

**Feature Speech for *Witchbroom* Archive Handover Ceremony¹
Geraldine Skeete, PhD**

Good afternoon all. I want to begin by congratulating and thanking Lawrence for offering to deposit his *Witchbroom* archives with us here in Trinidad at the University of the West Indies. We welcome you and Jenny home for a temporary stay, and we welcome the archives to its permanent home.

Acquiring the archives of the first novel from one of our more successful writers in Trinidad and Tobago's literary history should not be taken for granted. On the significance of literary archives and manuscripts one can turn to David C. Sutton, editor of the *Location Register of English Literary Manuscripts and Letters*, awardee of the Archivist of the Year (2006), among other accolades. In his essay "The Destinies of Literary Manuscripts: Past, Present and Future", he gives various examples of canonical writers whose archives came to be acquired in unexpected places and notes cases where literary archives went to another country, "[causing] controversy in the home country". Thankfully, with this acquisition of the *Witchbroom* archive that will not be the case here. Also, in his 2016 *Caribbean Quarterly* article "Diasporic Literary Archives Network and the Commonwealth: Namibia, Nigeria, Trinidad & Tobago, and Other Examples" (pp. 37-51), Sutton observes that "Caribbean institutions tended to conclude that they could not compete in the globalized market for English-language literary manuscripts." He tells us, too, that,

The Caribbean region demonstrates the challenge of creating a national literary heritage, illustrated by literary manuscripts, in circumstances where many of the authors are themselves diasporic and may have ended up as residents of the UK, the USA, Canada, and other richer countries. [...] [Sutton goes on to cite instances of where and why – such as regarding personal stories or because of the market for and

¹ Analysis of *Witchbroom* provided here are extracts taken from the chapters "Gender Ambivalence: Encoded" and "Queerly Speaking" in Skeete's doctoral thesis "A Discourse of Alternative Sexuality in Anglophone Caribbean Literature" (2007).

high value of their literary manuscripts the papers of James Berry, Andrew Salkey, Lorna Goodison, Derek Walcott, V.S. Naipaul and Samuel Selvon were collected elsewhere. He goes on to say that] There are, however, some Caribbean institutions which are perfectly well adapted to build collections of Caribbean authors—the best examples probably being the libraries on the various campuses of the University of the West Indies. [...]The Diasporic Literary Archives Network, working in partnership with Trinidadian colleagues in particular, was able to mitigate some of this discouragement and to encourage resumption of collection-building in the region. In facilitating the acquisition in 2014 of the archive of Monique Roffey by the University of the West Indies at St. Augustine, the Network is hopeful that a good precedent has been set for future collection development.

Hence, this occasion of acquiring Lawrence Scott's *Witchbroom* archives is another important step in fulfilling that hope.

History and religion are two leitmotifs in Scott's body of work – carnival and calypso, too – and so too are those concerning issues of gender and sexuality. Therefore, while the chronicling of national and family history, for instance, is central to the plot, my particular academic interest in this novel is its portrayal of transgenderism which is also one of its focal concerns. The 25th anniversary in 2017 of *Witchbroom*'s publication and this handover ceremony of its manuscript and other archives in 2018 undercover the novel's continued relevance and significance within the context of the recent legal triumph for the LGBTQI community in Trinidad and Tobago. Here is a stark example of how literature contributes both to raising awareness about real world and lived experience, and to the sociocultural, religious, legal and political discourses pertaining to debates about sexual minorities, civil rights and sexual citizenship.

A distinctive theme addressed in the novel relates to the characterization of intersexuality as well as cross-dressing in Anglophone Caribbean literature. The intersexual and transvestite character is presented by Scott not as aberrational or abnormal, but as a protagonist – as a kernel² character – on a quest to claim his/her identity and history in *Witchbroom*.

Among the strategies in the discourse through which gender ambivalence is encoded are the metaphors of Carnival and shifts in psychological perspective and pronoun usage. At times in Lawrence Scott's *Witchbroom* the reader may be confused as to whose voice is speaking at particular junctures in the novel. A third-person narratorial voice refers to the intersexual protagonist, Lavren, as 'he' for most of the text, or 's/he' a few times; but at other times, such as in the introductory chapter 'An Overture – Fugues, Fragments of a Tale,' and the middle and final chapters, 'A Journal' and 'Postscript,' one encounters an I-character's voice. One may ponder whether this voice is the same one that refers to Lavren in the third person for most of the text, or whether the third-person voice belongs to a separate narrator who seems to have zero focalization.³ The 'I' is heard in the chapter 'J'ouvert' as well, where the voice says, for example: "Lavren took my hand and led me" (263) [...] I take his hand. I take her hand, and I'm enchanted by his dissembling beauty. [...] As we wait, she and I, he and I, pronouns confuse and dissemble, King Carnival's magic begins to work" (264). Therefore, in this example, the confusing of the pronouns – the interchanging of Lavren's two voices – is a reflection of the ambisexuality or androgyny of the protagonist. There is an equation of two voices, yet only one person. The pronouns "I," "he," "s/he," refer to the same person throughout the text. *Witchbroom* is therefore governed by counterpointing, that is, the juxtaposition and interweaving of voices in the novel (Wales 89) and by a variable

² Kernels, also defined as bound motifs, cardinal functions or nuclei, are essential to the narrative action, and the causal-chronological coherence of this action will be destroyed without them (Prince 48).

³ A narrator with zero focalization has an omniscient perspective in which his/her perceptual and conceptual positions vary and are at times unlocatable (Prince 31 – 32).

focalization because of Lavren's two voices or selves, as it were, and also because the voices of other characters, such as his mother Marie Elena and the maid Josephine, are sometimes mediated through his/her narration.

The implied author of *Witchbroom* seems to acknowledge by way of implicature, however, what it must be difficult for the third-person narrator to do: that is, to refer to Lavren as 's/he' throughout the entire text; for in parentheses it is observed that "(Lavren can never settle on the appropriate pronouns when talking about herself, and so himself writes in a confusing way about himself, but never wanting to deny herself)" (174). This confession is made after referring to Lavren as "he," "S/he" and "her" in one paragraph. Maintaining a 's/he,' 'himself/herself' pronoun reference all the way through the novel might definitely have proven awkward and tedious, and so we see Lavren for the most part being identified as a male who has mixed genitalia and looks androgynous. The 's/he' pronoun has specific usage in the novel and is related to the mystical powers that Lavren possesses as a hermaphrodite.

As regards the shape of the discourse in *Witchbroom* and the manner of its telling – that is, narrative structure, narrative technique and narrative perspective – a stated comparison with Carnival is made in the first chapter, 'An Overture – Fugues, Fragments of a Tale': "He will ransack the carnival for the writing of his Carnival Tales. He will dissemble: he will be man, he will be woman" (3). Lavren's storytelling skills are likened to those of the Pierrot and the Robberman, both Carnival characters noted for their adept use of words; and the Moco Jumbie, Dragon and Jab Jab are invoked to describe the scope and effect of his narrative. Therefore, the juxtaposition of Carnival and intersexuality is a thematic and stylistic feat by the author.

The discourse type of the chronicle, that here comprises both the journal and the tales, is much like two narratives being told at once – again mirroring Lavren's hermaphroditic or androgynous nature; for s/he intertwines the chronicling of the history of the Monagas family

saga with the history of the fictitious Caribbean island of Kairi. One character with two voices, two sexes and two professed styles of storytelling is akin to a split consciousness or what Lavren calls “schizophrenia” (2). The narrator talks about the “fragmentation of Lavren’s narration.” Anachrony is an evident structural feature of the text as *Witchbroom*’s narrative is replete with analeptic episodes due to Lavren’s sojourns to the past and Marie Elena’s memories and stories of old that he records.

In *Witchbroom* there is need then to strike a balance between Lavren’s point-of-view and the other characters,’ as well as to balance Lavren’s story with his/her alter ego’s although it is difficult as a reader to actually discern the difference. The term ‘balance’ (154) implies the chronicling of family and national occurrences that tend to involve racial, gender, political, economic and social divisions; but it also implies the particularities and peculiarities faced by an intersexed protagonist and storyteller.

Manipulating elements such as the shape of the narrative, pronoun usage, the speaking voice(s) of characters, for example, is therefore necessary in order for Scott to tell his story of the transgendered character in *Witchbroom* who wishes, like other non-heterosexual protagonists whom we have met in the literary discourse, to narrate their own alternative experience.

These shifts in focalization and pronouns which are so vital to the characterization of the intersex character-protagonist can prove confusing not only to some readers and but also to publishers and agents as evidenced in a letter included in the archives in which Scott is told:

There is so much to praise in your work, which is vividly original and compelling; and WITCHBROOM is admirably elaborate and complex.

For all that, I have to acknowledge something in myself, and reading your work has obliged me to acknowledge this more forcefully, and that is that I am not altogether comfortable with a narration of this kind in which the

imaginative form is, in a way, so eclectic. This does not extend to your stories [he is referring here to Scott's story-collection *The House of Funerals and Other Stories*].

[He goes on to say] I have been very tempted to put these misgivings aside, but I feel I should not do that.

Hence, because he feels he cannot be wholly committed he declines to be an agent while wishing Scott every success with both books. In another letter, one publisher who seems less uncomfortable with the narration says in 1990 that “[t]here’s so much to admire – the energy of the prose and the linguistic panache”, yet concludes “but in the end it adds up to a novel that wouldn’t work at Secker”. Finally published in 1992 by Allison & Busby and then by the Heinemann Caribbean Writers Series in 1993 *Witchbroom* goes on to be shortlisted for the Commonwealth Writers’ Prize and was included in the Book at Bedtime programme on BBC Radio 4.

Because there is ambivalence in gender identity and gender performativity, an analysis shows that there is a parallel link between alternative sexualities and alternative personalities. Hence, the concept of the alter ego, defined as “a person’s secondary or alternative personality” or “a close friend who is very like oneself” (Pearsall 39), is germane to the discussion with regard to Lavren whose alter ego dwells within him/her as an alternative personality. Lavren’s ‘I’ explicitly identifies his/her other side as the alter ego:

[...] for me, or him or her – how did I see my alter ego? [...] I chose Lavren, or did he choose me, did she choose me, or did we choose each other, or was he or she chosen for me out of the bric-a-brac of history? Maybe you can tell. Maybe you can decipher, divine whether it is tragic schizophrenia or miraculous coupling or *something else* I tell you here, at times confusing and fusing my pronouns. (emphasis in text, 2)

Lavren’s alter ego *alternates* between, and is at other times, simultaneously both male and female. The root word ‘alternate’ here means the same as ‘alternative’ in the North

American usage of the term. Thus, this character is an example of the adjectival definition of 'alternative': "(of one or more things) available as another possibility" (Pearsall 39).

Intersexuality faces little censure in *Witchbroom* as it is portrayed as a condition that allows Lavren to bridge racial, ethnic and gender divides. Intersexual characters are a rarity in Anglophone Caribbean literature that parallels the rarity of intersex births that occur in the real Caribbean world which is characterized by mixed races, histories and cultures. The novel's title certainly bears metaphoric and symbolic meaning. It alludes to the agricultural and economic history of the cocoa industry in the Caribbean which was afflicted by witch's broom disease, and fictionally represented here in the novel as causing a decline in the Monagas family fortunes. Paradoxically, witch-broom disease can yield positive propagation and ecological effects like cultivars, food and shelter for insect and animal species. As a slang term, witch's broom refers to a female with a penis. In *Witchbroom*, in what is an echo of the berdache figure,⁴ the Caribbean intersexual is invested with special powers that enable him/her to fully embrace this mixture of heritages and identities, and so the perception of abnormalcy usually associated with the intersexed condition is overturned and for the most part Lavren's intersexuality is portrayed in a more positive than negative light in the novel.

In *Witchbroom* a rare literary view is provided of the Caribbean hermaphrodite. Modern-day intersexuals avoid using the term 'hermaphrodite' because of its negative and pathological connotations, and one writer, Anne Fausto-Sterling, makes a point to use it only when referring to the past in her monograph on the intersexed condition (31). One may safely say that the word 'hermaphrodite' is more appropriately used in the novel instead of

⁴ The berdache figure is believed to intercede between the physical and spiritual worlds in the form of spiritual visions or dreams, and his/her difference "offers advantage to society precisely because he or she is freed from the restrictions of the usual. It is a different window from which to view the world" ("A Native American Perspective on the Theory of Gender Continuum," DKK, <<http://hermaphrodite.arriba.net/twospirit.htm>>). Therefore, as a transgendered, third or middle gender being, the berdache is thought to possess universal knowledge, ("The Berdache Spirit," Wendy Susan Parker, <<http://www.queers4reconciliation.wild.net.au/berdache.htm>>) and is believed to have been sent by the Great Spirit as "a go-between for males and females, a bridge between the sexes who understands both sides of the human condition ("The Berdache Tradition," <<http://www.breakaway.org/openstudio/sylviawhite/bertrad.htm>>).

the modern term ‘intersexual’ because Lavren’s story, *Witchbroom*, concludes in the 1980s – based on contextual information on the socio-political period garnered in the novel – and includes events that pre-date his birth in the 1940s. An earthly reason grounded in medical science is given for the birth of Marie Elena’s intersexed child: hormone pills or – and the irony and the pun are palpable here – “*mixed* hormones” (emphasis added, 191). These pills seem to be necessary because Marie Elena is already middle-aged when she becomes pregnant with Lavren.

Lavren’s role and special powers as an intersexual in the novel, conveyed via magical realist techniques, is very much like the intersexed North American Indian berdache who is a male with feminine characteristics: hence, Lavren is “caught between the yearning of women and the silence of men” (36); is “levitated between genders” (62); is obsessed with “the future of the world” (91); and “can see through the sepia of time”/ “the moth-eaten time”/ “the dark shadows of nitrate negatives that haunted his middle life”/ “the torn edges of time”/ “troubled and changing time” (90-91). The intersexed person is usually deemed to be a deformity or a freak in mainstream Western culture. Foucault even notes that: “For a long time hermaphrodites were criminals, or crime’s offspring, since their anatomical disposition, their very being, confounded the law that distinguished the sexes and prescribed their union” (38). Lavren does not suffer a tragic and suicidal fate like the one Foucault recounts of the nineteenth-century hermaphrodite, Herculine Barbin.⁵ In *Witchbroom* the implied author does not simply normalize but assigns extraordinariness to Lavren’s character much in the same way that some North American Indian tribal cultures do to intersexuals in their communities.

This is reinforced by the way in which Dr. Adolf Kruger, who delivers Lavren in 1943, reacts to the child’s intersexuality, considering it as both perfect and miraculous. He feels he

⁵ See Michel Foucault, ed., *Herculine Barbin, Being the Recently Discovered Memoirs of a Nineteenth Century Hermaphrodite*, trans. Richard McDongall (New York: Colophon, 1980).

has “witnessed a miracle” and “the incarnation of a mythology” and he tells Marie Elena: “ ‘Here you are, my dear, one whole and perfect child. You could not want or ask for more. The best of two worlds’ ” (200). So, the link between intersexuality and perfection, rather than imperfection, seems to be touted here as correlational. The doctor decides against sewing up “the crack,” and this, in the 1940s, seems to go against the grain of common medical practice in which intersex babies would have their genitals ‘fixed’ to have them be either male or female with or without the parents’ permission. It is not surprising, therefore, that Dr. Kruger’s first thought on realizing Lavren’s condition is to surgically intervene but for the supernatural effect that the child’s face has on him (200).

Like the berdache who may have sexual relations with men, Lavren admits to being mistaken for a girl and is kissed and made love to in the dark of night (224). Boys and girls, men and women desire him/her (214 and 215) because of his/her androgynous looks. A statement is made about homoerotic love by the third-person narrator who notes that the Monagas men, and perhaps all men suffer because they cannot “accept their desire and passion for each other” and “[h]ence mythology produced Lavren, who had to be both girl and boy in order to love and be loved” (214).

The figure of the hermaphrodite is associated most commonly with Greek mythology and iconography, and so when Lavren is born it is observed that: “Stories told centuries ago on the Hellenic archipelago were now becoming a reality in the archipelagic rosary of the Caribbean” (200). There is a rare frequency of intersex births in the Caribbean. It is also a rarity for literary texts to be written about such individuals, whether in the Caribbean or elsewhere. In fact, Roger Strauss, chairman of Farrar, Straus & Giroux, a unit of Holtzbrinck said in 2002 of Jeffrey Eugenides’ *Middlesex* which would eventually win the 2003 Pulitzer

Prize for Fiction: “How many novels about hermaphrodites do you see every day?”⁶ Scott’s *Witchbroom* therefore has the unique status of being one of the few novels to have been written about hermaphroditic characters, especially within Caribbean literary discourse which has a paucity of texts dealing with gay/lesbian/transgender themes. The implied author finds associations with and contextualizes intersexuality within Caribbean society which is fraught with mixed racial identities, mixed heritages and cultures; schizophrenic sensibilities; and a carnivalesque atmosphere in which one sex or one class can masquerade as the other.⁷ And we see the Monagas family preoccupied with the fear of miscegenation, that is, of being mixed with Negro blood, and double standards (for example Marie Elena’s combined religiosity and prejudicial habits).

The theme of cross-dressing – as well as of masks, magic and masquing – is bound up with the characterization of intersexuality in the novel and is conveyed through the use of metaphor and semiotics (the study of signs).

Cross-Dressing⁸

⁶ David D. Kirkpatrick, “Booksellers Gather in New York,” *New York Times on the Web* 29 April 2002, 29 April 2002 <<http://www.nytimes.com/2002/04/29/business/media/29BOOK.html>>.

⁷ At the end of the novel’s introductory chapter, the link between hermaphroditism and Greek mythology is made with a pun on the word ‘carnival.’ Again, the special nature of the hermaphrodite/intersexual is highlighted with, in this instance, the use of a ‘suspended’ metaphor and the superlatives “more beautifully or wonderfully”:

In the buoyancy of the water, Lavren seemed to be without a body, but had the soul at that moment wished to manifest itself it could not have done it more beautifully or wonderfully. It was the body of a young boy not quite a man, the body of a young girl not quite a woman. This was a body known only to mythology, to the pantheons of gods, a place of goddesses and nymphs in a carnival of coupling. S/he was born in the waters of the new world a hermaphrodite, a young boy who might have been mistaken for a girl. Hermaphrodite, with the breasts of a young girl, who might have been mistaken for a boy with a penis and a crack between his legs [...] S/he levitated between worlds. S/he hung between genders. S/he trembled between loves and desires. S/he was pigmented between races. S/he stretched her young body between continents and hung about her neck this archipelago of islands. (11-12)

⁸ In 1910 the German sexologist, Magnus Hirschfeld, coined the word ‘transvestism’ – a derivative from the Latin ‘to cross’ and ‘to dress’ – in case studies that he conducted about people who wore the clothes of the opposite sex on a regular basis. For those who cross-dress, however, the terms ‘transvestite’ and ‘transvestism’ are usually loaded with pathological connotations and so ‘crossdresser’ and ‘cross-dressing’ are preferred. See Carole-Anne Tyler, “Transvestism,” *Gay Histories and Culture: An Encyclopedia*, ed. George E. Haggerty

In the penultimate chapter of the novel, which is entitled ‘J’ouvert,’ Lavren and his alter ego recall various characters in the text, including the deceased members of the Monagas family – all of whom are masquerading as j’ouvert or ‘ole mas’ characters. In what reads like a satirical twist, s/he observes: “Coming up from the bottom of the hill, Quentino and Margarita were playing each other, Father priest and Mother Superior, and having a real bacchanal, back to back, belly to belly” (266). The latter words allude to the calypso “Jumbie Jamboree,” which depicts the jolly parade of dead spirits, and evokes the idea of being both dead and alive, of being in a state of liminality or in-betweenity and can be compared to the state of the transsexual, transvestite or intersexual who can be both man/woman, straddling genders. So in this celebration of appearances and masking, reality and unmasking also take place. Ironically, in the carnival season the mask can be a metaphor for truth – that is, a masquerader may in fact be portraying his/her true self that otherwise remains hidden or repressed. Lavren says of Carnival:

There is no hierarchy in carnival; no colour, no class, no race, no gender: all may cross over and inhabit the other (264). [...] man could be woman, woman could be man, could be god, could be servant, could be master, could be indentured labourer, could be enslaved [...] (265-266). [...] There is the reversal that happens in Carnival, the collapsing of opposites. (270)

These significant remarks relate directly to the nature of Lavren’s own gender and sex: Carnival with its suspension of regular reality, its crossings-over, reversals and “collapsing of opposites” is a metaphor for Lavren’s hermaphroditism or intersexuality, as well as for what can be described as his own cross-dressing. This no doubt accounts for two books within *Witchbroom* being subtitled ‘The Carnival Tales of Lavren Monagas de los Macajuelos.’ To further heighten the importance of the season in the novel, s/he is also born in its midst. Much like the ability of Carnival to blur, delete and blend boundaries, the reader is reminded on various occasions throughout the novel that as an intersexual Lavren can levitate between

(New York: Garland, 2000) 894. All four terms are used in Skeete’s thesis to reflect the neutrality of her position regarding the issue.

genders, races and worlds. Indeed, in this text that traces and probes into family, world and national histories, s/he has the ability to empathise with man/woman, White/non-White, and the colonizer/colonized.

As regards his/her visions and dreams, Lavren's cross-dressing plays a crucial role. Marie Elena's black lace dress is the "fetish, charm and talisman" that "worked like a mask, like a masquerade" (214) and evokes Lavren's visions (225). The dress is therefore an indexical sign – it is a sign of the invocation of visions and dreams of the past as well as of the future (233). Like his/her sexuality, therefore, the tendency to cross-dress is given mythical significance. Lavren's cross-dressing – as well as his/her clairvoyance – is deemed to be deviant and a sign of mental instability, and s/he is institutionalized for a time (224). But it is noteworthy that Lavren's cross-dressing is intrinsically linked with his/her intersexuality. A major observation that the third-person narrator makes is – Lavren is here referred to in the masculine gender – that "his transvestism [is] necessary to express his full nature as a hermaphrodite" (224). Lavren's committal is therefore an example of society's regulation of difference.

The evocation of pantomime, masquerade, play, performance and cross-dressing under consideration ultimately brings to mind Butler's contribution to queer theory regarding gender performativity.⁹ She argues against "naturalized or essentialist gender identities" (1990, 176) imposed by a heterosexual hegemonic culture and its "regulatory fiction of heterosexual coherence" (173), and contends that there is no stable or original gender identity, that a true gender is a fantasy, and gender itself is a fabrication (174). She explains that,

[...] acts, gestures, enactments, generally construed, are *performative* in the sense that the essence or identity that they otherwise purport to express are *fabrications* manufactured and sustained through corporeal signs and other

⁹ In another example in Anglophone Caribbean literature, play and pleasure, that is, same-sex desire, onanism, deception, a carnival masquerade and a costume ball, form the contexts in which cross-dressing is figured in Antoni's *Blessed is the Fruit*.

discursive means. That the gendered body is performative suggests that it has no ontological status apart from the various acts which constitute its reality. (173)

She cites cross-dressing, butch/femme identities and the performance of drag as cultural practices that parody the idea of a primary or original gender identity (174) – an idea that helps to promote a binary (hetero/homo) classification. In fact, Butler categorically asserts: “Genders can be neither true nor false, neither real nor apparent, neither original nor derived” (180). The intersexed character in *Witchbroom*, by his/her very nature, attests to Butler’s claim.

For the graduate students present, if you had looked at the exhibition when it was on the ground floor of the library you would have seen examples of research done on *Witchbroom*, such as UWI Mona’s Rachel Mordecai Ramsay’s 1996 Master’s thesis “The Carnival Tales of Lavren Monagas: A Discussion of Religion, Sexuality and Community in the Fiction of Lawrence Scott”. With the *Witchbroom* archive being lodged here and being so accessible to our staff, students, and the general public I implore that full use is made of the material for research, teaching, and study.

Lawrence Scott has been a long-lasting and dear personal and professional friend and collaborator with us here at the UWI, St. Augustine. He has a long association particularly with those of us in the Department of Literary, Cultural and Communication Studies (formerly the Department of Liberal Arts) in the Faculty of Humanities and Education, serving as our Writer-in-Residence, an Examiner in the MFA – Creative Writing programme, and as guest lecturer, reader and speaker – all on numerous occasions. You were very kind and generous in sharing your time, work and ideas with me when I was doing my doctoral research; and I remember dearly the thoughtfulness you displayed when you sent your words to be read at my viva because you could not attend in person due to your travel schedule. We celebrate the acquisition of your *Witchbroom* archive, I feel very honoured to have been

asked to speak on this occasion, we celebrate with you on the commemoration of the publication of your first novel, and we celebrate continuing to partner with you in the furtherance of reading, writing and literature.

Thank you.