

The Paradise Alms House

Siting Literary Thirdspace in Shani Mootoo's *Cereus Blooms at Night*

Although most criticism of Shani Mootoo's *Cereus Blooms at Night* focuses on the Ramchandin garden, my analysis reveals that the comparatively neglected institutional space of The Paradise Alms House is central to both the narrative and the ethics of the novel. The overwhelming focus on the Ramchandin garden appears to be related to the critical dynamic noted by Christine Kim, who argues that *Cereus* "is typically packaged as post-colonial" (154) and discussed "within the cultural politics of the academy rather than the lesbian feminist politics of activism out of which it emerged" (159). Thus, while the destructive effects of colonization on the Ramchandin family are generally recognized, the equally destructive effects of sexism and heterosexism, which are inseparable from and interlocking with those of colonization, are less often discussed. Kim suggests that "reading texts solely through common postcolonial tropes and the popular theoretical lens of hybridity poses its own set of limitations" (163). This article balances the critical focus by identifying the alms house and its residents' garden as a place of productive literary thirdspace. This strategy restores the novel's full range of ethical engagement, which presents hybridity in a context of community and concerns with gender, and sexuality in the postcolonial setting of Lantanacamera, a fictional Caribbean island.

Sarah Philips Casteel's focus on the Ramchandin garden is typical of existing *Cereus* criticism. Although she concedes that "much of the action takes place" in the Paradise Alms House, she argues that "the [novel's] centre . . . is a semi-magical garden that is set against the experience of displacement . . . that is so characteristic of the Caribbean and its literature" (24, 16). Isabel Hoving's reading differs in that it illustrates the limitations Kim warns

against. Hoving focuses on the Ramchandin garden as a postcolonial trope. She “links the intense experience of the plant world to pain” and claims that “at first sight, this pain lives in sexual trespassing, not in colonization.” Although Hoving eventually concludes, more equitably, that “like the concept of hybridity, the metaphor of the garden analyzes the colonial as both racial and sexual,” her assertion that the novel “*seems at first sight to be about incest*” (my emphasis) denies that *Cereus* is, in fact, about incest, as well as homo- and transphobia, sexism, and colonialism. Hoving’s wording also disturbs because it includes incest and lesbianism under “sexual trespassing” (217).¹ This does some violence to the novel because it promulgates a confusion specifically repudiated in *Cereus*. Mala’s nurse, the transgendered Tyler, explains, “[I]t was a long time before I could distinguish between [Chandin’s] perversion and what others called mine” (51). Perhaps the focus on the garden represents a retreat to the familiar in the face of the more transgressive and challenging themes of incest, marginalized sexuality, and gender identity. Judith Misrahi-Barak unwittingly suggests this in her observation that, in *Cereus*, “the traditional [Caribbean] theme of childhood is intertwined with the two more unusual ones of homosexuality and incest, which are not immediately associated with Caribbean writing” (94).

In this article, I focus on the more unlikely space of a Catholic alms house and argue that it and the literary thirdspace that Mootoo creates there,² rather than the Ramchandin garden, form the ethical heart of the novel. I stress from the outset that literary thirdspace, like Homi K. Bhabha’s “Third Space” (53), is not fully representable. Its relational geography is an intangible born of a web of invisible connections within and between characters, identifications, and the inhabited landscape. The alms house is not, itself, thirdspace. Instead, it provides a locational frame within which cultural meanings are reworked so that characters may perform self-coherent versions of themselves and be appreciated *as themselves* by others. Siting literary thirdspace at the Paradise Alms House introduces a focus on community and argues that *Cereus* presents a spatialized community, an interwoven network of the social and physical wherein the ethics of living difference in community may be observed. My explorations suggest that recognizing the qualities of witnessing, kindness, safety, and radical acceptance of self and other within a relational geography not only serves to distinguish literary thirdspace from Bhabha’s originary concept, but also (re)claims these qualities from liberal humanism. I suggest that they belong, instead, to the critical conversation that seeks radical, effective, and peaceful social change.

On the level of narrative and content, the novel presents a way to, as Judith Butler suggests, “pose the question of ‘identity,’ but no longer as a pre-established position or uniform entity; rather, as part of a dynamic map of power in which identities are constituted and/or erased, deployed and/or paralyzed” (117). Coral Ann Howells asserts that “Mootoo writes about liminal identities positioned on the margins or between worlds. Such issues relate not only to the immigrant condition but also to sexual and racial politics and the legacy of colonialism” (7). I argue that *Cereus*’ textual and ethical concern with relational and interlocking multiple identifications (on the individual and the community level) encompasses both postcolonial commentary and the feminist shift towards viewing identity as interlocking or intersectional (see Dill, McLaughlin, and Nieves).

At the Paradise Alms House, multiply hybrid subjectivities are able to perform themselves openly and, by so doing, undermine the power of hegemonic norms. Each performance is relational, and the ineffable thirdspace created through this hybrid community recalls the “thinking of community that is open to the contingencies of singularity . . . in the spacing, the together-touching, of singularities” advanced by Samira Kawash in the context of African American narratives (213). The relational geography of literary thirdspace in *Cereus* inaugurates a radical integration that I deliberately misspell as *intergration* to parallel Bhabha’s “*international*,” which places the emphasis on relation, on between-ness, on “*inter*” (56). My neologism signals an integration that privileges “singularities” by resolutely refusing to homogenize the different parts of an individual or a community whilst nevertheless achieving a degree of harmony. To borrow from Bhabha, this represents “how newness enters the world” (303). It is “newness” that indicates the radical potential of interdependent qualities such as kindness and openness.

Although it would be presumptuous and reductive to attempt to reprise the extensive critical discussions of thirdspace and hybridity,³ literary thirdspace, like Bhabha’s Third Space is grounded in language and linked to hybridity. Bhabha links Third Space to hybridity through his reading of Frantz Fanon and, following Fanon, asserts that “the liberatory people who initiate the productive instability of revolutionary cultural change are themselves the bearers of a hybrid identity” (55), an assertion with relevance to Mootoo’s fictional characters and to literary critics. The link between performing hybrid identity and initiating cultural change accounts for much of the theoretical and activist enthusiasm for “hybridity” and “Third Space.” The possibilities these concepts imply are available to subjects of gender and

sexuality as well as to postcolonial subjects. While Bhabha declares that it is “significant that the productive capacities of this Third Space have a colonial or postcolonial provenance” (56), he also recognizes that “[w]hat is at issue is the performative nature of differential identities . . . [and] the limits of any claim to a singular or autonomous sign of difference—be it class, gender or race”—or sexuality (313). Nevertheless, the North American deployment of Bhabha’s “Third Space” and its attendant terminology of cosmopolitan hybridity have set off an important critical debate around what Rey Chow calls “the euphoric valorization of difference” and the “insufficiency of hybridity.” Chow claims that this, “in North America at least . . . must be recognized as part of a politically progressivist climate that celebrates cultural diversity in the name of multiculturalism” (62). My reading of *Cereus* demonstrates both the dangerous insufficiency of an individualistic or narcissistic hybridity and the revolutionary possibilities of relational hybridity.

The example of Chandin forestalls a celebratory reading of hybridity in *Cereus*. I largely agree with Hoving’s assessment of the effects of colonialism on Chandin, despite her slighting of the effects of patriarchy. Hoving links hybridity in postcolonial texts to representation and relation (as discussed by Édouard Glissant) rather than through the postmodernism of Bhabha, but nevertheless observes that “the father’s crime is situated within the context of colonization: he is one of the tragic persons meant to be part of the Caribbean colonial elite, a mimic man who found at a crucial moment that he was not quite white and British” (217). Of course, he also discovers that his wife does not “belong” to him and he cannot control her. But it is Mootoo’s careful delineation of the damage done to Chandin by the workings of colonialization that allows him to seem tragic.

Early on, readers, along with the immigrant workers who discuss Chandin’s rare good fortune in being informally adopted by the Reverend Ernest Thoroughly, are exhorted to “Remember that name.” However, the pain wrought through his interpellation into the Wetlandish church and culture cruelly mocks this early optimism. By the novel’s end, Chandin’s hybridity clearly contributes to the alienation that allows him to become a drunken, violent, and incestuous father rather than an exemplary man of God. It is understating the case to say that cultural hybridity has served neither Chandin nor his family well; he certainly does not initiate any positive cultural change. Positive change remains to be wrought by the hybrid community that evolves at the Paradise Alms House and which struggles against sexism, racism, homo- and transphobia.

As the narrative of *Cereus* entwines familial and colonial history in the ironically named town of Paradise, literary thirdspace is conjured at the alms house, which is situated, significantly, a little *beyond* the town's limits. More specifically, Mootoo's textual thirdspace is grounded in the newly created residents' garden, which offers fertile soil for the cereus plant that gives the novel its title and for the various human (trans)identifications that enact themselves socially and successfully at its borders. The resident that inspires the Paradise Alms House gardener, Mr. Hector, to create this garden is the elderly Mala, who has been "taken into the alms house . . . to receive proper care and attention until the end of her days" after being exonerated from charges of murdering her father (8). Mala and a cutting from her lush cereus plant are the key survivors who escape the Ramchandin property, where Mala has lived outside in the increasingly wild garden that surrounds the house for most of her solitary life.

Some background helps demonstrate how literary thirdspace comes to be located at the Paradise Alms House rather than in Mala's house or in her wonderfully exuberant garden. Mala and her younger sister Asha are left alone with their father after Sarah (Mala's mother), and Sarah's lover, Lavinia, fail in their attempt to take the children with them to begin a new life together in the Shivering Northern Wetlands (Mootoo's renaming of Great Britain). As the four are about to leave, Pohpoh (Mala's childhood name) returns for "her bag with all the seeds and the shells and the cereus cutting" (67). A suspicious Chandin returns home early and manages to detain both daughters while the two women flee his rage to catch the year's last sailing for the Wetlands. Asha eventually escapes Chandin and Paradise by leaving Lantanacamara and Mala becomes the sole recipient of her father's abuse.

A decade later, a suspicious Chandin returns home early once again, but this time finds a young man, Ambrose, visiting Mala. Chandin attacks Mala viciously, wielding a cleaver "high above his head" (245). In self-defence, Mala fells him.⁴ Later, she "drags his inert body downstairs, and after locking him up in the sewing room, she builds a barricade of furniture to protect herself against him" (Howells 155). It is *fitting*, as Joanna X. K. Garvey observes, that it is the sewing room, an area that is typically "women's space," which earlier "sheltered and hid the transgressive love of Sarah and Lavinia [and that] ironically now serves as crypt for the abusive father" (102). Following this, Mala "never lit a lantern in that house again. Nor did she, since that day, pass a night inside its walls" (Mootoo, *Cereus* 249). Mala takes solitary refuge in the garden, and it thrives while Mala survives and becomes

part of the garden's ecology, removed from human discourse and at some distance from her culture's definitions of sanity.

Mala's garden refuge is indeed compelling; however, I argue that no part of the Ramchandin property may be read as productive literary thirdspace. The house, in particular, is the novel's primary site of trauma and betrayal; it is there that Chandin sexually abuses Mala and Asha. After Chandin's death and Mala's withdrawal to the garden, the house becomes first "crypt," then crematorium. The narrative event that unmistakably signals the impossibility of the house's reclamation, and the impossibility of Chandin's recuperation, burns both house and body to ashes. Moreover, "the life-robbing cloud" of smoke and particles from the fire envelops the complicit town of Paradise and does not lift until Judge Bissey exonerates Mala and entrusts her to the care of The Paradise Alms House, which lets "light shine in Paradise once again" (8). As Mary Condé asserts, the cloud is "the visible metaphor for Paradise's wilful ignorance" (67). Given that coloniality is *thoroughly* implicated in the brutal and sexualized violence that Chandin visits upon his daughters, it is not surprising that the house built by him with his mimic-man wages is too tainted to provide thirdspace. However, the garden, too, is burnt. Notwithstanding the refuge it gives, and the critical attention it receives, it is not the site for literary thirdspace.

The dynamic difference between house and garden in *Cereus* reflects Mootoo's lived experience. She explains that her childhood "garden was the safest place, the best place. . . . much safer than inside the house, because there were repercussions from . . . being abused inside the house" (Mootoo, "Interview Sherman" 3). *Cereus* is not, of course, simply autobiographical; Mootoo's abuse did not occur at the hands of her parents. Gardens, however, do play an important role in Mootoo's literary and visual art as a result of Mootoo's early attachment to her Trinidadian garden. The Ramchandin garden offers Mala, as Mootoo's garden offered her, temporary refuge.

Indeed, in *Cereus*, refuge appears to be a necessary resting place on the journey to the possibilities offered by literary thirdspace. Howells claims that "[l]ike the wilderness landscape of much Canadian women's fiction, the garden functions as the site of spiritual and emotional healing for a damaged female psyche" (155).⁵ Mala's garden is a refuge where hegemonies (colonialism, patriarchy, and heterosexism) decompose, which mirrors the decomposition of Chandin's body within the house. Even the human tendency to prioritize human life over all other lives falls away as Mala *intergrates* into the garden that is freeing itself from human colonization.

But any paradisiacal reading of either garden or postcoloniality is precluded by the continuing psychic *disintegration* of Mala and the greed and rapaciousness of the men of Lantanacamara, who destroy the heart of her garden by “harvesting” the mudra tree and the rare peekoplat birds after the police take her into custody (201).

The surest indication that Mala’s garden cannot provide a site for literary thirdspace is that both garden and owner cease to be in relation with human community. Mala’s refuge becomes a site divorced even from human language. Without language, and despite its “fecundity” (Kim 162), the garden cannot become literary thirdspace because the productive instability of both hybridity and thirdspace is related to inherent qualities within language. Bhabha argues that his “Third Space” is similar to Jacques Derrida’s notion of *différance* in that it occurs within the “indeterminate space of the subject(s) of enunciation” (55). This slippage within language “constitutes the discursive conditions of enunciation that ensure that the meaning and symbols of culture have no primordial unity or fixity; that even the same signs can be appropriated, translated, rehistoricized and read anew” (53). The relational use of language is what facilitates social change. Moreover, because it is the foundational instability in language itself that underwrites thirdspace, literary thirdspace is a natural extension of Bhabha’s “Third Space” since the literary is wholly concerned with language and its effects. The narrative action of Mootoo’s novel reinforces this view as *Cereus* offers layered and multiple expressions of productive “discursive conditions” through its subjects of characterization and its presentation of subject matter.

In siting thirdspace, it is significant that the Paradise Alms House is the source from which *Cereus*’ language, the complex and multi-layered storyline, springs. “Nurse Tyler” becomes Mala’s recording witness and the entire novel is framed as an open letter from him to Mala’s sister or anyone who might know her (3). It is perhaps even more significant that both the cereus plant and Mala must be moved from the Ramchandin property to the Paradise Alms House before the novel’s most positive Lantanacamararian transformations are enacted.⁶ Notable within these transformations is Mala’s return to speech. The Paradise Alms House is where the main characters gather together in nascent community at novel’s end. Tyler and Mr. Hector work there and the abused, reclusive, and mad Mala arrives through court order. This draws her childhood sweetheart, Ambrose, and his now-grown child, the transman, Otoh, to visit. The cereus plant—almost a character in its own right—is brought there by Otoh. By the end, all six are set to bloom.

The eponymous cereus is the novel's primary symbol, as is noted by most critics. Casteel notes "its powers of metamorphosis" and argues that "as a metaphor for identity, the cereus plant simultaneously points to hybridity, mutability, and mobility on the one hand and to attachment to place on the other" (26). Casteel's comment makes a welcome link between the cereus and the hybridity and mutability of thirdspace. To her analysis, I would add that the cereus plant also functions as a symbol of Mala herself. Howells implies something similar when she writes that "[t]he cereus plant is intimately associated with Mala Ramchandin" (151). The cereus also acts *for* Mala. For instance, although she cannot, Mala "would pull the walls of that [Ramchandin] house down, down, down" and the lush growth of the cereus begins this process for her (153). Garvey observes that the cereus also shelters Mala "from the traces of trauma. . . . [f]or it resembles the inner barrier she builds in the house . . . and this growing rhizomatic wall hides the sewing room from outside eyes" (104). Simultaneously, the cereus plant is (re)covering the house on behalf of the land itself, which symbolically reinforces Condé's contention that Mala, herself, "comes the closest to being a personification of Lantanacamara" (69). Mala, the cereus, and the land of Lantanacamara are inseparable in Mootoo's novel.

It is, therefore, of the highest significance that both Mala and the cereus cutting are able to start new lives at the Paradise Alms House. There, Mala begins to re-experience supportive and interactive human community and the cereus roots in the residents' garden. The alms house becomes a site of hybridity and *intergration* despite its oppressive role as a religious institution, but it is not coincidental that the ideals of kindness, and caring for need within the community, which inform the ideal of an alms house, are germane to its suitability as the site of literary thirdspace. The text self-consciously alludes to the site's surprising potential. In a distinctive small caps font that is used only in this one place in the novel, the narrator declaims: "POINT NUMBER ONE: The Paradise Alms House is not en route to anywhere." The comment implies that the site is a kind of elsewhere, "off the main road." Moreover, "[t]here is nothing beyond" (131).

Garvey interprets this passage, usefully, as an indication that the alms house is a "paradoxical space . . . both destination and nowhere, presence and lack, clearly not center . . . and yet complete in itself. It is a peculiar 'home'" (106). I argue that, as well as being, as Garvey has it, "home" to a Butlerian kinship, it is also home to a literary thirdspace of intersectionality and *intergration*. The Paradise Alms House is the only space

where intersectional identifications that include racial, gender, class, and identifications of sexuality, are able to enact themselves in an expression of open and various hybridities. Thus, it is a site of community *intergration* for those whose identifications exceed the norm, where “a relation to the other as other . . . does not demand that the other become the same or disappear” (Kawash 200). It is a site of psychological *intergration* as well, as Mala begins to recover from the psychic splitting induced by a life of repeated traumas. Emilia Nielsen observes that the Paradise Alms House “is a place where extreme mental, physical, and sexual violence are not overt threats” (5). Her comment underlines the importance of safe space, a quality whose importance is often overlooked by those who usually feel safe. Garvey, too, notes the importance of safety (103), and I argue that it is a necessary attribute of Mootoo’s literary thirdspace.

In part, safety is necessary so that characters have sufficient agency, which is paramount in initiating productive change from the nebulous web I am calling literary thirdspace. Bhabha discusses postcolonial agency as the product of a kind of temporal thirdspace that he calls “time-lag” (264-65) and *Cereus* adds a spatial component: it is not really possible to act without both time and space. Bhabha also links hybridity to agency through performativity, arguing that “[t]he iterative ‘time’ of the future as *a becoming ‘once again open’*, makes available to marginalized or minority identities a mode of performative agency that Judith Butler has elaborated for the representation of lesbian sexuality” (314). In *Cereus*, marginalized transidentification and performative agency are most clearly enacted in Otoh’s repetitions of his father’s aborted youthful relationship with Mala.

Otoh consciously takes on his father’s early role as Mala’s suitor. Readers are informed that Otoh, in his father’s courting clothes, “might have passed for a pallbearer if it weren’t for his colourful necktie and elegant posture. In his father’s get up, Otoh looked more like a dancer” (152). As the novel’s queer man of action, Otoh fulfills this narrative vision. Language returns to Mala first through Otoh, the dancer, who is Mala’s “first human visitor in over a decade” (162). Mala then leads him to the still-rotting corpse of her father and, just like his father, Ambrose, Otoh runs away. His subsequent actions have a widening circle of effects that result in his also becoming a pallbearer of sorts. When he sets fire to the Ramchandin house to destroy any possible evidence against Mala, Otoh figuratively carries Mala’s father to rest by cremating his body. The same night, he also takes “clippings from a cereus plant” (203). Both Mala and the cereus are *transported* to the Paradise

Alms House, which underlines their reciprocal identification and the significance of the alms house location in the novel.

In the protective space of the alms house, empowering performance is also crucial to the recognition of the “shared queerness” between Mala and Tyler that underwrites the narrative itself (52). However, neither Mala nor Tyler is initially welcomed by the Paradise Alms House—Mootoo’s literary thirdspace is created through her characters’ actions; it is not a result of passive, solitary hybridity. In particular, thirdspace in *Cereus* is created by the performance of many acts of witnessing, openness, and kindness that are exchanged between Tyler, Mala, Otoh, and Mr. Hector, which I illustrate with several examples from the text. At the beginning of Tyler’s tenure, gender concepts are so fixed at the Paradise Alms House that they take precedence over professional nursing status and the home’s need for trained nurses. Tyler is given cleaning and repair jobs rather than nursing assignments and is assigned to help the handyman, Toby, fix the roof. Tyler’s effeminate manner of performing these tasks leads to a direct expression of homophobia by Toby, who vows “to leave the job if he was ever put to work with this pansy again” (11). The *transformation* of this hostile location into a literary thirdspace of possibility is initiated by Hector, who, as a decent heterosexual man, is unique in the novel. Hector reveals to Tyler that his mother sent his brother away because “[h]e was kind of funny. He was like you” (78). In response, Tyler is impressed and relieved by the bravery of his openness, which “suddenly lifted a veil between [them]” and leads to Tyler’s first “feeling of ordinariness.” This incident is the start of a “bond forming between Mr. Hector and [Tyler]” (79), but the bond matures through their mutual desire to improve Mala’s life at the Paradise Alms House.

Tyler feels “seen” by Hector and his second feeling of ordinariness comes when he is similarly “seen” by Mala, who has become his patient. Mala overhears the above conversation between Tyler and Mr. Hector and, subsequently, steals a (female) nurse’s uniform for Tyler. This gift touches Tyler, who reflects, “But she had stolen a dress for me. No one had ever done anything like that before. She knows what I am. . . . She knows my nature” (82). But the dress is not Mala’s only gift to Tyler. Once he dons the uniform, she does not exclaim over him—his gender performance was “not something to either congratulate or scorn—it simply was” (83). Once again, Tyler receives the gift of normalcy, this time from Mala. He exults, “I had never felt so extremely ordinary, and I quite loved it” (84). Mala’s gift to Tyler signals an important *intergration* for Tyler, but the act also marks a breakthrough

in her own mental health because it demonstrates her ability to understand, empathize, and witness in a reciprocal way. Her singularity is becoming relational and Tyler's is being accepted for the first time.

Kim argues that "Tyler's exploration of the ambiguities of gender is framed as an act of confidence that is made possible within the confines of Mala's room" (156); however, I suggest that it is significant that Mala's room is "only yards away" from the new residents' garden, which is begun by Hector using a cactus cutting from her own garden and "a full gerbera plant" that he offers her because she cannot bear cut flowers (77). Thus, the new garden represents Mala's *intergration* and gifts—not least her gift for radical acceptance. As Tyler observes, "She was not one to manacle nature, and I sensed that she was permitting mine its freedom" (83). Nielsen notes that "the [residents'] garden functions in marked contrast to Paradise, or anywhere else on Lantanacamara, where queerness is repressed" (6). It is significant that Tyler will transition the expression of her "nature" from the private space of Mala's room to the public space of the grounds of the Paradise Alms House.

In *Cereus*, there is a constant play between private and public performance and witnessing that culminates when Tyler and Otoh, through their mutual involvement with Mala's *intergration*, are poised to become lovers. Garvey argues that, in order to heal, Mala "needs the assistance of Otoh and Tyler, the former as catalyst and the latter as witness and scribe" (103). However, the text positions Otoh as both catalyst and witness. Tyler's reconstruction of Mala's story echoes Otoh's earlier witnessing role whereby Otoh wins Mala's trust by dancing with her, as his father had, while he himself is "awed that he should be privy to [her voice's] sound, and a witness to her past" (173). Both witnesses embrace a public performance of their transidentifications that is witnessed publicly by Hector, who along with Mala, has already been a private witness to Tyler. In the last scene of *Cereus*, Hector demonstrates respectful attention and kindness despite being shocked at seeing the couple promenading—Tyler in make-up and her new uniform and Otoh in masculine whites. Hector stares in wonder and offers a welcoming response: "I wish my brother could meet you two" (268).

Following Hector's comments, Otoh drops to the ground in front of the cactus "with no regard for his white trousers and proceeded to pack the soil around its base. . . . not because it needed work but rather to show it some attention and, I imagine, to honour its place in Miss Ramchandin's life" (268). Otoh's action (important enough to be recorded by Tyler) underlines

the importance of a kind attention to life, in all its forms, as a necessary part of literary thirdspace in *Cereus*. Otoh's lack of concern for his colonial whites may also be read as a postcolonial gesture. Although he wears the clothes he likes, unlike Chandin, Otoh is a transman, not a mimic man. He does not allow his trousers, his "whites," to interfere with his caring for the individuals, human and otherwise, that surround him. The trio exemplifies what it means to stay and break new soil, as Hector has with his new friendly relations as much as with the new residents' garden at the Paradise Alms House. The "grounded" kindness and respectful attention each demonstrates are characteristic of the literary thirdspace that develops at the Paradise Alms House.

Garvey suggests that "perhaps it is the cereus cactus itself that finds a safe space and a home, rooted in the garden of the alms house, tended to by a queer quartet . . . antidote as well as witness to multiple traumas" (106). In particular, the transplanting of Mala's cereus is shown to be dependent on relationship and goodwill. It is the outcome of actions by Otoh, who transports the cereus cutting; by Hector, who offers part of "his yard" for a residents' garden (73); and by Tyler, who tends both Mala and the cereus cutting. Garvey observes that there is a "chain of those nurturing the cereus plant" in its travels from Mrs. Thoroughly's garden, first to the Ramchandin garden, and then to the Paradise Alms House (96). Inexplicably, in naming those who care for and carry it, she cites Lavinia, Mala, and Otoh, but neglects Asha, to whom Lavinia also gives a cutting; Sarah, whose garden the cereus joins; Tyler, who tends the cutting at The Paradise Alms House; and Mr. Hector, who plants Otoh's cutting for Mala. The travels of the cereus invoke gift culture and its generous challenge to colonialism and capitalism.

Garvey's queer quartet not only tends the cereus, but it is also within this queer quartet that Mala "uttered her first public words," a call to the rejected parts of herself represented by the Pohpoh identity (Mootoo, *Cereus* 269). This is a personal *intergration* that mirrors Tyler's self-acceptance and the *intergration* of the variously identified characters in a supportive community. Garvey's "queer quartet" of Tyler and Otoh, and Mala and Ambrose comments directly on the queering of heterosexuality that *Cereus* effects; however, it overlooks the significance of the cereus being in the "residents' garden" and the importance of Mr. Hector, who is not included in the "queer quartet" (268). The trio that does include him, and his affection for his "funny" brother, as well as Tyler and Otoh, is united in caring for the cereus plant and for Mala—by extension, for Lantanacamara itself.

I would argue that this queer quartet plus one “find their agency in a form of the ‘future’ where the past is not originary, where the present is not simply transitory. It is . . . an interstitial future, that emerges *in-between* the claims of the past and the needs of the present” (Bhabha 313). Through performing, witnessing, and accepting themselves and others the effects of the past on each are recognized and cared for in the present while webs of interconnection are formed that will serve in the future. *Intergration*, both within and between this group of individuals, is the basis for a radical *interconnection* that makes hybrid community not only possible, but productive: the cereus has rooted and will bloom.

Finally, I hasten to join Nielsen in arguing that this is not a “utopic community,” contrary to Heather Smyth’s claim (147). Instead, literary thirdspace simply explores how to live with and through difference in community. The radical *intergration* that *Cereus* presents requires characters to recognize and accept, in themselves and in each other, what Bhabha calls “the incommensurable elements—the stubborn chunks—as the basis of cultural identifications” (Bhabha 313). Not only does Mootoo’s literary thirdspace avoid homogenizing as the price of community, but *Cereus* may also be read to address Chow’s critique of uncritical and overly optimistic uses of hybridity. On the one hand, in the figure of Chandin, Mootoo shows the possible destructiveness that can attend individualistic hybridity. On the other, the *intergrated* relational community arising from the literary thirdspace that evolves, not in the wilderness garden, but at the Paradise Alms House, demonstrates that self-and-social actualization in combination with positive social reception allows hybridity to attain its radical promise of initiating cultural change.

NOTES

- 1 I find Kim’s contention that “[t]he novel pairs these sets of relations, the coupling of Sarah and Lavinia and that of Mala and Chandin, to illustrate the danger of unregulated desire” similarly troubling (157).
- 2 Rita Wong, in an unpublished essay, suggests that “*Cereus* operate[s] within an unsettled and unsettling thirdspace” (18). I am indebted to her for this observation, which encouraged me to consider Bhabha’s “Third Space” in relation to *Cereus*.
- 3 Other texts besides Bhabha’s *The Location of Culture* discuss hybridity extensively and also relate it to the concept of Third Space. Most notable are Robert Young’s *Colonial Desire*; Kawash’s *Dislocating*; Nikos Papastergiadis’ “Tracing Hybridity in Theory”; and the collection, *Hybridity and Its Discontents* edited by Avtar Brah and Annie Coombes. Fred Wah’s *Faking It* provides a Canadian literary perspective.

- 4 Mootoo is careful to shield her protagonist from the charge of manslaughter. Very early in the narrative, readers learn that “Judge Walter Bissey had dismissed the case [against her] in minutes” (7). The story that unfolds layer by layer continues to exonerate Mala. For instance, it is Ambrose who, albeit unwittingly, initially strikes Chandin’s head with the door. Following this, Chandin’s body shows signs of death and, even before Mala repeats the act, Chandin “lay still on the floor, his eyes open and glazed, his legs limp, spread apart, his hands curled” (247). Although it is impossible to determine when Chandin dies, several characters and critics too easily assume Mala’s agency (Mootoo, *Cereus* 199; Howells 155; Kim 162).
- 5 Mootoo’s wilderness garden is a meta-example of productive hybridity in the novel, in that gardens are a common postcolonial trope and to be “full of wilderness” (as Northrop Frye put it [222]), remains common in Canadian literature. Mootoo claims that *Cereus* is typically Canadian in another way: “Recent immigration has brought people like me who write about elsewhere from here. I think this is very Canadian” (Christiansen). Tellingly, “Canada” is the novel’s only geographic location given a non-fictionalized name.
- 6 The escape of Sarah, Lavinia, and, later, Asha may be read as positive transformations, but they are accompanied by great loss: the loss of kinship, home, and country. Interestingly, Mootoo connects the intra-subjective personal journeys undertaken by Tyler and Mala to the journeys taken by those who physically travel to different countries. In an interview in *Herizons*, she comments that “[t]hey have not left their countries but are migrants of sorts” (Mootoo, “Interview Khankojé” 30).

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