more plausible considering the country's history of homophobia, which "exists in other Anglophone Caribbean countries but not to the same extent" (Charles 19) and which is also predicated on Christian indoctrination during slavery (8), whose cultural and legal heritage is still prevalent today (15). In summation, silence and silencing practices surround non-normative sexual/affectional identities¹¹ in the Caribbean, which is a point of encounter with the experience of Caribbean domestic workers—like

10. I thank my reviewers for suggesting this possibility.

11. See, for instance, Kosofsky Sedgwick's seminal work, *Epistemology of the Closet*.

the polka dot woman—in the Canadian space.¹² Because, as discussed, recognition and visibility are fundamental requisites for the integration of migrants, Black, and queer folk, the silences of representation in Silvera’s work echo the political silences that overwhelm the lived reality of so-called “visible minorities” in Canada and that allow for the systemic mistreatment of marginalised bodies as portrayed in the story.

Systemic oppression also features in the reading of the protagonist’s attire. The woman’s black polka dot pant suit seems to be intimately connected with her abilities for self-expression or lack thereof, and it functions as an ambivalent symbol of her identity. Although we know from the construction of the sentences “woman *in* black polka dot pant suit” (repeated throughout the story, emphasis mine) and “[s]weat running down woman black face” (Silvera, “CC” 31) that the black of her skin and clothes are separate, going back to the moment of her outburst or “possession” we see that, for some lines, just after the time that the text references her madness (“Woman in black polka dot pant suit gone mad,” 31), the descriptors of her outward appearance begin to drop. She loses her attire to go from “woman *in* black polka dot pant suit” to “black polka dot woman” until the blackness of her skin and clothes seem to conflate and dissolve, and she becomes only “polka dot woman” (31, emphases mine). This shapeshifting as the woman gradually surrenders to her anger is also relevant to the question of animacies raised in the first section. In her discussion of agency and affect, Sianne Ngai notes how “as we press harder on the affective meanings of animateness, we shall see how the seemingly neutral state of ‘being moved’ becomes twisted into the image of the overemotional racialized subject, abetting his or her construction as unusually receptive to external control” (91). In other words, in facing the Canadian state in the form of Borders and Immigration officers, the black polka dot woman enters into contact with the external control which both regulates the non-places into which she is perpetually thrust (from the airport to, presumably, police quarters) as well as the material possibilities for her realisation of selfhood. The constraints to this realisation are evidenced in the progressive disappearance of descriptive phrases that refer to the black polka dot woman: her “unusual receptiveness” to this exertion of control is, of course, not *a priori* but a result of her increased exposure to violence as a queer woman of colour and a migrant. This makes her particularly susceptible to the state’s dehumanising practices that force similarly excessive acts of resistance, like her final emotional outburst, and that further situate her, in the officer’s gaze, within the prejudiced white, Western

12. Indeed, Silvera’s collection of interviews with West Indian women employed as domestic workers in Canada is titled *Silenced*.

conception of Black otherness as primitive and animal-like. Because her encounter with power negates her possibilities for self-assertion, taking away her belongings, her clothes, and the sense of self she makes an effort to remind herself of, the polka dot woman is only pushed more firmly into physical and psychic zones of liminality. This chimeric construction is animated in her trance, but it is also foregrounded in the variously symbolic "chameleon" of the title.

Chameleons and Migrants

As the animal known for changing colour to blend in with its surroundings, the chameleon is able to stand for a number of meanings as it pertains to race and gender. It seems telling that, in the moment when the woman becomes a "[m]onster" and a "[j]ungle beast" (Silvera, "CC" 32) the blackness of her clothes and skin stop being meaningful signifiers. This "fading into black" may be particular to the chameleon's behaviour, but, as every other symbol in the story, it too is charged with ambivalence. On the one hand, the chameleon recalls orientalist literary representations of Jamaica, most notably Truman Capote's in "Music for Chameleons"¹³. On the other, the chameleon symbolises the illusion of integration and the simultaneous threat of assimilation—of a type of belonging that makes no recourse to difference but that engulfs and integrates it until it is no longer different but simply invisible. In being *invisible*, unable to be seen, to be looked at, and therefore to be articulated as a self, I agree with Fraile-Marcos that, in Silvera's story, "[t]he myth of the Canadian mosaic crumbles ... as minorities are fixed in a negative distorted perception of their identity," and that these fraught acts of seeing, reading and performing "preclude assimilation" (81). The extent to which "assimilation" is what the polka dot woman reclaims, however, can be put into question. When "assimilation" is understood as full socio-political belonging, it becomes an aim of marginalised identities; however, insofar as "assimilation" refers to the fabrication of a homogeneous state metanarrative that erases difference, it stops becoming desirable. Understood in this way, processes of assimilation absorb alterity into naturalised body politics, refusing the differential existence of the other by disavowing difference

13. In the story, the white author portrays a conversation between an American man and an aristocrat from Martinique who is only identified as "Madame." As in the case of "Caribbean Chameleon," Capote's tale opens and closes with animals when chameleons gather to hear Madame play the piano. Like the narrator, the chameleons seem compelled to hear the woman, although the question lingers as to the degree to which either is able to understand her.

itself. The tension between different forms of assimilation and their representation is consistent with Davis' assertion that "the maintenance of ... well-policed [geographical, cultural, and political] borders has been essential in fixing marginalized identities, in keeping them contained and restricted" (65). In this light, the polka dot woman's paroxysm can either be read as an attempt to escape from the zones of demarcation imposed by the Canadian state on migrant bodies or as a deconstructive practice that animates new habitable spaces for unhomely alterities. If the Black experience has, beginning with DuBois, been conceptualised through an understanding of doubleness, Hutcheon and Richmond remark how the immigrant experience is similarly liminal: "Caught between two worlds, the immigrant negotiates a new social space; caught between two cultures and often languages, the writer negotiates a new literary space" (9). This new, hybrid, and—to use Bhabha's terminology—"third" space is perhaps that which is opened through the polka dot woman's chimeric excesses, and yet, as unscribed *space*, it is incapable of adequately dealing with the need for assertion of the Afro-Caribbean migrant. Still, the binary unfolding of the mad "bestly" self and the "civilised" woman who needs to perform according to the stifling standards of propriety and character imposed by Western rule persists in the form of the pant suit, whose two-coloured polka dot pattern refuses to give up completely the dichotomous tensions that permeate the narrative: "Line long. Which one to enter. Woman or man. White or Asian. Black or white" (Silvera, "CC" 30). Although I lack the means to carefully consider this here, the narrative hesitancy in this instance as well as the pattern of the polka dot woman's pant suit open interesting possibilities for a reading of the polka dot woman as being of mixed race, further complicating the processes of negotiation in which she is inscribed as well as the discussion of alterity, performativity and scopic practices, which include a consideration of 'passing' (i.e. the privileges afforded by not *looking* Black).

Conclusion

In dealing primarily with that which is coded as interstitial—queerness, animality, migrant experience—, this article explores a space of liminality populated by subjectivities marginalised against the naturalised white Canadian self. It is a space, or a non-place, because the subjects that cross it are variously impeded from enacting strategies of self-assertion—through their recognition in the eyes of the other, through their stylistic performances—that might carry them from the interstice into signified locality. If "Canadian literature, as a representation of the collective expression by which the nation identifies itself, still relies on the landscape as a metaphor of identity" (Beckford 465), what does it say for the

Alterity, Recognition and Performance:
The Queer and the Animal in Makeda Silvera's "Caribbean Chameleon"

polka dot woman that she is only afforded the use of the non-place, and not the habitation of landscape? If, in Silvera's story, an exit from the non-place and unacknowledgement is perpetually negotiated and never stable, and leads to the traumatic disintegration of the Jamaican-Canadian, Black immigrant self, what does this say of government and policing, as well as of those who do get to inhabit liveable places? Space and place still offer opportunities for analysis in the story as, potentially, the three-act division of Silvera's story that I proposed in the introduction bears adding a fourth act, starting at the paragraph that begins "North Star cold" (Silvera, "CC" 31). Coldness as a feature of landscape has a rich history of being used to counterpose Canadian and Jamaican weather and describe the experiences of alienation felt by Caribbean migrants in a country that feels multiply foreign and isolating. The polka dot woman's refusal to wait to be brought to a separate locked room to be disrobed and searched (32), with its regulatory patriarchal echoes, also imbues space in the story with an oppressive quality from which the main character tries to free herself even at the cost of selfhood.

The (im)possibility to assert her *self*, regardless of the conventions and regulations that police acceptable identities, is at the crux of the story. Contrary to the rest of the characters, the black polka dot woman appears unable to perform the act(s) that may secure her a safe passageway home. She becomes suspect because she does not fit the narrative imposed on her ("Vacation. Family?' 'No. I stay in a hotel.' 'Why a hotel?' 'Why yuh mean, sir?' ... 'Did you stay with family?' 'No mam, I visit dem, but I stay in a hotel.' Suspicion" [Silvera, "CC" 30]) and is unwilling to act in such a way as to counteract the officer's prejudice. She is denied recognition by her peers, who look the other way as she is carried away from the premises.

This article has explored some of the ways in which the performance and construction of alterity are intertwined with considerations of race, sexual orientation and gender, and how these are expressed by markers of otherness like dress and animality. The recognition of alterity and the ways in which it is performed is continuously stalled, even as the protagonist's differential traits are constantly repeated in the text—"woman" and "black." Through the woman's experience, of the mechanisms at work in the transformation of Black subjects into less-than-human, violent, criminal stereotypes. If, upon leaving Jamaica, the narrator says goodbye to "slave wage, slave food, ranstid meat, *tear-up clothes*, rag man, tun' cornmeal, dry dust" (29-30, emphasis mine), by the end of the story, the black polka dot woman is nevertheless "tear[ing] off" her clothes. Arrested for "indecent exposure," the woman struggles for one last act of self-assertion with her nakedness, which can be simultaneously an act of resistance and a show of disempowerment (Fumagalli, Ledent and Del Valle Alcalá 4). If, for Derrida, selfhood and alterity surface in the moment when one

“is seen and seen naked” (11), the woman’s exposure begs this opportunity for recognition, but there is a sense of futility as her attempt falls short of achieving it within the story. Her body becomes censored, she is carried away, *unlooked at*, unacknowledged. Given that performances have no meaning in isolation—without sociality—this last refusal of recognition can be read as a symbol of the crumbling self that cannot co-constitute itself and so is abandoned to the schizophrenic logics of oppressive governmentality. Still, the theatrical frame of “Caribbean Chameleon” offers some hope out of this predicament, reminding the reader that they, in effect, have seen the polka dot woman, and so their own selves are co-constituted by the efforts at self-assertion of the story’s protagonist on which they fixate their gaze.

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Alterity, Recognition and Performance:
The Queer and the Animal in Makeda Silvera's "Caribbean Chameleon"

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