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# Transforming Disabling Trauma Through Care Work and Collective Affinity: Mental Disability and “a Shared Queerness” in *Cereus Blooms at Night*

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AT THE BEGINNING OF Shani Mootoo’s *Cereus Blooms at Night*, Mala Ramchandin, who is brought to Paradise Alms House, is understood by the majority of the nursing staff, as well as the community at large, to be a dangerous, “crazy old woman” (8). As such, she is transported by police escort, sedated, and strapped down on a stretcher, all to protect those who fear for their personal safety in the presence of such a “monster.” Yet one nurse on staff, Tyler, recognizes that they were both spectacles when they first arrived at the Alms House: Tyler because of his gender expression and perceived queer sexual orientation, Mala, more abstractly, because of “Her father. The prison. The rumours” (18). On his first assessment of Mala’s condition, Tyler says that he is “witnessing,” rather than a monstrous criminal, “a case of neglect” (12). He later diagnoses Mala as exhibiting “signs” and “symptoms of trauma” (14, 97). She embodies years of violence and is in desperate need of care when she arrives at the Alms House. Certainly, she can also be understood to live with a mental disability. Here, to denote an unnamed impairment of the mind, and because there is no neutral term — “not *mental illness*, *madness*, or any other term” (Geoffrey Reaume, qtd. in Price 298) — I, like Margaret Price, choose “mental disability” because, in her words, it “operates as inclusively as possible, inviting coalition, while also attending to the specific texture of individual experiences” (298). Within the world of *Cereus Blooms at Night*, Mala’s perceived madness and monstrosity are inextricably linked to the histories of colonialism, slavery, and indentureship in the fictional West Indian island country of Lantanacamara. And Mala’s mental disability cannot be understood apart from depictions in the novel of racism, sexism, homophobia, and transphobia in a time frame not quite distinguishable as past, present, or future.

*Cereus Blooms at Night* has been explored by theorists interested in its themes of colonization, diaspora, and identity (Condé; Garvey; Hong; Howells; May, “Dislocation” and “Trauma”; Smyth), but the novel also provides a rich opportunity to think through how disability functions as more than metaphor or trope. It also provides a context to discuss expanding categories of disability whereby mental illness might be more accurately termed “mental disability,” and it posits a manner of “imagined future” — both “elsewhere” and “elsewhen” (Kafer 3). In articulating the political/relational theoretical model of disability, Alison Kafer has argued that any contemplation of crip futurity can be understood as a project of the present as well as a projection into the future because visions for the future reveal how we think of disability in the present: “If disability is conceptualized as a terrible unending tragedy, then any future that includes disability can only be a future to avoid” (2). In turning to the future and in imagining a more radically accessible present, Kafer asks for a reframing of disability whereby it is understood not only as political but also as valuable and integral (3). *Cereus Blooms at Night*, as a fictional world both “elsewhere” and “elsewhen,” reveals that Mala’s disability is not only political but also valuable and integral to her own survival and to those closest to Mala. Traumatized from violence and harm, now elderly, neglected, and living with mental disability, she connects key characters in a process of transformation whereby they are not “cured” of disability or queerness but, through vulnerability and care, brought into a “collective affinity” (Joan W. Scott, qtd. in Kafer 11). *Cereus Blooms at Night* provides a rich site to explore the potential of remapping disability as integral not only to a progressive present but also to future “social change and political transformation” (Kafer 6). However, in order to do this, we must first bear witness to the sexual violence that Mala has endured, for in the world of this novel it is an important cause of her mental disability.

Mala does not simply “tell” her story — she is unable to — since she does not often speak but communicates through a few words and meaningful gestures. Therefore, Tyler pieces her story together because of a relationship that they forge. In this novel, the reality of mutual recognition and what becomes a relationship of interdependence push the narrative forward in interesting and at times remarkable ways. Because of Tyler’s care, threads of Mala’s narrative are collated as a haunting letter to her long-lost sister, Asha. Tyler, for one, resists seeing Mala as

simply mad, and certainly he does not understand her to be a monster. Instead, recognizing her as deeply traumatized, neglected, and living with mental disability, he realizes that he must care for her in a way that exceeds the expectations of competent care delivery in the nursing home. At a pivotal moment, with his palm resting on her brow, he notes that, “This one touch turned her from the incarnation of fearful tales into a living human being, an elderly person such as those I had dedicated my life to serving” (11). If Mala can be transformed from monster into human with a single gesture, then care within the world of this novel can transform ordinary transactional relationships into more than the sums of their parts. Because disability can be understood to be “relational,” it cannot be reduced to understandings that frame it as simply “medical” or “social.” Thus, in using the insights of Kafer’s political/relational framing of disability, care and care work can also be positioned as political and valuable, and, much like how disability can be reframed as an integral part of an imagined future, radical acts of care facilitate collective affinity within *Cereus Blooms at Night*.

### Politicizing Care Work

During Mala’s childhood, the community of Paradise ignored the rumours of her father’s incestuous, prison-like hold over her body and mind. After her mother fled the community with her female lover, Lavinia, her father, Chandin, habitually sexually abused his eldest daughter. But in Paradise evidence of her sexual abuse was excused because his wife had left him for another woman. Mootoo explains how Paradise viewed Chandin:

While many shunned him there were those who took pity, for he was once the much respected teacher of the Gospel, and such a man would take to the bottle and to his own child, they reasoned, only if he suffered some madness. And, they further reasoned, what man would not suffer a rage akin to insanity if his own wife, with a devilish mind of her own, left her husband and children. (211)

Thus, Paradise has failed to protect Mala as a child and understands her, as an elderly woman, to be monstrous and mad.

When she was a young woman, her lover, Ambrose, also betrayed her when he too envisioned her to be not only mad but also monstrous. For Mala at the time, this betrayal is the most traumatic. Despite her

initial difficulty in consummating a sexual relationship with Ambrose after years of incestuous rape, she is eventually able to actualize her desire for him. However, when Ambrose leaves the family home after one of their afternoon liaisons, Chandin spots him and brutally punishes Mala with a series of violent sexual assaults. Ambrose, unaware of Chandin's incestuous rapes, as well as his most recent sexual attack on Mala, returns the next day to find the Ramchandin home in disarray and Mala bruised and bleeding. In this scene, Ambrose realizes that Chandin is responsible for the carnage:

Ambrose stood still, trying to make sense of what had been revealed to him . . . all the while feeling shame for her and for himself — as though he had been betrayed by Mala, and at the same time wrestling with the notion that she could not possibly, not conceivably have been agreeable to intimacies with her father. In that instant of hesitation he so distanced himself from Mala that, like an outside observer, he saw the world as he had known and dreamed it suddenly come undone. (246)

In this moment of hesitation, in which he contemplates Mala's "complicity" in her sexual abuse, Ambrose irrevocably distances himself from Mala and allows her to become a monster in his eyes. He then describes that before him — "instead of the woman he had made love to the day before" — he saw "an unrecognizable wild creature with a blood-stained face, frothing at the mouth and hacking uncontrollably at the furniture" (247). In a final act of betrayal, Ambrose flees the house and leaves Mala to defend herself against her father, injured but still alive in the next room. Thus, she is forced to kill Chandin in self-defence, which triggers her dissociative splitting into two subjectivities, Mala and her younger, childlike self "Pohpoh," whom she cares for and protects, if only in her mind.

In *Cereus Blooms at Night*, Mala's racialization as an Indo-Lantanacamarian brings to bear the traumatic, yet often neglected, history of Indian indentured labour in the wake of slavery in the West Indies. In addition, Chandin's forced conversion to Christianity suggests an evaluation of England's "success" in colonizing church and state as well as West Indian bodies and minds. If any compassion can be mustered for his despicable actions against his daughter, then it is in how, as a colonized subject and in crisis, Chandin misdirects his rage and violates her. But this is not to excuse or mitigate the trauma that

Mala suffers. That said, Mootoo handles the history of indentureship via the Ramchandin family in such a way as to illustrate the powerfully damaging effects of colonization whereby both Chandin and Mala can be understood as victims, as oppressed, within this historical narrative.

Vivian May argues that *Cereus Blooms at Night* can be read as “allegorical,” stressing that this is not to suggest that “Mala’s story of incestual rape and domination is simply metaphorical, a synecdochical stand-in for a long history of domination and violation in the Caribbean” (“Trauma” 108). May argues that, though such a reading might hold true, it would be at the expense of Mala’s personal narrative as her “individual story gets reduced to its utility to teach us something about diaspora, exile, and the dysfunctional ‘family’ of empire on a larger scale” (108). Mala’s story, in its complexity, can illustrate to the reader the effects of familial breakdown as it is experienced in a postcolonial context, but her story is also a lesson in trauma, mental disability, and the need for care. From a pedagogical standpoint, the various sites of trauma in the novel function to allow university students to engage in difficult conversations about colonization, race, ethnicity, gender, sexuality, and mental disability as well as the necessity of transforming trauma through acts of vulnerability and care work. Unlike medical students who are required to take a humanities course to engender empathy for others as represented in fictional form, which can result in the rejection of those understood as “unruly subjects” (Wear and Aultman 1056), students who study narratives of health, illness, and disability with social justice in mind embrace this novel for the ways in which it provides a site for discussing real-world problems. Reading this novel, it is almost impossible to ignore the instances of radical care work, and as embodied readers we experience emotions and undertake care work in thinking through, discussing, and even writing about the novel. But my discussion of care and caretaking here enters the fray with knowledge of a historical divide between feminist disability perspectives and ethics of care perspectives.

Most recently, Christine Kelly has argued that we might all be well served by thinking about what “accessible care” can offer when positioned within a critical theoretical framework that does more than offer concrete solutions where accessibility is concerned (789). Instead, the critical work still needed is oriented toward the creation of more inclusive forms of care. In this frame, there is space to affirm the disability

pride rallying cry “We do not need care!” and to affirm that care can function as a “complex form of oppression” (784). Although we must continue to grapple with the reality of abuse carried out by caretakers, the work of care can also be transformative for both recipient and caretaker. This seems to be especially so when care work is envisioned as a contingent relationship rather than a relationship wholly defined by dependence when the goal is independence. If anything, and in accordance with Kafer’s articulation of the political/relational model of disability, thinking about care and care work requires less polarizing of positions and more politicizing of care work itself, which might reveal how interdependence can be an outcome of care work. Therefore, within a discussion of *Cereus Blooms at Night*, we might focus less on what care is and more on what care does and can accomplish. Although the relationship between Mala and Tyler begins as a more typical depiction of the able-bodied caregiver and the disabled person as a recipient of care, we also witness how their relationship exceeds the confines of these roles. We see not only Mala’s transformation from enduring abject neglect to being able to receive touch and care and participate in non-verbal communication, but also Tyler’s transformation from internalizing queer shame to being empowered, for the first time, to explore and share his nature, his innermost conception of sexuality and gender.

### Crippling Care Work

Tyler — the narrator of *Cereus Blooms at Night* and Mala’s life story — is portrayed as a precocious child in a series of flashbacks. From an early age, Tyler questions gender roles, seeking to understand not only how they are normally presented but also whether it is possible to deviate from norms. One afternoon he asks Cigarette Smoking Nana, (not Bible Quoting Nana, who will not tolerate his effeminacy), “Could a nephew be the father of his uncle? . . . [C]ould 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?” (26). Finally, Tyler wants to know, “[C]an your Pappy be your Pappy and your Granpappy at the same time?” (26). Cigarette Smoking Nana hesitates, then explains that, though possible, “it doesn’t happen often and it’s not, well, it’s not good, it’s not nice, you know, son” (27). But Tyler does not know. He does not understand what Nana attempts to explain about family and how these roles and responsibilities should

come about. Thus, during this conversation, he learns of Chandin and the rumours of his “not nice” relations with his daughters, Mala and Asha. As a result, the young Tyler becomes aware of the reality of incest. However, this knowledge only further confuses his young understanding of gender, sexuality, and family making and whether there is any way to queer this terrain without truly “perverting” the rules of gender and sex roles.

His early troubling of gender roles and questions about sexuality are unique in Paradise, for any gender or sexual expression that deviates from the norm is termed “funny” if not blatantly perverse. As an adult, Tyler recognizes that this all too convenient explanation serves to privilege some and marginalize others. Not satisfied with dominant explanations of his femininity — and keen to differentiate it from perversion — he turns inward for answers:

Over the years I pondered the gender and sex roles that seemed available to people, and the rules that went with them. After much reflection I have come to discern that my desire to leave the shores of Lantanacalara had much to do with wanting to study abroad, but far more with wanting to be somewhere where my “perversion,” which I tried diligently as I could to shake, might be either invisible or of no consequence to people to whom my foreignness was what would be strange. I was preoccupied with trying to understand what was natural and what perverse, and who said so and why. Chandin Ramchandin played a part in confusing me about these roles, for it was a long time before I could differentiate between his perversion and what others called mine. (51)

Tyler comes to terms with the knowledge that, even if his “perversion” is equated with Chandin’s, it is markedly different. And eventually Tyler articulates that he has “found [his] own nature” (51). Still, he questions if his Cigarette Smoking Nana were alive would “this particular nature be coarse sandpaper drawing blood against her?” (51). Tyler hopes that she would have accepted him in adulthood because she “accepted me and my girlish ways” (76). With this in mind, he realizes that to be true to his nature he must reveal his innermost conception of gender and sexuality — even if it is considered by others to be unnatural, if not perverse.

On a daily basis, Tyler is a spectacle at the Paradise Alms House, both as a foreign-trained nurse and as the only man in the feminized



profession of nursing on the island of Lantanacamara. Mala responds to his assessment that she is traumatized, neglected, and in desperate need of caregiving by showing in turn that she sees that he also needs compassion, care, and even recognition. The Paradise Alms House provides a refuge for Mala; Tyler, too, needs a safe place to express his inner self outwardly. When she steals a female nurse's dress and a pair of stockings from the clothesline and brings them back to her private room, their bond solidifies. Through gestures and a few words, she suggests that he try on the outfit. Tyler is taken aback. In stealing the dress, Mala indicates that she understands his innermost nature even though he describes himself as "neither properly man nor woman but some in-between, unnamed thing" and "not a man and not ever able to be a woman, suspended nameless in the limbo state between existence and nonexistence" (76, 83). Thus, when Mala steals the dress, Tyler believes that she not only sees what he attempts to keep hidden but also encourages him to make his inner self manifest to the outer world. For him, there is no peace dwelling between genders.

At this early point in the narrative, Tyler articulates being caught between two genders and "suspended nameless" — unintelligible — yet somehow Mala can perceive his nature. He explains that "I felt she had been watching me and seeing the same things that everyone else saw. But she had stolen a dress for me. No one had ever done anything like that before. She knows what I am, was all I could think. She knows my nature" (82). In caring for her, Tyler also watches Mala and observes that she is deeply connected to the natural world and all its creatures. He notes that she will not eat even a trace of animal flesh, and rather than see this particularity as a time-consuming annoyance, like the other nurses do, he takes care to prepare her simple plant-based meals. As a young woman, Mala retreated to the world of her garden after her father's mysterious death in the house. She did not interfere as flora and fauna worked in symbiosis in her feral yard. In fact, her garden became a thriving ecosystem. Thus, Tyler observes that she "was not one to manacle nature," adding that "I sensed that she was permitting mine its freedom" (83). Without this active encouragement from Mala, it would have been even more difficult for Tyler to express his nature.

Whereas she facilitates his growing self-empowerment and desire to express his inner nature, the world outside her room is not as welcoming. Tyler is fully attuned to this reality. Yet, when dressed in the female

nurse's uniform and stockings, nose powdered, lips and cheeks rouged, he does not feel unnatural or that he is a spectacle. On the contrary, he says, "I had never felt so extremely ordinary, and I quite loved it" (84). Here what can be understood as cross-dressing allows Tyler to feel "ordinary." But he can perform in such a manner only in the company of Mala since he is understood to be a man, and to act in a contrary manner would signal his "perversion" to others. Thus, Tyler cannot leave her room in a dress since he is "endowed with a sense of propriety, depended on it, for that matter, for the most basic level of survival" (84). For now, only Mala understands that he is caught in a double bind in which gender and survival are concerned. Nevertheless, her care for the natural world, and by extension her recognition of Tyler as occupying a natural place on the spectrum that is human diversity, serve to deepen their relationship, marked by the reciprocity of care. What transpires between Tyler and Mala points to the potential of building relationships across differences and signals a burgeoning sense of collective affinity within the world of the novel.

### Situating "a Shared Queerness"

Tyler refers to his affinity with Mala as "a shared queerness" (52), articulating a linkage in two seemingly disparate subjectivities. While he undertakes a personal discovery of gender, and by extension sexuality, Mala is a survivor of incest and sexual violence and now lives with mental disability. That queerness can be conceived, then, as a commonality is a bit troubling. Still, queer theorist Eve Sedgwick first proposed in the early 1990s that queerness can imply any failure to assemble the various elements of gender identity and sexual practice that supposedly follow "naturally" from one's sexual anatomy. In light of Sedgwick's conception of queerness, both Mala and Tyler "fail" to assemble the "correct" elements of gender and sexuality. After long years of sexual abuse by her father, Mala is unable to express sexual desire easily. Even when simply contemplating a sexual relationship with her first and only young love, Ambrose, she feels that she is somehow betraying her father. Ambrose is a positive man in her life, especially because, as she articulates, "The only man's sweat she knew was her father's, which made her nauseous, and so she was delighted she could invent a smell for Ambrose that melted her with passion and momentarily overpowered her father's awful

hold over her” (230). In spite of this, Ambrose’s illicit visits leave Mala feeling conflicted:

Yet thorns of fear and treachery would prick her after Ambrose left the house. The fear that her father would discover that her head, heart and body were betraying him, if only because he could smell this new desire on her skin, rendered her inactive in Ambrose’s presence. She would pace the upstairs of the house, tormented and confused by odd feelings of having betrayed her father. (230)

Her initial inability to embody her sexual desires, and thus to express her sexuality, is directly tied to her father’s insidious possession of her. As such, Mala “fails” to embody “natural” sexual practices and, according to Sedgwick (and Tyler), can be included in this collectivity of a shared queerness.

Sedgwick also proposes that queerness can suggest “the open mesh of possibilities, gaps, overlaps, dissonances and resonances, lapses and excesses of meaning when the constitutive elements of anyone’s gender . . . or anyone’s sexuality aren’t made (or *can’t be* made) to signify monolithically” (8). By this definition, almost anyone is queer, for arguably no one’s gender, or sexuality, is a monolith. Still, I am interested in how queerness might also signal gaps, dissonances, and lapses especially if we are to take Mala’s mental disability seriously and if we are to contend first with the trauma that Mala has experienced. Ann Cvetkovich rejects pathologizing understandings of trauma, such as those that permeate medical and clinical discourses (including psychoanalysis), and turns her attention to *Cereus Blooms at Night* for its depiction of various forms of survival. Moreover, in *An Archive of Feelings: Trauma, Sexuality, and Lesbian Public Cultures*, Cvetkovich turns her attention to “those whose experiences circulate in the vicinity of trauma and are marked by it” (3). Her aim is to “place moments of extreme trauma alongside moments of everyday emotional distress that are often the only sign that trauma’s effects are still being felt” (3). Her work on queer trauma is important to my argument since it highlights how all of the characters associated with Mala can be affected by trauma, sometimes enormously. This tangential association with trauma is not unlike a shared queerness in *Cereus Blooms at Night* since it functions to link several of the key characters. But negative associations do not mar this linkage between unlike sub-

jectivities; instead, the “failure” to perform norms is part of what unites unlike individuals in a powerful collective affinity.

Tyler also fails to assemble convincingly the “correct” gender identity and expression, for he seems to reside between genders — in limbo — and thus remains unnamed. His queerness, then, is all the more complicated because he lives in a society that will not tolerate the self-identification of gender. Certainly, Paradise, the main fictional town in Lantanacámara, will not tolerate a divide between one’s sex assigned at birth and the gender that is to follow “naturally” from that apparent anatomy. Furthermore, queerness can connote a failure to fit into *any* normalized category of gender and/or sexuality. Finally, though, as Sedgwick radically argues, “what it takes — all it takes — to make the description ‘queer’ a true one is the impulsion *to* use it in the first person” (9). Tyler is queer because he says as much. But queerness cannot be understood as a simple, straightforward expression of sexual orientation. However, as Sedgwick argues, “given the historical and contemporary force of the prohibitions against *every* same-sex sexual expression, for anyone to disavow those meanings, or to displace them from the term’s definitional center, would be to dematerialize any possibility of queerness itself” (8). If queerness is inextricable from same-sex libidinousness, then it must also be understood to destabilize gender and sexual essentialism.

In the past, Tyler hoped that while studying abroad his foreignness might temporarily deflect attention from his queerness. Ultimately, however, he wants his queerness to be of “no consequence.” Tyler cross-dresses not to attract attention in a drag queen-like performance but to feel no less than ordinary. He expresses his femininity in private, with only Mala for an audience, for to do otherwise would make him a dangerous target for those keen to punish his “perversion.” Yet Tyler is overwhelmingly read by literature scholars as a “gay man” (Condé; Garvey; Howells; May, “Dislocation”; Smyth) in an attempt, it appears, conclusively to identify, name, and make sense of his gender expression in a novel that otherwise refuses to name, label, and normatively categorize characters.<sup>1</sup> This misreading appears to stem from confusing his femininity with cross-dressing as only an act of drag. Yet Tyler explains while in the female nurse’s outfit and stockings that “At first I felt horribly silly, like a man who had put on women’s clothing for sheer sport and had forgotten to remove the outfit after the allotted period of fun”

(83), but later he feels differently. If at first he feels awkward because it could be construed that he is wearing the dress for “sheer sport,” he is not seeking sport or wanting to become the exotic other. He dresses in women’s clothing because doing so allows him to feel, for a moment, ordinary — which is to say natural and commonplace.

While wearing the dress, Tyler is even able to conceive of his body as female, thus revealing the veracity of his inner nature. With the dress on, he says that “My body felt as if it were metamorphosing. It was as though I had suddenly become plump and less rigid. My behind felt fleshy and rounded. I had thighs, a small mound of belly, rounded full breasts and a cavernous tunnel singing between my legs” (82). Yet, despite this embodied articulation of feeling like a woman, Tyler does not easily pass as a woman. At this point in the narrative, he does not even conceive of trying to pass as one in recognizable terms. Instead, he resides in gender ambiguity, a dangerous, marginal position if only because Paradise is distressingly heteronormative. As such, Tyler struggles to find a way to stay true to his nature. However, in the novel’s final pages, he presents himself dressed in a female nurse’s outfit. That said, even when articulating his body as female and publicly presenting himself as a woman, he is read by scholars as a homosexual man, primarily, I presume, because he is sexually attracted to men. His “unusual sexual nature” (May, “Dislocation” 100), his sexual attraction to men, seems to be complicated by misreading his/her gender. However, if one recognizes that his nature is his own revelation that he is a woman, then his desire is not deemed unusual at all; rather, it is the norm. Tyler, despite his — or more accurately “her” — sex assigned at birth and physical anatomy, understands her nature to be that of a woman. When permitted to express her inner nature, she is a woman. Although this might be termed “unusual,” read through a trans-inclusive politic and theoretical lens, Tyler’s articulation or embodiment is neither complicated nor unusual. Instead, it is properly a part of the diversity of the natural world and, potentially, integral to the community of Paradise, Lantanacamara. Said another way, Tyler’s queerness belongs in the world of the novel and as such serves as another connective element that brings characters together through care, reciprocity, and mutual recognition.

## Politics of Passing

The Paradise Alms House and its walled garden mirror Mala's house and yard, where creatures were allowed to thrive in the complexity that their particular nature demanded. The garden also functions as a safe haven for Mala, Tyler, and the budding romance between Tyler and Otoh Mohanty, who was assigned female at birth but seamlessly transitioned to male in adolescence. Here Tyler and Otoh are granted a measure of privacy to explore their feelings for each other and in connecting in the garden move the narrative arc toward love. This could be read as a suggestion that elsewhere they might also find such acceptance. Despite the flourishing of their relationship in the garden, to suggest that they might easily survive — or even thrive — elsewhere is to ignore the realities of the other queer characters in the novel. Hector, the sympathetic gardener, mourns his brother Randy, who is “funny,” he says, like Tyler (78). Randy was sent from Paradise by their mother to save him from their father's beatings and was never seen or heard from again. Mala's mother, Sarah, and her lover, Lavinia, are driven from Paradise, never to return. Thus, the privacy of the walled garden of the Alms House stands in marked contrast to Paradise and nearly everywhere else on Lantanacalara, where residents are fearful of mental disability and suspicious of queerness and actively seek to repress both.

As a young man, Otoh delivers — at his father, Ambrose's, request — a monthly package of food and supplies to Mala's home. Despite these deliveries, Mala is known to Otoh only through rumour and innuendo, for she is the town's “crazy lady.” He is rather surprised by his father's curious investment in Mala's continued well-being and knows nothing of their romantic relationship as young people. However, Otoh, unlike the other townsfolk of Paradise, feels strangely drawn to Mala. He is so eager to forge a connection with her that, in a desperate attempt to attract her attention, he steals one of his mother's dresses from the clothesline. When he tries the dress on “without knowing why,” Otoh explains that he “wanted to share his secret with Mala Ramchandin, even at the risk of being caught walking the streets dressed like a woman” (130). Otoh will risk not only embarrassment but also personal safety to disrupt how he is seen and perceived — as a man, without question — in order to make it apparent that he is, in fact, different. Here cross-dressing functions as a visual disruption but again is an attempt to connect more deeply with Mala. Later, when Otoh and

Ambrose make a trip to the Paradise Alms House to visit Mala, Otoh describes having a profound desire to share his secret with her in order to forge what could be understood as collective affinity: “I felt as though she and I had things in common. She had secrets and I had secrets. Somehow I wanted to go there and take all my clothes off and say, ‘Look! See? See all this? *I am different*’” (133). Otoh understands that both he and Mala are perceived as different and that this difference is the source of their commonality.

Although passing as cisgender makes Otoh anxious, for the time being it is the only way that he can survive in Paradise. And, though he articulates a desire to make his trans reality known and visible, especially to Mala, he is unable to do so because he would risk his personal safety. He would also like to take his shirt off on a hot day, as the other men do, but “there were some risks he preferred to avoid” (127). Otoh’s mother, Elsie, concerned for her son’s future happiness, especially in his choice of an appropriate girl to marry, encourages him to consider the affable Mavis. Elsie, however, questions just how much Mavis knows about Otoh:

She know you don’t have anything between those two stick legs of yours? . . . You think because I never say anything that I forget what you are? . . . Now the fact of the matter is that you are not the first or the only one of your kind in this place. . . . [E]very village in this place have a handful of people like you. And [it] is not easy to tell who is who. How many people here know about you, eh? I does watch out over the banister and wonder if *who* I see is really *what* I see. Look here, what I want to ask you is, you sure Mavis is a woman? (258)

In the world of this novel, not unlike life, one can never be too sure *whom* one sees is *what* one sees. As such, where the politics of passing are concerned, a queer disabled perspective might complicate a terrain that would understand both Tyler’s and Otoh’s passing through a singularly normative and negative discourse. This is to suggest, of course, that passing is a more complicated endeavour, as Ellen Samuels has cogently argued.

Samuels reminds us that she makes no attempt to pass as either “heterosexual” or “nondisabled,” but that does not prevent her from being read as such by others. She argues that two persistent ideas are

in need of interruption: first, that “nonvisibly disabled people prefer to pass”; second, “that passing is a sign and product of assimilationist longings” (240). Conversely, Samuels suggests that passing can be reframed as a subversive practice whereby the passing subject should be read not as assimilationist but as defiant and, “by crossing the borders of identities, reveals their instability” (243). However, as Samuels reminds us, there are at least two contradictory dynamics in play where passing is concerned because one can pass deliberately (which implies that something is purposefully kept hidden) or by default (240). Whereas Otoh passes by default because he is read as cisgender, Tyler does not, though she might deliberately attempt to pass in the future. As Samuels notes, “Discourses of coming out and passing are central to visibility politics, in which coming out is generally valorized while passing is seen as assimilationist” (244). Therefore, Samuels makes a call to “refocus our endeavours from the visible signs of these identities” — queerness and disability — “to their invisible manifestations” (236).

Mental disability is often referred to as an “invisible disability” because, unlike physical disability, it does not signal difference through signs that a viewer can presumably “read.” Mala could be misread as non-disabled; however, in the context of this novel, she does not pass as normatively able-minded, and because she is so consistently termed “mad,” “crazy,” or “monstrous,” her difference is well observed by the townspeople of Paradise. Samuels argues that there is a crucial difference between non-visible and invisible disabilities. Whereas the former can be used to indicate an unmarked identity, the latter can be used to indicate the force of social oppression that leads to marginalization, even as these two terms are commonly used interchangeably in disability theorizing (251). This positively complicates how Mala is understood within the fictional world of *Cereus Blooms at Night*. Although her disability is overwhelmingly unrecognized — so much so that there are calls for her to stand on trial as an elderly woman for her father’s murder — this does not mean that she is not disabled. Instead, even as Mala might be understood to have a non-visible disability, her abuse, neglect, and disability are initially rendered invisible through the social forces of oppression. Certainly, as Samuels notes, non-visible disability and invisible disability always have the potential to meet “since nonvisible disabilities remain largely invisible, both in disability discourse and in the culture at large” (251). Accordingly, the town of Paradise is ironically named; not only



will the townsfolk not tolerate or accept queerness, but also they refuse to see or understand disability.

Although other scholars have discussed the fictional world of *Cereus Blooms at Night* as a manner of postcolonial “utopia,” this reading is discordant with a consideration of the material realities of the lives of its queer, crip, and trans characters. Because the fictional world of the novel is not a utopia for such subjectivities, we are presented instead with the force of collective, relational affinity whereby a shared queerness can connect gender and sexual minorities as well as those living with disabilities. This conception of collective affinity gestures toward a crip futurity in which disability is no longer marginal but reframed as integral — exactly as Mala is within the world of this novel. But this collective affinity does not emerge without care or work. In fact, both care and the work of care are at the heart of *Cereus Blooms at Night*, and depictions of caring attention and responsiveness to the needs of others illustrate how progressive social change — truly social transformation — might be made manifest. However, in observing the dedication and careful recognition that Tyler, Mala, and Otoh afford each other, we can understand care less as an abstract or idealized notion and more as a generous act and ordinary daily action necessary for social and political transformation.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> The focus of these scholars’ work is not on queer gender and sexuality in *Cereus Blooms at Night*. Yet it remains curious that these scholars name Tyler a gay man when the novel refuses such a straightforward, and potentially deeply erroneous, practice of naming identity.

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