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Nature and Shadows in the Caribbean: Queer Subjectivity and Identity in Helen Klonaris's "Ghost Children" and Shani Mootoo's *Cereus Blooms at Night*

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Abstract

This paper argues that the Greek-Bahamian writer, Helen Klonaris, and Trinidadian-born novelist, Shani Mootoo, pay obeisance to those systemically marginalised peoples in the Caribbean whose notions of self continue to be damaged by forms of imperialist attitudes which condemn queer and non-heteronormative desire as monstrous and strange. The authors offer an alternative discourse to etch out critical insights into the complicated lives and subjectivities of Caribbean communities, and in so doing, have recuperated tropical nature as a recourse to therapeutic interventions and as a space that protects the vulnerable from lethal neocolonial forces, which aim to disfigure the mind and body. This work, therefore, presents the task of locating a language in which the tacit understanding of deviant and queer encounters, and pleasures, can be made knowable and available to epistemic inquiry.

Keywords: tropical nature, queer ecology, Caribbean spectrality

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(Re) Constructions of Caribbean Subjectivities through Mythic Domains

In the aftermath of chattel slavery, forced indentureship, and cataclysmic incidents of history that drew peoples from Europe, Africa, and Asia, the modern New World Caribbean was birthed. These ruptures, rooted in migratory patterns, autonomy displacement, and survival traumas, continue to occupy the minds of several writers in the contemporary Caribbean world. More particularly, Shani Mootoo and Helen Klonaris have turned to uncanny, spectral, and mythic environments to grapple with its fearsome outworkings. The tropical landscape becomes an important paradigm in liberatory movements that seek to combat persecutory practices and instil pride in those following lifestyles of alterity. In part, it speaks of the necessity to enter into nature with a creative audacity to fill the gaps and holes in history with new knowledge and myriad self-expressions. What is thus striking is the sense in which the spectral surfaces the subjugated knowledge of fluid sexualities and deviant identities. The contemporary Jamaican writer and essayist, Kei Miller (2013), addresses the subject of "queer and mythological beings" in "Maybe Bellywoman Was on 'Di Tape" (2011) and observes that "queer or gay identities in postcolonial countries like Jamaica…seem to live more comfortably in mythical rather than actual spaces" (p. 100). Miller seems to point to how the tradition of the mythic accommodates Caribbean-specific non-heteronormative and deviant expressions of the self. From this position, such communities operate on a representational or symbolic level. Life forms are imagined not in stable articulations of being and existing orders but can equally emerge from submerged worlds, affective rapport, and dream universes. This forms part of a broader creative tactic of refusing the separations of the natural and the unnatural that have been mobilised to underpin homophobia and maintain the binaries between included and excluded bodies.

Underscoring the need for more work to be done in this area of research for the region, and building on the pattern of ideas advanced by Miller, I argue that both the Bahamian writer Helen Klonaris and Trinidadian-born novelist Shani Mootoo[1] not only pay obeisance to those systemically marginalised groups of people whose notions of self continue to be damaged by forms of imperialist attitudes that condemn queer and non-heteronormative desire as monstrous and strange but engage the non-human world as a viable and instructive terrain. This critical process is more explicitly emphasised in fluid time scales

[1] The primary texts examined here are authored by Caribbean diasporic writers, though Helen Klonaris has returned to the Bahamas after living in California for seventeen years. Shani Mootoo maintains a permanent residence in Toronto. Both writers have, however, successfully offered literary depictions of the complex life experiences of non-heterosexual individuals within a fictional *Caribbean* setting. These portrayals address the notable dearth of regional authors who explore themes of alternative sexuality.

in the narratives, fragments of gossip and whispers, plant symbolism and garden spaces, the coexistence of the ghostly and the living, juxtaposed images, underwater counterworlds, and a dreamlike universe. Various forms of textual contradictions, such as paradox, metaphor, and perspectival shifts, are among the elements used to explore the agency of characters of polymorphous sexualities. With the Anglophone Caribbean remaining a predominantly heterosexist and heteronormative space, Mootoo and Klonaris offer an alternative discourse to etch out critical insights into complicated lives and subjectivities.

As regards the importance of postcolonial thought to the theme of transgressive identity, I draw insights from several literary and cultural critics, including Curdella Forbes, who advances the transformative potential of mythic landscapes; Derek Walcott's unruly douen poetics; Elizabeth DeLoughrey's and George B. Handley's emphasis on nature's witnessing role; Wilson Harris' dream universe; Mildred Mortimer's antechamber aesthetic; Isabel Hoving's notion of environmental identity; and Nicole Seymour's queer ecologies. These thinkers offer new modes of theorising human and more-than-human relationships in the postcolonial world. The ambiguous composition of Caribbean space thus brings into focus the axes of gender, sexuality, and ethnic hybridity, which are key to the necessary unpacking of colonial legacies and ongoing negotiations of power within the contemporary nation-space. This perspective becomes even more significant considering the converging historical influences of slavery and the introduction of Christianity, which collectively shape and thwart notions of sexuality in the region. Secular laws, in tandem with religious ones, legislate against non-heterosexuals. For example, in Trinidad and Tobago (and Jamaica), homosexual and lesbian marriages are illegal. Tara Atluri in "When the Closet is a Region: Homophobia, Heterosexism and Nationalism in the Commonwealth Caribbean" (2001) notes that "Homophobia and heterosexism in the [Caribbean] have its roots in colonialism, yet, ironically, homosexuality is defined…as a form of 'Western imposition'…. The psychic residue of colonialism is transmitted through the neo-colonial on the basis of supposedly natural, superior sexuality" (p. 33). If Atluri's position is true, then the gay or lesbian subject is made to be subservient, unnatural, and bastardised in relation to heterosexist island orders. Atluri shows how "Caribbean sexualities are the products of the historical experiences of the region" and probes the sense in which identity and sexual politics "can be seen as…a product of European enlightenment ideology" (2001, pp. 11-13). The deleterious consequences of bastardisation based on queerness converge within the ghost genre insofar as the characters' inner concealed spaces are construed as tombs containing buried family hurts and betrayals.

Eco-Spectral Alliances in Helen Klonaris's "Ghost Children"

In "Ghost Children" (2015), the young protagonist's loss of ontology in the material world raises her value as an epistemological source of knowledge in the mythical realm. Helen Klonaris engages as her source material the Caribbean spectral universe, which is, in part, replete with tension and unease. In her short story, there is tension between the wild and the structured, the individual and society, the moral and the immoral, the queer and the heterosexist, the material and the immaterial, and the (neo)imperialist and the vulnerable subject. Settings are also juxtaposed with earthly domains set against dreamy swampy terrain brimming with multitudinous flora and creeping fauna. The narrative is a dizzying maze of endless crossings between temporal and sexual frontiers. The plot revolves around a thirteen-year-old lesbian narrator, Eilythia, whose sexual curiosity is nurtured by entry into a dream universe and nightly escapades with a spectral playmate. Central to the lesbian mystery is the simultaneous plot of coming out, familial rejection, and internalised homophobia. The story is told through the second-person point of view, where the clash of cultures and the alienation of the displaced narrator superimpose with the incoherent narrative universe and dream fragments that intrude even though the reader understands the events to be transpiring in real time. The unique narrative perspective creates a participatory impression on the reader insofar as latent cultural recognitions are discerned and the reader is catapulted into an immersive reality. It is an experience provoked by narrativized environments that expand the consciousness of time and space.

Eilythia faces rejection from both her mother, Renoula, and the broader society due to her defiance of religious and social conventions, queer proclivities, and clairvoyant abilities. The story opens with a conservative sense of Caribbean life. This is spatialised in Renoula's Saturday morning tea rituals with a group of elite Greek-Bahamian women who adorn themselves in Dior and who operate as a policing apparatus for the wider body politic. According to Eilythia, conversations centred around the scandal of Anna's daughter—"a girl with a girl" (2015, p. 40). In this atmosphere of deception and intense surveillance, Eilythia extends her learned submission by pretending to be a 'proper' heteronormative teenager. This is concretised when the clique leader addresses Renoula and claims, "Thank God your daughter is a good girl, Renoula. Look at her. She is perfect" (2015, p. 40). Rooted in their fidelity to Christian values, the women embody the wider community's self-cleansing function.

In this heterosexual imaginary of Bahamian society, the lurking or closeted lesbian threatens social stability. It is here that Klonaris treats the reader to a moment of heterosexist transgression, which she envisions through her young protagonist. Indeed, the art of manipulation that the child learns is engaged to keep her fantasy life a secret. She pretends to be the deceptively innocent teenager her mother wants her to be in the same way that Renoula feigns affluence to gain entry into the opulent Bahamian social hierarchy. Anne Allison (1996) in “Producing Mothers” enlists the characteristics and nature of parental policing, which include excessive control over a child's habits through religious and cultural expectations (p.136). In a parallel context, Klonaris appoints Renoula as a character who progressively encroaches on her child's freedom of movement. This is apparent when the narrator asserts, "When you were certain she was gone, you woke up. Only to find her sitting at the edge of your bed, eyes on you" (2015, 42), and "You listened for her breath behind your door, as she listened for yours" (2015, 45). Significantly, with each restriction imposed by her mother, Eilythia encounters a corresponding interaction with her spectral playmate that subverts her mother's attempts at control.

The protagonist’s entry into a dream universe peopled with spectral children whose sexual aggression provides a different kind of pain is telling: “their cold fingers scratching at your face and pinching your arms and legs…. The girl’s face crumpled. She called out to you…. You wanted to know what she felt like under your fingers. What her anemone breasts and velvet cucumber felt like against your skin” (2015, p. 44). The chain of subjects constantly blurs the border lines between the real, present, and living and the imaginary, mythological, and non-living. Eilythia is subservient to the pleasure and pain induced by her spectral playmate, which serves as a catalyst for unlearning the nauseating conventions of the Greek-Caribbean community. In fact, the rebelliousness that she discovers through her pleasurable encounters with the ghost children trickles into her creative defiance. It comes as no surprise that the material Bahamian island world manifests as a feverish and disorienting dream. Klonaris is here skilfully employing a ghostly framing to signify the co-option of a transgressive liminal space.

In the absence of a secure family setting where she can express her true self, Eilythia enters the realm of dreams as a means of undergoing transformation. Reflecting on the function of dreamscapes in postcolonial Caribbean fiction, Wilson Harris avers that “Dream provides the space to break the monolithic structures of power and authority. Dream provides the space to *ignore* the…tensions arising out of *forced* and voluntary movements” (1981, p. 91, emphasis added). In this sense, Klonaris uses unconscious, nocturnal activity as a transitory space that shapes the dreamer’s conduct and releases

her from damaging repression. Eilythia is able to presume a self that is fluid and shape-shifting. The dream universe permits her a freedom that is akin to a second life and enables a transformation that may not have been possible in the material world. The universe that emanates from the dream space is marshy and remote. She is thus portrayed in a way that typifies her as an unruly maroon figure—an outcast/outsider to the predominantly heterosexual mainstream society—while simultaneously being portrayed as an integral aspect of the human condition. Furthermore, Eilythia's experience in the labyrinth involves changing dimensions—from the intimate to the vast, from the close-up to the general view, from situations of proximity to interdiction of approach—as well as changing temperatures from cold to warm. This is illustrated when we are told:

> You swam toward them, felt the water grow cool…. Another swam closer…. They watched you from between mangrove roots, whispered secrets to each other. And then one of the ghost children swam toward you, stopping and hovering feet away. You could not tell if it was a boy or a girl…. They swam toward you then in droves, their long fingers stroking your cheeks, weaving through your hair, caressing your arms…. They…slid up against your skin…. [Y]ou slid feet first into the water and felt the labyrinth draw you down again…. The ghost children grew still and cold in the water. Your breath was warm in your throat (Klonaris, 2015, pp. 42-44).

In this dream space, nature is presented as both a cultural and sexual safe haven. Klonaris places emphasis on deep caverns, which the protagonist must traverse in order to touch the spirit girl's "velvet-smooth sea cucumber" (2015, p. 44). The phallic, dark "mangrove roots" (p. 41), which "snaked out of her bedroom" (p. 48), and female genitalia of the swamp that conceal "pink conch shells" (p. 48) similarly connote a subtle rebellious commentary that probes the interplay between human eroticism and nonhuman wilderness spaces. Bodies, faces, and fragments of gestures appear and disappear in the dark. Bathing in this epiphanic, fantasy mangrove away from a civilisation that is structured through neocolonial forces allows Eilythia to discover what comes spontaneously to her—an erotic attraction to the same sex. As the spectral girl dominates Eilythia's body, we are told that she reaches "inside [her] jeans and under the elastic of [her] underwear for the place between [her] legs, and sank into the wetness there" (p. 44). Through her participation in nocturnal masturbatory activities, Eilythia cultivates a deeper awareness of her existence and sexual identity. Her body becomes a site of inscription of the inner layers of the self. It is in this alternative domain that she is able to cut the

umbilical cord and come out of a stifling cocoon. What should remain hidden makes itself manifest: the feminine as a disrupting force, ruining neat gender orders and expectations. Klonaris is illuminating the seething presence of the lesbian figure by bringing to the surface through her fiction that which is not represented—those who are not mimetically figured.

Apart from the homoerotic freedom that the text affords through the dream universe, injustice and other forms of wounding are addressed in the ruinate (the bush and swamp). That the narrative universe is peopled with "purple cheeked children" (2015, p. 42) who have sunken bellies, lidless eyes, and purple arms speaks to Klonaris' multifaceted intent of retrieving a traumatic underside of Caribbean reality. Klonaris, it seems, is deploying the trope of ghost children to engage the child as a symbolic reflection of the potential (or lack thereof) of nation-building. Numerous Caribbean thinkers like Derek Walcott and LeRoy Clarke have engaged the legend of the douen—a mythical figure in African Caribbean traditions—who is the lost child that dies or is aborted before it is christened. Denied access to an eternity, the douen, or incarnated, disfigured foetus, is doomed to wander the earthly woods and watercourses. The ghoulish creature devotes itself to mischievous pranks and particularly enjoys luring other unbaptised children astray. This evocation is sustained in Klonaris' work insofar as, like the undead children, Eilythia is powerless in a society that is stripped of moorings and integrity, which stifles new potentialities. The author therefore sets up narrative conventions and tropes to disrupt binaries and elevate communities that exist on the margins of society.

By implicature, the ghost children who operate as douens provide a historical contextualisation of the ways that the queer, the deformed, the monstrous, and the unwanted were rooted out, destroyed, and exploited by heterosexist, patriarchal ideologies in the Caribbean. As Rosamond S. King (2002) states:

> Although sex and sexuality are the heart of the human life…. [c]olonized, formerly colonized, and minority peoples often find these issues particularly problematic because their sexual behaviours have been derogated, exaggerated and exoticized by imperial and colonial power, and then held up by those powers as examples of their inferiority and the justification of their oppression. Such a history is evident in the case of the Caribbean. (p. 24)

The impact of historical dynamics on demonstrations of sexuality and the formation of identities in the Caribbean cannot be underestimated and is tacitly located in Klonaris's

ghost story. Her fictional imaginary operates as a conduit for the narration of collective histories and the configuration of deviant communities whose perceived monstrosity remains tethered to historicised notions of colonial alterity and strangeness. In a similar vein, Angelique Nixon (2015) argues: "The selling of paradise and consumption of bodies through tourism continues in ways that are deeply troubling. As long as the selling of difference continues in these ways, it will be very difficult to create new frameworks of alternative models of tourism that are not entrenched in racism, sexism, heterosexism, class exploitation, and embodied consumption" (p. 21). According to Nixon, the historical narratives of those who have been regarded as powerless have been positioned at the periphery of society, and their stories silenced. The elimination of a subject's history is thus concomitant with the deletion of their identity. Nixon opines the need to foster more complex understandings of the Caribbean that probe the sedimented ground of national representation through which certain bodies have been positioned as unnatural for eons. Klonaris provides both historical and contemporary recourse by granting visibility, viability, and variability to the subject of female same-sex eroticism. Eilythia's and the spectral girl's erotic foreplay and even friendship are seemingly impossible outside of the narrow confines of the Bahamian townspeople. However, the author radically re-purposes the importance of wilderness spaces for the processes of queer coalitions, revolutions, and rebellions.

In the introduction to *Postcolonial Ecologies* (2011), Elizabeth DeLoughrey and George B. Handley assert that since the environment functions as a "nonhuman witness to the violent process of colonialism, an engagement with alterity is a constitutive aspect of postcoloniality" (8). Klonaris thus establishes a discursive realm where lesbian characters engage in sexual adventurism within the safety of nature. Her use of the landscape as both a cultural and sexual haven interlocks with Mildred Mortimer's assertions in *Writing from the Hearth: Public, Domestic, and Imaginative Space in Francophone Women's Fiction of Africa and the Caribbean* (2007), in which she explores women's transformation of restrictive, repressive structures into a liberating "alternative" space that contains freedom of choice as well as a place of resistance to the status quo. Mortimer describes how this alternative terrain functions as "a refuge (for meditation, *memory*, or dream)" and as a "preparatory antechamber for future activity, a site of resistance, a place of performance" (2007, pp. 24-25). By this estimation, the "alternative spaces" that Eilythia resorts to in her dreams become an enabling environment to fashion creative acts that dispel her social and cultural erasure. Thus, the solid world starts crumbling, and the boundaries become porous as the uncanny impinges on the rational world. Despite Renoula's initial claim of having successfully banished the ghost children from the house

by fortifying the doors and crevices with wooden frames, the text subtly reveals the futility of this effort.

The narrative crescendos with an uplifting apotheosis, symbolised by the "specks of white dust" that gracefully drift into the house (2015, p. 48). It is a sign that Eilythia has thrust her transgressive identity into the realm of the living, fractured established traditions, and defied cultural expectations. Unable to ignore her daughter's unapologetic transgressive nature, Renoula eventually comes to terms with the truth of the girl's clairvoyance and queerness. Klonaris is thus creating a different context for the evaluation of border-crossing. She presents an unexpected and queer return to nature, which brings with it a completely different notion of the natural from monolinear and hegemonic worldviews. The story unfolds as a testament to the young protagonist's audacious self-authorisation, a journey fully realised through encounters with spectral presences.

Natural Worlds and Empathy in Shani Mootoo's *Cereus Blooms at Night*

For displaced and disposed persons, Caribbean writers continue to turn to the natural world as an avenue for therapeutic intervention. This is sustained in Shani Mootoo's novel, *Cereus Blooms at Night* (1996), which is set in the fictional Paradise, Lantanacamara, a town that finds its creative alternative to the social imaginary of Trinidad during a season of colonial rule. Lantanacamara is a colonised space that is subservient to the Shivering Northern Wetlands, which is a novelised Western metropole. By refusing to name a real island, Mootoo privileges space and place over nation and hetero-normative history. Sissy Helff's (2008) observation is useful as she unravels the implications of introducing a fictional space as well as the name's deeply symbolic position. She notes, "The island symbolizes migrancy and transformation. The lantana bush and its ability to adapt to most soil types can be found almost everywhere in the world today. It's beautiful pink flowers, however, should not distract attention from its dangerous, thorny undergrowth" (p. 284). By designating Lantanacamara as a utopic no-man's land, social hierarchies gain the freedom to proliferate like a poison ivy across various spaces and in diverse manners.

Lantanacamara is reminiscent of the post-indentureship period in Trinidad, which becomes evident in Mootoo's prioritising of the intergroup social and historical relations that existed between the Presbyterian missionaries and the Hindu—East-Indian—population on the island. Mala Ramchandin's ostracism, her father's emasculation by his lesbian wife, and Tyler's sexual fluidity toward gendered identities are entrenched within

a larger field of identity politics. Numerous moments of peril abound, posing a threat to those who are vulnerable. Implicit in Mootoo's sociocultural framing are the insights of Trinidadian historians like Jerome Teelucksingh (2015) and Tejaswini Niranjana (1999), who have shown that East Indian national identity has historically defined itself in relation to morality and propriety. We find a clear evocation in Chandin's mother's impulse to pull her "orhanie over her head and nose and mouth" to veil herself from the gaze of others (Mootoo, 1996, p. 27). Mootoo is here drawing attention to an idealised inscription of Indo Caribbean women as preservers of domestic culture, in which they are expected to cheerfully perform their ritual acts of duty. Thus, growing up in a household where his mother was anticipated to maintain family honour through her conduct, shapes Chandin's perspective on the role of women in relation to men. Together with the amplification of this misogynistic colonial history as a vengeful presence, Mootoo offers a new perspective for questioning the source of self-sacrifice, psychic dissolution, and terror.

Thus, not unlike the circumstances we encounter in Klonaris' narrative, submerged trauma finds pathways for speaking through entangled and queer[2] relationships in *Cereus*. Mala's journey from childhood to womanhood, then victimhood, and ultimately facing disability is given voice by a queer male nurse narrator. Through his patient listening skills, Tyler is able to meaningfully engage Mala's supposed psychosis when she is committed to the Alms House. Her inaudible grunts and limited vocabulary are the consequences of a life of abandonment, horrific sexual abuse, ridicule, and scorn. Out of a willingness to tolerantly read her responses, Tyler brings to public life Mala's concealed pains, and it is in this sense that his storytelling compels a reckoning. Tyler insists, "I am the one who ended up knowing the whole truth, every significant and insignificant bit of it" (1996, p. 7). The truth proves enigmatic: a life defined by maternal abandonment, child rape, murder, and exile. The effect is Chandin's rotting body, which repositions Mala's painful memories as ghostly presences. The Ramchandin manor is haunted by the irrepressible ghosts of the undead—Chandin, Sarah, Asha, and Lavinia. Together, Mala and her childhood alter ego, Pohpoh, live through this crisis.

In a telling portion of the text, Mala remembers her mother's abandonment. We learn that at a specific moment each year, when aspects of light and weather align "in perfect imitation of another moment, long ago" (Mootoo 1996, p. 131), Mala reminisces about the day Sarah and Lavinia left, leaving both her and Asha behind. This sparks an explosive

[2] It is imperative to note that Mala is not read as a queer figure in the context of the LGBTQI community. Rather, the term 'queer' specifically refers to Tyler's and Otoh's relationship (as well as Lavinia's and Sarah's liaisons) and may be fruitfully deployed as an important frame for the subversive effect of Mootoo's writing.

chain of events ranging from incest to madness and murder. Mala is heretofore seduced into accepting the monstrous version of Chandin—becoming the surrogate wife who left him. To intensify the horrific circumstances, when Ambrose, Mala's childhood love, returns to Lantanacamara and rekindles their romance, Chandin discovers their affair and subjects his daughter to a night of brutal rapes. The images of Chandin "press[ing] his menacing face against hers" (1996, p. 221); "push[ing] her to the sink and shov[ing] her face down into the basin, pressing his chin into her back as he used both hands to pull up her dress…yank[ing] out his penis [while] ramm[ing] himself in and out of her"…her "lower lip split and the outer edge of her left eye tore" (pp. 221-222), bring together images of a mocked, rejected, and tortured man, as well as unimaginable physical and psychical violence, which will later act as a means of foreshadowing his death at the hands of Mala. The intense shame and betrayal that Chandin experienced upon Lavinia's and Sarah's exodus is renewed by the presence of Ambrose; however, what triggers his brutal violence is the fear of losing his sex object, which renders him a man. The larger extract describes the sense in which Mala's humanity, childhood, and womanhood are snatched from her by Chandin in a reiterated enactment of colonial oppression. However, what stuns Mala into absolute silence and subsequent physical disfigurement is the ultimate inertia, avoidance, and abandonment by Ambrose when she reveals Chandin's corpse under the house.

Devastated to a point beyond repair, Mala withdraws into the symbolic garden, where she quite literally becomes a wild woman. Unlike Klonaris' Eilythia, who finds personal agency in an untamed and unchartered natural world, Mala becomes disenchanted with living and is socially withdrawn into an unruly garden space. The mystery of Mala's life, which evades retrieval and resolution, is embodied in the yard. Mirroring the ambiguity that she feels on a psychic level (the accusatory label of being her father's whore by the village people and failing Ambrose's ideal of a virgin), the garden contains the duality of her freedom as well as her degeneration. According to Curdella Forbes in "Yearning for Utopia: Earth, Body, Deviance and Festive-Carnival Failure in Cereus Blooms at Night":

> Unlike the two male [transgressive] figures [Otoh and Tyler], Mala does not actually cross-dress. However, her attempt to recode her body outside clothing, to remake it as a part of nature, may be read in the same terms as cross-dressing—that is, as a way of taking on another identity, though in this case fabricated costume is replaced by the foliage of nature with which she becomes identified. (Forbes 2011, pp. 115-116)

Forbes notes that Mootoo is locating a modality that returns the violated human body to its primal origins and to the body of the earth. With its “unmanageable clumps of razor grass” (1996, p. 151); “the smell of rotting water-logged wood” (p. 13); the “soil [that] smelled damp and rich with earth worms”; “bullfrogs that belted territorial warnings” (p. 151); and the specimens that might be seen “only in the heart of an old-growth forest” (p. 154), the garden temporarily cloaks and protects Mala from human intrusion. In fact, when she finally receives a visitor after decades of living alone, the guest notices:

> decades of dust; clumps of matted cobwebs; old cavities eaten away by wood lice; lazy, unperturbed daddy-longlegs clinging to the siding, motionless; stout cloud-white moths polka-dotting the wood; remains of snake eggs, lizard eggs, hatchlings lurking, squirming squishily as they sought the warm sunlight. An old glass aquarium lay on its side. (Mootoo 1996, p. 153)

The numerous references to what the tropical garden hides usher the readers into the shadowy mental terrain of the protagonist. The garden space generates an impulse to render visible what lies concealed behind the thick vegetation—a woman whose childhood and innocence have been erased and denigrated by a promiscuous and abusive parent. Mala’s response to these recurring and deeply traumatic memories involves ingesting a homemade chilli paste so potent that it damages her mouth and "her tongue" (Mootoo 1996, p.133) and eventually disables her from any form of speech. It is an act that suggests her sense of justified punishment. Alone in the overgrown garden after her father's death and Asha's flight from the island, she gradually relinquishes language altogether, preferring instead the sounds of animals—the chirp of crickets or the songs of birds—that she can mimic with uncanny accuracy.

Violent upheavals proliferate in the text and are apparent when the local police invade Mala’s ruinate house and disrupt her visceral connection with nature. Upon sighting the cereus plant, they exclaim, “The blossoms of this thing so big! I wonder if it will catch if I break off a piece and take it home?” (1996, p. 176). A band of bird catchers simultaneously observe as men with birdcages descend upon the garden space: “In a pinch ten birds could live for about two, three days in one cage…. You know how much one peekoplat fetching these days?… Divide up, a third each, a mudra that size would make each one of us a rich man. I myself putting in a bid for the lower third of the base” (p. 187). We are therefore seeing that both nature and the character, Mala, are represented as wholly other to the patriarchal, colonial socio-symbolic order of Lantanacamara. Mootoo is providing us with an expression of the unspeakable and

excessive greed that victimizes both Mala and the landscape. The writer is offering us a narrative space to think through the complicated global and local contexts of environmental sustainability.

It is significant that the nurse Tyler, like Mala, is made to stand outside of the collective and that it is he who exhumes and embraces her history. He is both caregiver and transcriber of her life story. Despite his acquaintance with European culture (he goes abroad for nursing training[3]), he strongly identifies with his homeland insofar as he follows the local folkways and communes with non-human species—plants and animals. What we see here is a patient and mindful interaction with nature. He is thus able to sensitively peel away the existing layers of public scorn from Mala's life. Cathy Caruth (1995) argues, "Trauma is not locatable in the simple violent or original event in the individual's past, but rather in a way that its very unassimilated nature—the way in which it was precisely not known in the first instance—returns to haunt the survivor later on" (p. 4). Mala—a survivor—is haunted by the unassimilated nature of her trauma—the violence, we might say, for which she has no language. This is where Tyler's non-discriminating voice hones a major narrative function. Himself an outcast for offending the mores of the colonial town through his gay and cross-dressing proclivities, Tyler shares an uncanny symmetry of experience with Mala. He admits, "Perhaps my intuition was nothing more than recalcitrant yearning, for I did fancy that she and I shared a common perception of the world" (1996, p. 20). In a poignant moment within the novel, Mala's and Tyler's deep connection is evident when she intuitively meets his unspoken needs by gifting him a nurse's uniform (pp. 75-78). Despite acknowledging Tyler's effeminate demeanour, Mala transcends mere reactions by actively addressing his desires. Her ability to lean so heavily towards actions over words prompts Tyler to ask, "Me? Me what? You. You want to wear it.... You want to wear it?" (p. 76). The uniform in question, with its pair of nylon stockings, is a signifier of not only Tyler's repressed desire to cross-dress but also of Mala's acceptance of his sexuality. Her doing for him what no one else had done before exemplifies the kinship between them. She intervenes in the mistreatment that Tyler suffers as a feminine person in a homophobic society because she too has had her own experience of abuse and stigmatisation within that framework.

This connection takes on an additional layer of complexity as, by the fifth chapter, Tyler's narration is significantly interrupted by the voice of Asha. The themes of metamorphosis and fluidity cannot be missed, as exemplified by Tyler's seamless movement into Asha's

[3] The discourse on Caribbean homosexuality addresses, in part, themes such as familial and societal pressures, interactions with men, migrations, and navigating cultural differences.

story. At this juncture in the narrative, we learn that Asha's letters to her sister remain undelivered due to the postman's refusal to venture to the Ramchandin manor, as he deems it a site steeped in sin and moral decay. Asha's and Tyler's voices seem to co-mingle here because it is he who reads "the letters out loud, one by one" (1996, p. 246) to Mala. However, because this is not stated until the last correspondence is presented, the narratee 'hears' Asha's voice as she futilely communicates with her sister. The fact that it is Tyler who reads Asha's correspondence to her sister and indirectly to us, is one indicator as to how he in effect tells Mala's story—how he has gained "the privilege, and honour, of entering her world" (p. 72). Tyler's narrative thus emerges out of a shared deviance—the incommensurability between the public accounts of Caribbean island life and its unspoken corollary. This narrativized personal account interfaces with the wider history of the Caribbean postcolonial nation, which functions aporetically as a series of gaps between the official narratives of life in Paradise. Tyler's queerness and Mala's traumas operate within the interstice—in limbo. In a bid to recover these denigrated and erased subjectivities, Mootoo repurposes the third space, which is devoid of polarities and binaries, to provide a social commentary on the value of difference in the "other" and thereby enhance the potential for transformational communality. The history that operates in limbo is thus a product of enigmatic survival. By living in the in-between, both Mala and Tyler are able to live with and take as natural that which the community condemns as abnormal.

The theme of survival is significant to the discussion at hand and is ultimately engaged through the vivid symbol of the night-blooming cereus plant (a remnant of Mala's childhood and the flower that she ran to retrieve the day she planned to escape with her mother and Lavinia), which Otoh Mohanty and his father, Ambrose, bring to the Alms house. In a curious juxtaposition, both father and son exemplify the text's striking instances of border-crossing and mirroring. Ambrose is the former suitor of Mala, but he proves unable to save her from her traumatic life. Otoh is his transgender son, who crosses not just the boundaries between genders but also generations as he disguises himself as his father to bring food to Mala. The cereus is thus a symbolic offering from two characters (Lavinia and Otoh) who defy gendered and temporal boundaries. The illusive flower produces unavoidable associations with transgressive identities since it is cactus-like and unobtrusive except when in bloom. It can be engaged as a hermaphroditic symbol that boasts a stamen and an ovary, thus challenging borders altogether. As an ambiguous night flower, it dovetails with the undercover and transgressive identities that operate in the novel. This nocturnal blossom, with its uncanny allure, becomes a poignant metaphor for the powerful but clandestine forces at work within the narrative. In mirroring the meticulous cultivation of the slow-blooming cereus plant by characters like Mala and

the alms house gardener, Mr. Hector, Tyler's evolving femininity finds compassionate acceptance. Thus, when Tyler announces that "my own life has finally—and not too late I might add—began to bloom" (1996, p. 105), the resonance of "bloom" underscores the ethics of care and tenderness that encompasses the natural, cultural, and human worlds.

As Tyler, Otoh, and Mala watch the plant's rare blooming, a moment of transcendence, peace, and serenity is afforded. In *Strange Futures: Futurity, Empathy, and the Queer Ecological Imagination* (2013), Nicole Seymour describes such an occasion as bearing a transformational potentiality of contact between the human and nonhuman. It is one that offers an empathy-based vision of a holistic ecological state rooted in inter-relationality (2013, p. 22). The three characters are thus able to negotiate their liminal status through deep affective linkages, nurturing duties of care and mutual respect. The queer Otoh—a female to male transexual—finds a soul mate in Tyler, and their love is compared to the natural and diverse Caribbean landscape. The literary critic, Isabel Hoving (2005), tells us that "Mootoo…calls for an ongoing, subtle interaction with the world—an interaction subtle as the insect touch, open to the other's response" (p. 166). In other words, survival is not suggested only in self-preservation but through tender, compassionate alliances and awareness of the interconnected and fragile order in which one finds oneself.

In many ways, Otoh and Tyler also "queer" the space of Chandin's heterosexual male dominance. Neither provokes a violent response to the abuse that runs unchecked on the island, but both demonstrate what it is to have courage enough to feel emotions and to exhibit them. Moreover, it is in their recognition and embodiment of the shifting codes of nature that Tyler and Otoh are able to set Mala on the road of recovery. They assert that the alleviation of psychic disease spawned by systemic injustices is to be found in the embrace of shared vulnerabilities.

Conclusion: Caribbean Nature and Spectrality

At the end of Mootoo's and Klonaris' texts, both female protagonists experience different fates. While Eilythia sensitively emerges into a state of independence, Mala—amid her horrific life experiences—is offered recuperative, healing moments in the natural world and safe havens of friendship. The natural domain, which protects and restores, represents collective belonging in a state of compatibility. Although both women bow, in part, under the weight of pervasive hegemonic ideologies, they find recourse to therapeutic intervention through mythic spaces and natural worlds, and have, in so doing, displaced colonial and neocolonial regimes of rule.

By radically unravelling how the familiar and the strange are mapped onto bodies, Mootoo's and Klonaris' nonrealist writing compels a powerful re-examination of the cultural impact of normalised heteronormative self-concepts. The intermingling of radical imaginings and the call for transformation becomes central to Caribbean spectrality studies as the writers variously call into question the realities intertwined with concepts of nationhood and citizenship. The texts suggest that in an ideal world, untouched by hegemonic control, all actions habitually deemed perverse would be accepted, with the exception of those that exploit the souls and bodies of the vulnerable.

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