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Terrestrial Cosmopolitanism, Posthumanism, and Multispecies Modes of Being in *Cereus Blooms at Night*

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Abstract: Cosmopolitanism has generally been used to describe a philosophy that imagines all humans as citizens of a single “human” community. This article explores a terrestrial cosmopolitanism that challenges the colonial discourse of human exceptionalism by extending the democratization of people to include environmental bodies within their global context, replacing hierarchies with collectivities to reveal humanism’s underrepresented others. Examining interspecies alliances in Shani Mootoo’s *Cereus Blooms at Night*, I look towards terrestrial cosmopolitanism as an alternative to anthropocentric forms of cosmopolitanism that continue to reinscribe colonialist aspirations and ontologically exclusionary practices. Mootoo’s work decenters how we think about humans and the environment and offers a nuanced depiction of a positive interspecies community that resists harmful humanist taxonomies. Reading the novel’s protagonist, Mala, as a posthuman figure, I argue that her rejection of human language, in conjunction with her nonhuman interactions, positions her as a keeper of collectivity, as she creates a third space of subjectivity in her garden that blurs the boundaries between humans and nonhumans.

Keywords: terrestrial cosmopolitanism; humanism; posthumanism; postcolonialism; subaltern; multispecies ontologies; ecocriticism; ecological diversity

1. Introduction

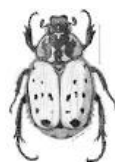
Recent work in the postcolonial environmental humanities (DeLoughrey 2011; Didur 2006, 2011, 2012; Marzec 2009; Mukherjee 2010; Nixon 2011; Huggan and Tiffin 2010; Vadde 2009) seeks to reconcile what appear to be unexamined humanist strands of cosmopolitan thinking with efforts to reorient its anthropocentrism via communities historically designated less than human (Black, Indigenous, queer, people of color). Cosmopolitanism is intrinsically problematic, since it is rooted in a humanism that privileges certain individuals as more human than others and neglects the agency of nonhumans. Contemporary postcolonial critiques of cosmopolitanism, such as Homi Bhabha’s (1994) “vernacular cosmopolitanism” examine the contradictory nature of the local coexisting with the global, as informed by a Eurocentric universalism rooted in nationalism. Arjun Appadurai’s (2013) “cosmopolitanism from below” takes this critique further, and challenges the idea that cosmopolitanism is culturally mediated from a place of privilege, looking instead to its expression through the post-national sensibilities attached to globalism that offer an “expanded idea of humanity which transcends the boundaries of nation and ethos” (p. 32). Yet these forms of “resurgent cosmopolitanism,” as Aarthi Vadde (2009) argues, continue to reinscribe “humanist aspirations” through efforts to include figures previously designated less than human, and thus fail to “set nonhuman subjects alongside human ones,” a move that would “temper human ascendancy and exceptionalism” (p. 524). But how can we incorporate environmental and nonhuman concerns into an anthropocentric cosmopolitan discourse that is only

just beginning to hold itself accountable for centuries of human oppression? By exploring the parameters of what Vadde calls “terrestrial cosmopolitanism,” we can use political ecologies to reveal humanism’s underrepresented others in order to extend the democratization of people associated with cosmopolitanism to include environmental bodies within their global context.

The word cosmopolitan, which derives from the Greek word, *kosmopolitēs*, “citizen of the world,” has generally been used to describe a variety of philosophies that envisage all citizens as humans of a single community. While most definitions of the word are limited to moral and socio-political domains, cosmopolitanism can also refer to economic, religious, and environmental approaches towards the inclusion of diverse bodies. Cosmopolitanism’s unification of disparate groups offers an ideological alternative to the binary thinking that has typically manifested in power structures of oppression, but with it comes the problem of encompassing cultural and ontological diversity. In this article I will examine how Shani Mootoo’s (1996) *Cereus Blooms at Night* (from here on referred to as *Cereus Blooms*) depicts and normalizes relationships between the animal, human and vegetable world that suggest interspecies or multispecies modes of being integral to ecological diversity. While some scholars are skeptical that postcolonial readings of Mootoo’s novel might preclude conversations about gender and sexuality, other scholars like Isabelle Hoving (2004) turn to the natural world in *Cereus Blooms* as a metaphorical space where these differences can be explored and nurtured. I similarly focus on theories of cosmopolitanism that seek to expand the novel’s political agenda in terrestrial directions via theories of postcolonialism, posthumanism, and multispecies ontology.

Beginning with a discussion of the aforementioned theories of cosmopolitanism, I turn to *Cereus Blooms* and the slow violence of the Christian civilizing mission to examine how its effects linger through generations of humans and nonhumans in the fictional Caribbean country of Lantanacamara. Emphasizing the necessity of interspecies cooperation for survival, Mootoo’s narrative presents human exceptionalism as a threat to terrestrial wellbeing, while reflecting on underacknowledged race and gender hierarchies that continue to inform colonial economic globalization. Reading the novel’s protagonist, Mala, as a posthuman figure, I argue that her rejection of human language, in conjunction with her nonhuman interactions, positions her as a keeper of collectivity, as she creates a third space of subjectivity in her garden that blurs the boundaries between humans and nonhumans.

As a visual artist and writer, Mootoo draws readers into *Cereus Blooms* by setting a precedent for material interconnectivity that continues to inform the aesthetic and narrative content of the novel. The first page of the book is ornamented with three illustrations of insects: A largely-faded dragonfly behind the script at the top, a tiny ladybug punctuating the text in the middle, and a medium-sized grasshopper to serve as a full stop at the bottom. From here on, the chapters are divided by images of different bugs that embody the presence of non-linguistic, nonhuman characters, whose lives are interwoven with those of the humans about whom we are reading. This visual overlay serves as a reminder of the intersubjectivity that Mootoo’s narrative addresses through its epistolary form, as mediated by a nurse named Tyler, who becomes Mala’s caregiver in old age.



Though I will not be focusing on Arundhati Roy’s (1998) novel, *The God of Small Things*, which I will briefly discuss below, the third space of subjectivity that Vadde theorizes in relation to Roy’s work will help us examine interspecies relations in Mootoo’s *Cereus Blooms*, as they signal a terrestrial cosmopolitanism that rejects humanist hierarchies in favor of ecological collectivities. Like Roy’s text, Mootoo’s work decenters how we think about the environment and shares some of the narrative qualities that stress interspecies alliances; but unlike Roy, Mootoo offers a more nuanced depiction of this multispecies community through the posthuman orientation of her main characters. Exploring

what Vadde would call the “environmental literacy” of Mootoo’s protagonist Mala, along with her détournement of Western ideals, this paper looks towards multispecies modes of being—synonymous with what I call interspecies alliances—as an alternative to anthropocentric forms of cosmopolitanism that continue to reinscribe colonialist aspirations and ontologically exclusionary practices.

2. The Backwaters Sphere and Mala’s Garden

Before moving forward with an analysis of the novel, I must first situate terrestrial cosmopolitanism within the contemporary postcolonial theory and environmental criticism. In “The Backwaters Sphere: Ecological Collectivity, Cosmopolitanism, and Arundhati Roy,” Aarthi Vadde dismantles cosmopolitanism and the anthropomorphic framework within which it operates. Cosmopolitanism is rooted in an ascendant humanism, Vadde suggests, which is grounded in disparity. She defines humanism as “an epistemology of ascendancy derived from the desire to dominate others without understanding them . . . ” (p. 524). While the resurgent cosmopolitanism of thinkers like Bhabha and Appadurai aims to equalize power relations among those who were once designated less than human, these efforts have yet to contend with ecological challenges that pose real threats to human survival in the era of the Anthropocene. Centering on the literary and activist writings of Arundhati Roy, Vadde sees Roy’s narratives of connectivity between humans and nonhumans as “weapons against the bedfellows of globalism and state control” (p. 522), ideological weapons that directly inform this resurgence of anthropocentric cosmopolitanism. As Vadde explains:

Against the logic and consequences of ascendant humanism, Roy posits a third space of subjectivity formation, [which Vadde refers to as] the backwaters sphere. Unlike the traditionally divided public and private spheres of identity formation, the backwaters sphere shapes human subjectivity through cross-species solidarities. Roy founds these solidarities on her child protagonists’ environmental literacy, which foils the monological approaches to entomologic taxonomy and ornamental gardening featured in the novel as reflections of their older relatives’ ascendant humanism. (p. 524)

Vadde is invoking Homi Bhabha’s Third Space Theory here, which he uses to explain the uniqueness of each individual as a hybridized product of his or her biological and environmental circumstances. Such personal conditions include class, kin, and location, and can help explain the intersectional complexity of socially exclusionary practices. Bhabha concludes that neither social nor cultural capital alone defines one’s identity; rather, his Third Space Theory suggests that rudimentary models of the Other are likely to be insufficient. Building upon this multifactorial model of third space subjectivity formation, Vadde suggests that an individual’s identity is equally impacted by his or her proximity to the natural world. In *The God of Small Things* and *Cereus Blooms*, the child protagonists are forced to seek refuge from adults whose attempts at colonial assimilation result in cultural policing. The children’s abilities to communicate with the natural world outside of human language (their environmental literacy) demonstrates resistance to this oppressive regime, and their being at home outside of man-made structures presents the possibility of a more sustainable and less hierarchical society. In the “backwaters sphere” (the third space of subjectivity that I will from here on refer to as Mala’s garden), we find fertile ground for a terrestrial cosmopolitanism that empowers underrepresented humans and nonhumans through an interspecies alliance based on the imperative for mutual respect and coexistence.

The multispecies alliances that characterize Mala’s garden as a third space in *Cereus Blooms* emphasize a lack of ontological diversity in current cosmopolitan discourse. While cosmopolitanism in its resurgent forms seeks to equalize relations among humans, Vadde sees this emphasis on democracy as an opportunity to consider more radical “epistemic shifts in our understanding of community, civic duty, and environmental obligation . . . ” (p. 523). Since cosmopolitanism is rooted in a humanism that privileges the human over the nonhuman, Vadde uses Kant’s “Perpetual Peace: A Philosophical Sketch,” to help construct an alternate theory to this power distribution, imagining environmental agency outside of human contingency. Kant imagines physical nature (distinguished with a lowercase

n) as a proponent of the almighty Nature, God, who regulates humanity through “diverse ecologies and geographies” (p. 526). According to this logic, cooperation and conflict are structured by the natural boundaries that give rise to nation-states, framing physical nature as precedent and integral to human existence. “Nature,” Kant suggests, “both enables and constrains human existence through the ‘mechanical process of nature’” (p. 108). In other words, environmental resources and physical proximity between landmasses determine how nations and cultures are formed. Kant’s evolution of “human community” as environmentally situated is self-defeating, however, since it presupposes a hierarchy in land formations that are anthropocentrically defined by unequal distributions of power. As Vadde explains, Kant’s consideration of “geography and anthropology ... as precursors for all philosophical and scientific knowledge ... were incompatible with [his] larger vision of ‘universal ethics and cosmopolitan principles’ because they raised the discomfiting question of whether such principles applied across different (and in Kant’s mind inferior) races” (p. 527). Kant’s a priori account of human ascendancy thus negates the autonomy he grants environmental determinism, since it privileges the racialized laws of man over the laws of nature.

While Kant’s logic is fundamentally unsound, Vadde sees value in exploring the tensions in his construction of the human: “Investigating the relationship between Kant’s geographical and anthropological methods and his practical philosophy,” Vadde argues,

Reveals a repressed ambivalence between subject and object understood as ‘man’ and ‘physical nature’ in Kant’s oeuvre. That ambivalence is crucial to restructuring the human/nature divide animating contemporary cosmopolitanisms whose current imperatives for ‘partial,’ ‘provincial,’ and ‘vernacular’ frameworks of global citizenship do nothing to challenge the privileged status of the human in otherwise trenchant critiques of Eurocentric universalism. (p. 527)

This “repressed ambivalence between subject and object understood as ‘man’ and ‘physical nature’” illuminates systemic oppression, which thrives on hierarchies that position certain humans as more human than others. By addressing the limits in Kant’s conception of humanism, however, Vadde endeavors to extend cosmopolitanism into a terrestrial posthumanism “in which particular places are not empirical afterthoughts ... by emphasizing the persistence of difference over the recognition of sameness ... we replace Kant’s categories with ... a philosophical commitment to what Édouard Glissant (1997) calls [consensual opacities]” (p. 528). These opacities, which Glissant explores in *Le discours antillais*, reflect his commitments to preserving cultural heterogeneity within an island collective. The collaborative force of independent cultures, Glissant argues, is maintained by “consent to a mutual opaqueness, [and] an incomplete understanding of each other that governs their connection” (qtd in Vadde 2009, p. 529). This attention to difference reflects interspecies relations where humans and nonhumans lack a complete understanding of each other, even as they constitute a collectivity. Legitimizing opacity therefore allows us to replace Vadde’s definition of humanism from “an epistemology of ascendancy derived from the desire to dominate others without understanding them ... ” with a posthumanism, whose “epistemology of [collectivity is] derived from the desire to [coexist with] others without [fully] understanding them ... ” (p. 524). This posthumanism, which resists humanist hierarchies in favor of diverse interspecies communities, will be central to my understanding of terrestrial cosmopolitanism.

3. Failed Cosmopolitan Connections

Before moving forward with my reading of what a viable terrestrial cosmopolitanism might look like, I must first explain the dynamics of the failed colonial project that forces Mala out of human society and into the sanctuary of her garden. Mootoo’s *Cereus Blooms* depicts the slow violence of the Christian civilizing mission, as its effects linger through generations of humans and nonhumans in the fictional Caribbean country of Lantanacámara. Set in the aptly named village of Paradise, Mootoo weaves together oppressive instantiations of Eurocentric humanism as they perpetuate ideas

of colonial homogenization in favor of white, heteronormative Christianity. As a young boy, Mala's father Chandin Ramchandin is adopted by a white Reverend's family. When Chandin falls in love with his adopted sister Lavinia, his sense of filial loyalty and self-worth is problematized by a growing awareness that he is unworthy of a romantic relationship with this white woman. Reverend Thoroughly recognizes his adopted son's interest in his daughter and admonishes the possibility of Chandin pursuing Lavinia, presenting this love as incestuous, while masking the real issue of race and human value. This racial bifurcation comes to the fore when the Thoroughlys take a family trip to the Wetlands (Mootoo's fictional version of the British empire), leaving Chandin at the seminary in Paradise. When the Thoroughlys return, it is without Lavinia, who has become engaged to her adopted cousin. After accepting Lavinia's indefinite absence, Chandin commits himself to her best friend Sarah, a local Indian girl who he perpetually demeans. Despite his lack of affection towards her, the couple has two children, Pohpoh (later known as Mala) and Asha. When Lavinia returns to Paradise years later, unwed and eager to see her old friend and adopted brother, Chandin's passion for her, along with his racialized feelings of inadequacy immediately resurface. Chandin's criticisms of his wife and daughters become increasingly severe as their skin and comportment fail to meet his stringent expectations of colonial society. Imagining Lavinia as a conduit to whiteness and Christian ideals, Chandin makes her into an infallible idol, positioning his Indian wife in direct opposition to her. Yet his binary thinking is challenged when Sarah leaves him to pursue a lesbian relationship with Lavinia. At this point it becomes clear that his attachment to religion is directly bound to his interest in climbing the colonial ladder and being affiliated with humans of what he considers to be a more cultivated breed.



Chandin's wife's lesbian affair, his decay into alcoholism, and his failure to remain Christian, signal his decline in social status, and this societal degradation marks his children by association. Chandin is presented as a victim of circumstance, but the slow violence of colonial oppression, coupled with his inability to conform to Christian standards, manifests in aggression towards his daughters. This violence seeps into the girls' deflated conceptions of self, ingrained by the persisting sexual abuse to which they are subjected. After his wife leaves him,

Chandin Ramchandin never set foot in the schoolhouse or the church again . . . For the first few weeks after the shattering of his world, he slept in his bed with a child on either side. One night he turned, his back to Asha, and in a fitful, nightmarish sleep, mistook Pohpoh [Mala's younger self] for [her mother] Sarah . . . Suddenly, awakened fully, he sat up . . . Glaring and breathing heavily like a mad dog, he pinned her hands to the bed and forced her legs apart. That is how it started. (p. 65)

This description of Chandin's incestuous abuse towards his daughters and the language used to describe his animality present him as a failed model of the Eurocentric cosmopolitanism that Mala's garden directly contrasts. Depicting Chandin as a "mad dog" reinforces the primitivism that he unwittingly resorts to after he is unable to achieve his humanist ideals as a man of the clergy. This scene is the first of many similar instances of abuse, and marks the beginning of Mala's retreat into her garden. While Chandin is depicted as nonhuman in his comportment, this behavior reinforces colonial expectations of animality and perpetuates the divide between the colonizer's culture and that of the colonized. Chandin's need to assert patriarchal authority over his daughters accentuates his feelings of inadequacy in a society over which he has no control, and shows him becoming the normative notion of a cosmopolitan failure that Mootoo will subsequently write against. Later in the novel, after Chandin catches Mala's childhood friend and adult lover, Ambrose, leaving his property, Chandin confronts Mala in a rage and she "puff[s] her chest out against him like a bullfrog in full

defiance" (p. 205). Reframing this hierarchy of civilization and embracing a positive connotation towards animality, Mala's inclusive approach to diverse bodies is enabling for both humans and nonhumans, and positions her as a keeper of collectivity, and a figure of hope for social change.

Stressing a redistribution of agency and a valorization of intersubjectivity, *Cereus Blooms* sets a precedent for interconnectivity through its narrative form. Mootoo's novel begins as an epistolary narrative self-consciously recounted by the elderly Mala's queer male nurse, Tyler. "By setting this story down," he explains, "I, Tyler . . . am placing trust in the power of the printed word to reach many people . . . Might I add," he continues, "that my own intention, as the relator of this story, is not to bring notice to myself or my own plight. However . . . being a narrator who also existed on the periphery of the events, I am bound to be present" (3). By opening the novel with this self-aware mediation of a minority voice, Mootoo immediately interpolates her readers into a web of atypical intersubjectivity. Tyler's self-conscious role in his mediation of another person's story demonstrates the impossibility of an individual narrative existing without intersubjective dependence. The self-conscious "I" for which Tyler is constantly apologizing signals the danger of one narrator accounting for myriad subjectivities, while emphasizing his own feelings of inadequacy, as influenced by an overarching narrative of heterosexual white privilege. And yet, while Tyler devalues narrative miscegenation, it is through "the printed word" that he hopes to "reach many people" (3), and through the combined efforts of a written medium and connected readership that he hopes to find Asha Ramchandin, Mala's estranged sister. We therefore come to recognize the importance of subjective cross-pollination, and the value of Tyler's narrative role.

Through Tyler, Mootoo complicates the relationship between language and identity politics from the outset, revealing his struggle with gender identity and the limits of reductive binaries: "Not a man and not ever able to be a woman," Tyler laments. "Suspended nameless in the limbo state between existence and nonexistence" (p. 77). The constructed limits of language therefore exclude certain subjectivities, among which queer and what are considered lesser human identities suffer most. Tyler's childhood obsession with family relations is symptomatic of this heightened self-awareness, since he questions the mores of what is socially acceptable, based on the intuition that he is somehow different: "Could a nephew be the father of his uncle? I wondered, or could a mother ever be any other relationship to her child? Could she be the father? . . . Could your sister be your brother too? Could your brother be your father?" (p. 24). Although the younger Tyler's musings might appear farfetched, his curiosity dismantles typical gender and power structures inherent to patriarchy. These questions present the possibility of deviating from relational norms, and adumbrate Mala's mother's lesbian affair, and the sexual abuse subsequently inflicted upon her by her father. These connected traumas are what cause Mala to eventually disavow herself of her childhood name, Pohpoh, as she combats encultured forms of oppression—albeit out of survival—through a refusal to conform to a normative language or human conduct. As the narrator of the story, Tyler's life becomes increasingly interwoven with Mala's, and their emerging friendship, combined with their ostracized identities, presents the diversity of human experience that these individuals extend into nonhuman subjectivities. Interconnectivity binds characters and their stories, and while the scripted word serves as the cohesive between people, it is also this language that Tyler acknowledges creating hierarchies and diminishing the phenomenological capacities of subjugated humans and nonhumans.

Caught in a liminal state between language and meaning, there are no words to adequately describe Tyler's gender identity. This linguistic inadequacy offers insight into the constraints innate to language, and the unequal social structures through which labels gain currency. In "'A Shared Queerness': Colonialism, Transnationalism, and Sexuality in Shani Mootoo's 'Cereus Blooms at Night,'" Grace Kyungwon Hong (2006) explores the tropes of natural history and classification as they reveal hierarchical patterns still present in neo-colonial practices. Hong argues that by addressing Mala's nonhuman companions in the language of natural history, Mootoo is able to "articulate new modes of affiliation and connection, not to assert that these modes of affiliation 'truly' existed historically but rather to occasion their emergence in the present" (p. 75). The creatures in Mala's garden

are “not known as birds, insects, snails, and reptiles, but ‘Aves, Hexapoda, Gastropoda, Reptilia,’ identifiable only through their Linnaean, Latinate, natural historical classifications” (p. 73). The Linnaean classification system, which was popularized with the publication of *Systema Naturae* by Carl Von Linné (Linnaeus), standardized the categorization of all living things into a Latin bipartite model of genus and species.¹ Hong situates the Linnaean classification system within a colonial framework, suggesting that natural history emerged with, and was central to “a discourse of morality and propriety through which notions of racial hierarchy and ... ideological justification for colonial labour(*sic*) stratification were established” (p. 75). The Linnaean model therefore provided a language to reduce plurality, and “to mediate the intrinsic and structural instabilities of colonialism. Its orderly taxonomic classifications simultaneously legitimated racialized colonial rule, in particular, naturalizing the racial, gender, and sexual hierarchies on which the plantation economy was based” (p. 79). I will explore this tension further when examining various characters approaches to gardening; but for the meantime, what is essential to retain is that natural history is a by-product of colonial Christian discourse, and what is most central to this agenda is procreation.

Queer identities like Tyler’s are incompatible with these Christian ideals, since their sexual relations are generally not conducive to reproduction. However, as Greta Gaard (1997) points out, “there are many flaws in the assertion that queer sexualities are ‘unnatural.’ First among them is that such an assertion does not accurately reflect the variety of sexual practices found in other species” (p. 5). Basing what is “natural” on the characteristics of a colonial elite not only excludes the majority of humans from this privileged position; it also negates the natural world as having any autonomy of its own, as I will show with the asexual cereus plant. While Mootoo presents Lantanacamara as a country cradled by Christianity, she also shows its citizens’ resistance to ideological oppression. Mala’s intuitive understanding of the environment illuminates this opposition to taxonomical nomenclature, since she is able “to name plants and insects with only their scent or a brush against them as her clues” (p. 156). As a politically driven literary text, *Cereus Blooms* normalizes sexual and interspecies relations in ways that critique embedded colonial hierarchies. As Ellen O’Loughlin puts it, “We have to examine how racism, heterosexism, classism, ageism, and sexism are all related to naturism” (qtd in Gaard 1997, p. 1). By representing the majority of her characters through non-typical sexual and gender orientations, and in close proximity to nonhuman plants and animals, Mootoo offers a revised social order uncompromised by a language of natural history tending towards heterosexual reproduction.

4. Mala’s Posthuman Garden

While the colonial project strives towards the taxonomical standardization of humans based on race, sex, and gender, this act of categorizing man is intrinsically flawed, since what is human is always already a heterogeneous construct based on interspecies dependencies, as exemplified by Mala’s garden. In “Posthuman, All Too Human: Towards a New Process Ontology,” Rosi Braidotti (2006) discredits any singularly human or nonhuman form of proliferation, offering instead a model of affiliation that demonstrates interconnectivity at the level of an individual’s interspecies composition. Braidotti explores Donna Haraway’s (2008) decentralization of the human, “in favor of the in/non/post-human and of bio-centered egalitarianism” (p. 200). In the age of artificial intelligence, the human is no longer a homogeneous construct, but a network of codependent technological and interspecies alliances. Power comes not from a singularity, but from “a dynamic web of interconnections or hybrid contaminations, as a principal of radical non-purity” (p. 200). Braidotti’s interpretation of Haraway’s posthuman is largely informed by technological prosthetics available to humans, but it also stresses the importance of recuperating what were once considered less important subjectivities. Braidotti explains,

¹ Known to many as the “Father of Taxonomy,” Linnaeus’s hierarchical classification systems are still in wide use today. However, our understanding of this “natural classification” has evolved significantly since the 18th century, and we no longer encounter (at least not to the same extent) Linnaeus’s heteronormative sexual binaries in our conceptualization of plant, animal, and human reproduction.

In order to restructure our collective relationships to the new nature/culture compound of contemporary techno-sciences, Haraway calls for a renewed kinship system, radicalized by concretely affectionate ties to the non-human ‘others.’ Haraway argues that the subject-object, nature-culture divides are linked to patriarchal, oedipal familial narratives. Against them, she mobilizes an enlarged sense of community, based on empathy, accountability and recognition. (p. 200)



Recognizing nonhuman otherness within our own human bodies can help us learn to accept ontological difference and appreciate the “hybrid contaminations” and “radical non-purity” (Braidotti 2006, p. 200) that empower all of the co-implicated bodies in this shared terrestrial space. Similarly, these “hybrid contaminations” of interspecies contact are what nourish Mala’s garden and sustain her wellbeing. While Braidotti and Haraway stress interspecies community within the human body, this posthumanism is also demonstrated in the symbiotic relations between Mala and her non-human compatriots. Forced into isolation by the inhumane treatment of her father, Mala seeks asylum in her garden, and brings the natural world into her physical house. Yet she is always already posthuman in her interspecies orientation, as evidenced from a very young age when she inherits her mother’s environmental literacy, an ability to co-exist and communicate with non-human beings.

By embracing ecological bodies, and allowing them to encroach upon human space, Mala overturns the hierarchy of man over nature, and facilitates interconnectivity between what are commonly seen as contending forces. Mootoo depicts gardens as microcosms of society, critiquing the artificiality of colonial gardening in contrast to the natural self-governance of indigenous plants and animals. Mala’s garden, which functions as a third space of subjectivity akin to Vadde’s backwaters sphere, is a safe cosmopolitan space that allows diverse bodies their autonomy and respective opacity. Yet Mootoo’s socio-ecological ideals are embodied in Mala’s mother’s garden before they are nurtured in her own, demonstrating the persisting antagonisms between imperial claims to land and efforts to respect nature. As Mootoo writes, “Lavinia loved the freedom and wildness in Sarah’s garden, so unlike her [own] mother’s well-ordered, colour-coordinated beds” (p. 53). In contradistinction to the colonial violence that demands cultural submission, Mala’s mother refuses to corral the natural world in any way that might be counterintuitive to its natural form. Her mother’s lesbian affair is another example of this refusal to conform to heterosexual standards, and it is no coincidence that Sarah’s partner, Lavinia, gives Mala and her sister an asexual cereus plant the day the two women are forced to leave the children. Emotionally barren because of the sexual violence that she is later subjected to by her father, Mala is capable of, but does not conceive any children out of these incestuous relations. In collaboration with the asexual cereus plant, however, Mala facilitates growth and interspecies alliances in the garden where she finds refuge from antagonistic human forces. Her garden grows yet wilder with the freedom she enjoys after her father’s death, and after she has barricaded his body in the basement of his house, nature begins to pervade what was once an oppressive colonial property. “At first Aves, Hexapoda, Gastropoda and Reptilia burrowed instinctively into nooks and crevices. They realized eventually that they had no cause to hide. Mala permitted them to roam boldly and to multiply at leisure throughout her property” (p. 128). Mala is blessed with her mother’s ability to coexist alongside disparate materialities, and while she remains outside of Lantanacamaran society after her father dies, this gift helps her nurture nonhuman ecologies, which eventually become indistinguishable from human communities. As we see, the collapse of Mala’s family’s manmade house is contemporaneous with its being ontologically reimagined by nonhuman structures:

Mala opened her eyes. She couldn't see the birds but she noticed that a grapefruit tree and several pepper plants had sprouted in the dirt and rust of the roof . . . The roots of the cereus, like desperate grasping fingers, had bored through the damp wood of the back wall of the house. It was no longer the wall that supported the succulent but rather the other way around". (p. 116)

Mala encourages plants to grow as best serves them, and so long as they do not threaten her safety, this overgrowth actually helps combat the colonial structures against which she is fighting. As the interspecies community in Mala's garden grows stronger, the distinction between what is human and nonhuman becomes gradually obscured. Her preservation of this order, as well as her reclusion from human society, presents the value of turning towards a posthuman society resistant to hierarchical colonial regimes.

The interspecies community that Mala nurtures in her garden reflects her posthuman orientation and the new terrestrial cosmopolitanism that she offers to the citizens of Lantanacamara. As previously mentioned, we are first introduced to the present-day Mala when she is admitted into an old age home and taken under the care of Tyler. Although Mala is nonverbal and presumed insane after being linked to her father's murder, Tyler instantly feels compassion towards this woman and senses a history of trauma behind her apparent misconduct. "Miss Ramchandin had been lying strapped," Tyler observes, "except for the brief moments when I carried her . . . But my intuition was that the woman on the bed was going to prove herself to be neither crazy nor failing in health, and that she would fare better given more freedom . . . I did fancy that she and I shared a common reception from the rest of the world" (p. 20). Throughout the course of the novel, Mootoo subtly likens Mala and Tyler's "shared queerness" to the rare, night-blooming cereus plant. The asexual plant, which "appears to be little more than an uninteresting tangle of leafage" (p. 22) is easily overlooked and often considered "unsightly until [it blooms]" (p. 54). Unlike most plants, which thrive in sunlight for a prolonged period of time, the cereus plant only offers its "exquisite elegance for one short, precious night" (p. 54) of the year. Because the cereus is different from many other plants due to its short-lived nocturnal nature, it serves as a material ally for underrepresented bodies like Mala and Tyler. Excluded from Lantanacamaran society because of their affiliations with homosexuality and incest, Mala and Tyler are both relegated to less human status among the citizens of Paradise. Together, however, they are inspired to help one another realize each other's potential, and cultivate a more inclusive community.

While the natural world is presented to us through Tyler's mediated narration, Mala's profound respect for and fluency with the land presents nonhuman language as equally viable and worthy of representation, and this orientation extends into her valorization of marginalized humans. Harkening back to my earlier discussion of mutual opacity, this recognition of ontological difference reinforces the importance of giving voice to all vital bodies, whether or not we understand their subjective articulations. After her father dies, Mala communicates exclusively with plants and animals, granting credence to their concerns and permitting them their space as they permit Mala hers. "Mala's companions were the garden's birds, insects, snails and reptiles. She and they and the abundant foliage gossiped among themselves. She listened intently . . . She did not intervene in nature's business" (p. 128). Although Mootoo portrays these multispecies interactions as meaningful conversations, her readers are left to ponder the linguistic opacity that leaves us wondering exactly what was said amongst the gossiping creatures in Mala's garden. These omissions are significant and pay respect to diverse modes of expression, while offering space to explore how these variant articulations might still be heard. Mala's ability to be understood in nonhuman terms also accentuates the shortcomings in her society's voiced representations, since the residents of Paradise reject those who are not readily assimilated into the dominant colonial discourse. Later in the novel, after Mala has been sent to the old age home, she is once again brought into contact with Lantanacamaran society. Although she remains limited in human speech, Tyler quickly recognizes Mala's alternative modes of communication, observing how she engages with the natural world, even within the confines of the old age home's courtyard. For the first few weeks of Tyler's acquaintance with Mala, she " . . . made no sounds

besides crying, moaning, wailing and sighing ... Then one evening ... when a pair of parrots flapped across the sky ... [he] distinctly heard a perfect imitation of the parrots' calls" (23). While everyone else reduces Mala's behavior to insanity, Tyler begins to understand that these imitations are in fact evidence of meaningful communication. Separated from the physical garden she so cherished, Mala still manages to cultivate a new garden of interspecies subjectivity wherever she goes, which develops into her friendship with Tyler, and allows her to reconnect with her childhood friend Ambrose.

Apart from a brief love affair with Ambrose leading up to her father's intervention and subsequent death, Mala has little contact with any humans until years later when she comes into contact with Tyler. It is at this point in the novel that she is able to share her third space of subjectivity formation with the residents of the hospital and extend this interspecies ethos into the greater Lantanacameran society. Earlier in her childhood, Mala has close relationships with her sister and Ambrose; and though Asha remains largely absent throughout the course of the novel, Ambrose's return signals Mala's past influence on his later nonhuman interests. As a young girl, Mala teaches her friend to respect the subtleties of nature, and this shared adoration for the natural world develops into Ambrose's career as an entomologist. Later in the novel, Ambrose describes his relationship with Mala to his son Otoh, recalling childhood memories of the young friends' early encounters with their nonhuman companions. "We fancied ourselves protectors of snails and all things unable to defend themselves from the bullies of the world" (p. 119), Ambrose explains. As children, Mala and Ambrose advocate for all creatures whose threatened autonomy require protection. Ambrose is inspired by Mala's attentiveness to the natural world, and in their early years of schooling, he tries to impress her with his own accumulating knowledge of nonhuman realms: "Teacher said plants respond to gentleness," the young Ambrose tells Mala. "He told us too that plants [like people] could show signs of trauma" (p. 91). In addition to their nonhuman advocacy, the playground bullies, that he and Mala combat, indicate larger systemic oppression, and this early exposure to inequality leads the adult Ambrose to question the flaws of a humanist hierarchy. He explains, "When I was asked about my special areas of interest I told them that I dearly wanted to map the importance of the insects and bugs mentioned in the Bible to the spiritual well-being of humankind and the earth on which we all, man and nature, coexist" (p. 199). Equalizing power relations among disparate ecologies and social groups reflects a growing desire to overthrow the limited political projects of colonialism; but Ambrose's later involvement with Mala, following his education abroad, reflects how deeply embedded some of these colonial ideologies remain.

5. Return of the "Cosmopolitan" Son

Comparing Mala's symbiotic approach to nature with Ambrose's later tendencies towards natural history provides insight into the ease with which colonial institutions normalize environmental exploitation. Following years of study abroad, Ambrose returns to Lantanacamera as the picture of colonial cosmopolitanism. Dressed in "Wetlandish" (English) attire, his language and conduct are completely foreign to the locals of Paradise, although he retains a strong attachment to his native country, and a personal claim to the land. Following years of separation, Ambrose visits Mala immediately upon his return, presuming little to have changed in the time he was away. Emulating Chandin's earlier cosmopolitan desires, "Ambrose E. Mohanty stood like a man ... [and] for the first time in her life Mala felt like a woman (p. 196). Unwittingly teaching Mala to conform to normative gender roles, he also subscribes to the colonial commerce of resource extraction and exotified tourism. When describing to Mala the naturalist tendencies that forced him to leave the church, Ambrose explains that the Bible considers "all creatures not of the human species as lesser, as dumb ... God's tools, servants." In response to this realization, Ambrose wrote a letter to his priest who agreed that Ambrose could use his scholarship to study entomology "as long as [he] promised to return and work as a good Christian in the ministry of agriculture" (p. 199). When Mala asks if he will work in the cane fields, Ambrose tells her that he was able to negotiate a profession in tourism instead. While his investment in Mala is rooted in a nostalgia for their shared childhood, this reunion following years of absence marks a definitive separation in the two characters' cultural developments. Ambrose, like her

father, becomes increasingly saturated in humanist ideologies, while Mala becomes more invested in her garden. Although the characters instantly reconnect and their friendship develops into adult intimacy, the colonial language and ideologies that Ambrose has acquired abroad divide them; it is only their body language and environmental literacy that draws them closer. In the wake of Ambrose's departure, Mala remains subjected to her father's sexual abuse, and retreats further from human society. Ashamed of her situation but longing to be understood, Mala is hopeful that Ambrose will understand her victimization without her need to voice it: "'Pappy didn't change much, na. You remember him?'" Mala asked Ambrose. "How little she could tell him, she wondered, and still expect him to catch her meaning? ... She wondered if [he] had ever figured out that her father pretended she was the wife who had many years ago run out on him" (p. 196). Yet Ambrose does not quite cotton on to the extent of her physical and emotional entrapment. He is aware that Mala's father is possessive of his one remaining daughter, but his own privilege and mobility as a man clouds his ability to recognize Mala's domestic hostage.

As the two become increasingly intimate, their closeness accentuates the cultural distance that has been internalized in their language and comportment. Upon their first meeting as adults, Mala is unable to understand the language and dialect that Ambrose has adopted abroad. "[Mala] found [Ambrose's] words and meanings too obscure for her to follow ... [but she] became interested in the musicality of his voice" (p. 198). Despite their cultural divides, the characters try to bridge their differences by sharing their love of nature and communicating with nonverbal cues: "[Mala] admired [Ambrose's] straight back and imitated his posture" (p. 213), and equally, Ambrose sought Mala's counsel as a terrestrial translator. While there is equality in the love that Mala and Ambrose collectively nurture, a class distinction remains that is informed by Ambrose's gender and foreign education. He positions himself as Mala's teacher, taking it upon himself to teach her the language of natural history that paradoxically reinforces the human exceptionalism against which he claims to be fighting. Recounting his experience of racism and alienation in the Wetlands, Ambrose tells Mala: "'Some of us are considered to be much lesser than others—especially if we are not Wetlandish or European or full-blooded white'" (p. 198). Using an entomologist's language of taxonomy, Ambrose employs labels to make sense of a racist predicament, which is reinforced by the colonial language that he unknowingly subscribes to. Ambrose's speech is proof of the distance his acquired culture has wedged between himself and his ability to effectively communicate with his native people.

Both Tyler and Ambrose fancy themselves cosmopolitan following their sojourns in the Wetlands, but this sense of worldliness complicates their social identities as reintegrated members of Lantanacamaran society. While Tyler struggles to closet the sexual identity that was more readily accepted during his studies abroad, Ambrose finds himself consulting Mala as his resident expert on the botanical culture of which he is only familiar as a colonial scientist. In her essay on "Island Writing," Elizabeth DeLoughrey (2011) discusses the reterritorialization and naturalization of the island subject in the wake of colonial alienation. Although Tyler and Ambrose accumulate cultural capital during their time overseas, DeLoughrey's argument favours the dynamic cultures bound up in the island's self-contained ecosystems. DeLoughrey cites Jane Bennett (2010) when she argues that "If 'an island is a world, and everywhere that people live, they create their own worlds,' then the island might be reclaimed as a space of belonging rather than marginalization and exile" (p. 818). Instead of looking to outside cultures as means to a more *human* end, DeLoughrey sees value in exploring the diversity that the individual island has to offer. "Thus," she argues, "a refusal to migrate from the island may reflect a resistance to colonial trajectories rather than a lack of cosmopolitanism" (p. 816). We might then consider Mala's terrestrial cosmopolitanism as a more empowering intercultural collaboration than the colonial cosmopolitanism of Ambrose and Tyler, since Mala's attitude esteems the island as a self-enclosed totality without need for human intervention or appropriation. With this in mind, we can return to the problematic position Ambrose occupies as a reterritorialized citizen of Paradise.

While Mala's cosmopolitanism is expressed in a posthuman order of interspecies alliances, the cosmopolitanism that Ambrose has acquired makes him return to his native land with an outsider's

eye for profit. Returning with a foreign education and what he considers to be more progressive notions of environmental sustainability, Ambrose approaches the natural world as a possession, which he plans to protect and off of which he expects to profit. While he has every intention of being a good naturalist and combatting colonial exploitation, he unwittingly indulges in this very practice by using ecotourism as a means to manipulate both religion and the natural world. When in the early days of their romance Ambrose explains to Mala his thoughts on bringing Western ecotourism to Lantanacamara, he calls it “bringing people to God via the ministry of His marvelous (*sic*) nature” (p. 199). In addition to ecotourism, Ambrose also proposes harvesting spider silk and selling it abroad. Unlike Mala, who simply coexists with nature, Ambrose’s humanist tendencies inspire him to find ways to capitalize off of his fluency with, and closeness to nonhumans. This exploitative approach to his native land reflects the same self-interest that causes Ambrose to run out on Mala in a flight of self-preservation, revealing himself as Mala’s failed suitor, as well as a postcolonial version of Chandin, whose unsuccessful cosmopolitanism leads to Mala’s withdrawal into her garden.

When Ambrose leaves Mala on the day that her father dies, she is not only stripped of her language, but also of her trust in humans. The day after Ambrose has been spotted on Chandin’s property, Chandin attempts to kill him. Mala intervenes in order to save his life, and in the course of this violent commotion, Ambrose becomes a bystander, and a victim of life’s circumstance. On that fateful day when he entered Chandin’s house to meet Mala,

[Ambrose] heard a dreadful crashing . . . He ran back up the stairs as though jolted by a cord. In the kitchen he saw, instead of the woman he had made love to the day before, an unrecognizable wild creature with a blood-stained face . . . Thinking she had gone crazy and fearing once more for his life, he turned and bolted from the house. Mala . . . rushed to the veranda, screaming his name. He had already disappeared . . . She looked into the yard. “Asha? Aunt Lavinia? You there? Mama?”. (p. 228)

Those whom she loves most perpetually betray or disappoint Mala; it is only her garden that relentlessly protects her. Colonial history repeats itself with Chandin and Ambrose, as Mootoo depicts the intergenerational attempts that both men make to assert themselves as cosmopolitan entrepreneurs—only to be crippled by their failures and subsequently descend into remote and stagnant lives. After Chandin’s wife leaves him, “living had become a matter of habit” (p. 195), and similarly, Ambrose goes to sleep for decades after he has failed to protect Mala against her father. Ambrose only explains this avoidant behavior to his son years later, when he has once again made contact with Mala in old age. Giving up on his life and all the commercial enterprises he had once imagined with Mala, Ambrose resigns himself to self-pity, and in the course of repeated history, marries a woman he does not love, who eventually leaves him. Although Chandin and Ambrose are initially granted greater opportunities to ascend the colonial ladder through their affiliations with Christianity, their color, along with their situational estrangements from Lantanacamaran society, position them both as victims of failed cosmopolitanism. It is only when Ambrose and Mala are reunited again in old age that Ambrose finally comes out of his stupor and decides to make changes in his life. As an inspirational figure for change, Mala is the embodiment of a terrestrial cosmopolitanism that holds hope for the betterment of a posthuman Lantanacamaran society.

6. Terrestrial Cosmopolitanism and a New Social Order

Deeply rooted in her environmental literacy, Mala is able to recognize the inner workings of all beings on a prelinguistic level. This cognizance of profound individuality—and relationality—makes her welcome to any vital manifestation that does not cohere to the typical Linnaean script, and serves the plants and animals in her garden, as well as the atypical human bodies with whom she connects. As with the asexual cereus plants that she nurtures throughout the novel, Mala permits diverse human sexualities their respective space to grow. Understanding Tyler’s feminine ways, Mala steals a dress for him a few weeks into her stay at the old age home. He recalls the event and Mala’s neutral reception of

his clothing change: “The reason Miss Ramchandin paid me no attention was that, to her mind, the [dress she stole for me] was not something to either congratulate or scorn—it simply was. She was not one to manacle nature, and I sensed that she was permitting mine its freedom” (p. 77). Seeing beyond the gendered expectations of society, Mala transplants the interspecies culture of her garden into a shared space of subjectivity that benefits the marginalized humans of Lantanacamara, as well as the island’s nonhuman residents. Whilst the novel progresses in the present-day, Tyler and Mala’s developing closeness signals his entrance into Mala’s terrestrial cosmopolitanism, as she helps him take the necessary steps towards self-acceptance.

Affirming Tyler’s sexual orientation as natural, and exposing him to other atypical human and nonhuman bodies allows him to feel a sense of unity within diversity. Although Mala does not introduce Tyler to Ambrose’s transgender son, Otoh, it is after she has entered the old age home that Ambrose begins making visits to her again, and bringing his son with him. While Mala and Ambrose’s reunion in old age offers hope that the two might salvage what was once lost, it also holds promise for a budding romance between two people whose gender identities are commonly viewed as deviant and irreconcilable—Tyler and Otoh. The novel’s most flagrant example of sexual deviation is witnessed in Otoh’s smooth transition from a girl into a boy. Born as the female, Ambrosia,

[Otoh’s parents] hardly noticed that their daughter was transforming herself into their son . . . Hours of mind-dulling exercise streamlined Ambrosia into an angular, hard-bodied creature and tampered with the flow of whatever hormonal juices defined him. So flawless was the transformation that even the nurse and doctor who attended the birth, on seeing him later, marvelled (*sic*) at their carelessness in having declared him a girl. (p. 110)

Although gender is still frequently understood in binaries, as we have seen with Tyler, Otoh, and the cereus plant, this categorization is a social construct, which excludes many bodies that cannot be contained within the reductive language of natural history. While queer bodies have historically been oppressed and corralled into more socially acceptable heteronormative roles, Mootoo depicts gender and sexual orientation as fluid systems that intuitive bodies must respect and to which they must listen.

Tyler and Otoh represent the next generation of society that is both posthuman and postcolonial in its orientation. Whereas years earlier Mala’s mother and Lavinia were forced to leave Lantanacamara for a “more cosmopolitan” country where they could pursue their love, in present-day Paradise, Tyler and Otoh learn to be at home in their native land, as well as their native bodies. These characters offer revision to conventional cisgendered heterosexuality, leading Mootoo’s readers to question the prescribed logic of any “natural” order. In the same way heterosexuality is privileged as the correct way to develop a society, it is assumed that a plant will generally only bloom in sunlight. “Without blossoms the [rare night-blooming cereus] appears to be little more than an uninteresting tangle of leafage” (p. 22). Yet once a year, “the flowers will offer their exquisite elegance for one short, precious night” (p. 54). Without a nuanced understanding of this plant’s nature, the exceptional subtleties of the cereus are overlooked. We need to respect differences in order to nurture them. While we must remain skeptical of the society that shunned Mala and forced her into the refuge of her garden, we can learn from the multispecies community that she fosters in the wake of this violence. The radical rethinking of terrestrial cosmopolitanism that Mala offers gives voice to those vital bodies who were once forcefully oppressed. By shifting towards a posthuman order of interspecies alliances, Mootoo’s readers learn to embrace diversity and extend what was once a limited anthropocentrism into a dynamic garden of intersubjectivity.

In this article I have put forward an argument to highlight the limited scope of contemporary forms of cosmopolitanism that continue to reinscribe humanist aspirations and ontologically exclusionary practices. While globalization has accelerated transnational migration and encouraged the democratization of humans, this “horizontalizing of the ontological plane” (Bennett 2015, p. 230) remains inadequate until the subjectivities of all vital beings are recuperated. Though steps have been taken to recognize Bhabha’s Third Space Theory, and the multifaceted elements of each individual’s

social composition, this valorization of the human comes at the expense of our nonhuman companions. Humanism has historically thrived on hierarchies that position certain humans as more human than others and neglect the agency of nonhumans altogether. While humanitarians and activists urge corporations to divest from human subordination, we continue to engage in exploitative practices, evidenced by the slavery, sweatshops, and unsafe labor conditions that still exist, in addition to the alarming rate at which we are exhausting natural resources and accelerating climate change.

Shani Mootoo's *Cereus Blooms at Night* responds to a global crisis with a call for compassion. Mootoo depicts the intergenerational violence of the civilizing mission; its commissaries offer Chandin and Ambrose the possibility of climbing the colonial ladder at the expense of all those around them. Failed attempts at a Eurocentric cosmopolitanism result in Mala's persisting physical and emotional abuse and reflect a community that lacks empathy for its people, plants and animals. As a character embodying a multispecies mode of being, Mala's approach to her garden, the diverse sexual identities whose differences she nurtures, and her refusal to conform to a normative human language or conduct, present her as a posthuman figure of hope. While it is important to question the values this fictional society held that allowed them to overlook colonial oppression, ultimately, what *Cereus Blooms* asks, is for its readers to imagine a terrestrial cosmopolitanism in which all beings can flourish.

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