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Who is a Victim?
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Article abstract

Contributing to what Dominick LaCapra has identified as the institutionalization of trauma studies in the humanities, Margaret Atwood once identified survival, colonization, and hardship as the primary experiences of "Canadian-ness." Many writers have since exposed fundamental flaws in this model. Shani Mootoo's novel Cereus Blooms at Night provides clear examples of the ethical problems formed between witness and victim within an overarching framework of victimization. Here, perpetrators identify as victims, victims identify as perpetrators, and accountability becomes a blur. The narrator's piecing together of fragmented memories and utterances problematically integrates multiple accounts into a single overarching voice that equates traumatic experience with a repetition of victimization. By crafting a narrative voice that is problematic, monologic, and ultimately appropriating, Mootoo illuminates weighty issues that strain the fabric of "trauma studies," as well as social and political life more generally. She thus calls for a remapping of ethics in what Annette Wieviorka has described as "the era of the witness."

Who is a Victim? Difference and Accountability in Shani Mootoo's *Cereus Blooms at Night*

Cassel Busse

> The lights and shadows must always fall with a certain difference.
> — George Eliot

In historiographer and critical theorist Dominick LaCapra's latest book, *History and Its Limits: Human, Animal, Violence* (2009), he discusses the contemporary institutionalization of trauma studies in the humanities as a reaction to the violence and losses of the twentieth century and now twenty-first century. He quotes the French historian Annette Wieviorka, describing our current time as "the era of the witness":

> Of course testimonies and witnesses have existed in other times and places. But the extent and intensity of traumatic events and experiences, notably including genocides and other forms of violence, abuse, and victimization (as well as natural disasters), seem to mark our time in a distinctive manner and to lend credibility to its prevalent figuration as the era or age of the witness who gives testimony. (60)

This description of "our time" as one characterized by the witnessing of trauma coincides with my own more local observations on the ubiquity of the academic, literary, and popular engagement with traumatic experience within the realm of Canadian culture and literature. In 1972, Margaret Atwood rather contentiously declared that Canada "as a whole is a victim, or an 'oppressed minority,' or exploited" (45) in her nonfiction book *Survival.* According to Atwood, this "essence" of victimization in Canada is particularly visible in its literature, which frequently represents survival, colonization, and hardship as the primary experience of being Canadian. Though Atwood's text was written decades

ago, victimhood remains a popular topic in Canadian literature, with novels such as Kim Echlin's *The Disappeared* (2009), Barbara Gowdy's *Helpless* (2007), Gil Adamson's *Outlander* (2007), and Anne Michaels's *Fugitive Pieces* (1996) becoming national bestsellers. Moreover, the global embrace of what has been termed the "Age of Apology" (Gibney et al.) is reflected in our government's focus on Canada's traumatic past, Prime Minister Stephen Harper alone having delivered numerous apologies for violent or exclusionary actions toward different groups of people. According to Harper, these public acts are not "about liability today" but rather are gestures of recognition and reconciliation for "the burden of [victimizing] experience" that lies on the shoulders of a "good and just" nation (Harper 2008) — a sentiment that shows the fitness of Atwood's description of Canada and LaCapra and Wieviorka's analysis of current work in the humanities as centred upon the experience of the traumatic.

Echoing LaCapra's apprehension over the potential elision of the distinctions between "bearing witness, giving testimony, and offering commentary" (*History* 61), I am concerned by the ethical implications that arise from the popularity and acceptance of "victim" literatures in Canada and the generalized claim of the role of victim as an identification of "Canadian-ness." While this tendency toward a desire to identify with victims is, as LaCapra and others prove, not by any means a solely Canadian issue, the long-standing national stereotype of Canadians as innocuous, passive, and peacekeeping is interesting to consider with relation to Wieviorka's broadly applied "witnessing" era. Indeed, if we are all somehow witnesses in this current cultural condition, all victims even, where is accountability to be found? I will explore how responsibility is displaced in the overarching framework of a "victim culture" through Trinidadian-Canadian author Shani Mootoo's novel *Cereus Blooms at Night* (1996). This reading of Mootoo's novel analyzes the ways in which the novel mirrors many of the current problems in writing about trauma, including LaCapra's issue of boundless identification between academic, literary, and journalistic commentators and victims, and the sense of entitlement toward others' suffering that this relationship creates. However, the events and characters of Mootoo's novel not only provide an example of the ethical problems formed between witness and victim, but also push beyond this discussion of trauma theory to

look at the ways in which identification may also extend to the perpetrator within a culture that fetishizes the traumatic and the victimizing.

Cereus Blooms at Night is set on the fictional island of Lantanacamara, which, like Canada, is a nation with a lengthy history of colonization and influence from the "Shivering Northern Wetlands," a country that is portrayed by Mootoo as similar to Britain. Furthermore, like many examples of contemporary Canadian literature, *Cereus Blooms at Night* focuses heavily upon trauma and victimization. The representation of the role of victim in this novel is particularly problematic as it tells the life story of a sexually abused and speechless woman, Mala Ramchandin, through the voice of a third-party narrator who not only romanticizes the subject position of victim, but also further attempts to justify the violent actions of the perpetrator Chandin Ramchandin through histories of colonization and emasculation. This narrator, a queer-identified and socially isolated nurse named Tyler, encounters Mala after she has been sent to Paradise Alms House — the asylum where Tyler works — following her acquittal for the murder of her abuser, her father. Although highly traumatic experiences and decades of isolation have rendered Mala largely silent, Tyler pieces together the events of her life through town rumours, her ramblings, and his own imaginative reconstruction. The narrator, in his identification as victim, seeks to deconstruct social difference and to speak through other characters in the hope of normalizing his own marginalized subjectivity. As we learn quite early in the novel, Tyler has faced ostracism based on his sexual identity, from his early childhood experiences of familial rejection for "not being boyly enough" (Mootoo 26) to his present-day exclusion from the community of caretakers he works with at the Paradise Alms House. It is thus little wonder that Tyler, who has "known the gamut" of homophobic "subtleties and incremental degrees [of] . . . hostility" (15), should long for a community that would treat his queerness as "either invisible or of no consequence" (51), rather than the subject of disgust and discrimination. As Mootoo herself explains in an interview on the novel, much of the narrator's (as well as the author's) motive for telling the stories of others "is to appeal to the larger world for acceptance" of difference, regardless of norms and societal expectations (Mootoo, "Interview" 111).

Following from the novel's focus upon Tyler's desire for social inclusion, many scholars have taken up Tyler's expression of his own struggles

and interests in his telling of others' stories as a transgressive and queer-community-building action, as well as a means of working through traumatic memory. For example, in her essay "A Shared Queerness: Colonialism, Transnationalism, and Sexuality in Shani Mootoo's *Cereus Blooms at Night,*" Grace Kyungwon Hong suggests that Tyler's narrative network based upon "[other] characters' various estrangements" proliferates a "sense of community," a possibility for queer belonging, and a subversion of "racial and sexual hierarchy and differentiation" (95). Echoing these ideas, Vivian M. May suggests that Mootoo's novel demonstrates the ways in which "practices, histories, and desires usually conceptualized as different and separate intertwine" (109), linking not only various traumas but also ways of expressing them. May posits that Mootoo "draws lines of connection" between a multitude of victimizing experiences, which, in her interpretation, allows for an "openness" to develop among involvements with the "unspeakable" (129). These lines of thought are also found in Mariam Pirbhai's description of Tyler's storytelling as a disorientation of rigid identity and a "compassionate reconstruction" of a woman's life, shattered by abuse and oppression (85), and in L. Chris Fox's discussion of the Paradise Alms House as a "third space" of radical, indeterminate subjectivity as well as an evocation of Judith Butler's theories of "interactive human community" (76).

I agree with these authors' support of Tyler's active involvement in Mala's life story, particularly as they reflect many prevailing views on the ethics of human relationships and trauma recovery. Indeed, given Fox's use of Butler's "relationality" in *Bodies that Matter* (1993), it is worth noting that Butler further develops this term in *Giving an Account of Oneself* (2005), defining it as a recognition of the self as containing and being influenced by a polyphony of voices and stories, rather than adhering to the hegemonic authority of the individualistic "I" (74). The symbolic interactionist view that the self is made through its relationships and encounters with others (see George Herbert Mead, Charles Cooley, et al.) is similarly taken up by prominent thinkers such as Michel Foucault to explain the development of identity within a pre-existing field of social codes, norms of conduct, morals, and values. These views on the sociality of development and identity are situated in Butler's theories of self-knowledge and expression as well as her ethics of communication and human relationships. According to Butler, the part of the self that remains opaque — the unconscious — "occasions

[one's] capacity to confer a certain kind of recognition on others" (42). By forming an account, one is not only addressing another, or perhaps an entire audience, but also further attesting to an intrinsic link with others: the otherness *in one*, which makes up who one is through social interaction (Butler 84). Through this line of reasoning, to see the wounded other is to see the wounded self — a recognition that can become an ethical call to action.

Many scholars in the field of trauma theory, as well as social and clinical psychology, have also advocated for a unification, or synthesis, of traumatic experiences as a form of therapy and community building for victims. For example, Tyler's assemblage of Mala's biography could be construed as an attempt at "scriptotherapy," a term coined by psychoanalytic critic Suzette Henke to describe a therapeutic progression of recovery through a victim's engagement with her past by writing and making coherent her fragmented experience (Henke xv). The indoctrination of this approach in psychoanalysis, psychology, and later cultural theory and popular non-fiction has created something of a synonymy between narrative accounts in the aftermath of traumatic experience and survivor recovery. As Butler points out, it is part of a norm of mental health to give "a coherent account of oneself" (53), a demand that suggests that *incoherence*, an epitomizing quality of victims, is abnormal — and from a Freudian perspective, "hysterical" (Todd 5). In addition, literary critic Laurie Vickroy suggests that one victim's story may be filtered through "the lens" of another's "individual consciousness," developing a link of understanding between two victims, *regardless* of their different experiences (2-3). This position is similarly taken up by Kate Neiderhoffer and James Pennebaker in their article "Sharing One's Story" (2009): these psychologists, through experiments and studies involving the writing of negative and life-threatening experiences, contend that narrative used as a "scaffolding for persons to organize their thoughts and feelings surrounding [a] traumatic event" helps to further provide a *social* scaffolding for other victims to disclose, share, and connect (579). With respect to these varying viewpoints, Tyler's feeling of connection to others and his narrative bricolage of personal accounts in many ways follow therapeutic and poststructuralist discourses and ways of thinking. As most scholarship on *Cereus Blooms at Night* maintains, Tyler, as a victim of homophobia, shares an empathic connection with the traumatized Mala; through his hybridized form of storytelling and

identification, he is able to "reconstruct . . . identity in more open-ended and inclusive terms" (Pirbhai 179), making coherent traumatic pasts that might otherwise have remained incomprehensible and repressed.

While, as I have outlined, much supports these conceptions of Tyler's role as benevolent transcriber and relater of his patient's tragic history, a kind of violence also arises from manipulating unsettling and interrupted experience into the finality of narrative closure and assimilating a specific trauma into other experiences (Vickroy 12). Although the slipperiness that develops between characters has positive potential, as when the Alms House gardener develops an accepting relationship with Tyler because Tyler reminds him of his long-lost brother who was similarly "kind of funny" (79), this slipperiness also can affect characters' lives in unethical and unsettling ways. Retelling moments of his childhood exposure to concepts of queerness and sexual alterity, Tyler confesses a confusion between Chandin's abusive and incestuous "perversion and what others called [his]" (51). Through his narration of Mala's life story, Tyler questions his queer identity and its relation to other non-normative desires under a colonial structure that denounces any orientation outside of conventional heterosexuality (Hong 75), attesting to his own ostracism from a repressive homophobic society. This lack of differentiation between sexual violence, queerness, and "sexualized women" (Hong 75) in Lantanacamaran society is further evident in the way that the victims of child abuse, Mala and Asha, are viewed as similar to their rapist father. Perhaps one of the most appalling bystanders in this novel is the postman, who refuses to deliver the escaped Asha's letters to her sister Mala — letters that could have potentially helped Mala escape from their father — because he had deemed "the Ramchandin house to be a place of sin and corruption" (Mootoo 263). This misidentification (and its terrible consequences) represents a problematic underside to the indeterminate hybridization of traumatic experience and victimized identity in the novel. That Mootoo exposes these problematic elisions of difference between perpetrators and their victims is not being challenged here; it is rather the ways in which these moments of identificatory violence are repeated by Tyler's interweaving of varied traumatic experiences that must be interrogated.

Linking Mootoo's novel with wider discussion in trauma studies, the construct of narrative disclosure that has developed — that of the coherent, organized account as the victim's medium for reparation — has,

in its popularized formula, the potential to make traumatic experience accessible to the point of appropriation, and further to create a lack of moral space for accounts outside of victimization. In other words, what are the implications of imposing the same kind of accessible testimony upon all accounts that emerge from a scene of violence? How might the normalization of the victim's testimony in all manner of cultural media create a tenuous ethics for the establishment of difference — particularly in the case of those who have witnessed an act of violence or committed one? This is not to say that the focus on victims' accounts is in itself debatable, or that the popularity of victims' accounts in popular media does not have positive implications; indeed, many psychological and sociological studies — such as Neiderhoffer and Pennebaker's — have found benefit for survivors of trauma to record and share their experiences. However, it seems that without creating an ethical space for perpetrators to speak, there is also a risk that their accounts may mimic and identify with those of victims in similar efforts to "share one's story." Thus, another question arises: when the perpetrator enters this narrative space of healing and makes coherent his or her experience of perpetration, can the reader still distinguish such an account from that of the victim's? Moreover, should individual accounts be overlapped, identified with, and focused through a single lens in the hopes of resistance, acceptance, or recovery from trauma? What is sacrificed in this approach?

These issues form my own inquiry into the narrative structure of *Cereus Blooms at Night,* a novel that I will show becomes an example of — to borrow a term from Primo Levi — the "grey zone," a space characterized by a "breakdown of all the foundational categories and distinctions that have hitherto held sway" (Leys 158). While Hong reads *Cereus Blooms at Night* as a novel that "narrates a notion of community that does not promise limitless incorporation" in its perpetuation of estrangement between characters connected through forms of cultural queerness (97), I contend that the novel is actually a space where perpetrators identify as victims, victims as perpetrators, and all accountability becomes a blur. Tyler's piecing together of fragmented memories and utterances into coherent narrative problematically integrates an "unruly network" (Mootoo 5) of multiple accounts into a single overarching voice that equalizes traumatic experience — including, as I will later prove, that of the perpetrator — into a repetition of victimization. At

the outset of the novel, Tyler addresses us, his readers, and informs us that his intention,

> as relater of this story, is not to bring notice to myself or my plight. However, I cannot escape myself, and being a narrator who also existed on the periphery of events, I am bound to be present. I have my own laments and much to tell about myself. It is my intent, however, to refrain from inserting myself too forcefully. Forgive the lapses, for there are some, and read them with the understanding that to have erased them would have been to do the same to myself. (3)

In this introduction, Tyler describes himself as a relater of Mala's life story, implying a role of passive recording with little intrusion. Although Tyler is undeniably victimized by discrimination based on his queer identity, he also confesses a "temptation . . . to be the *romantic* victim" (Mootoo 16; emphasis added), drawing attention very early on in the novel to his aestheticized — and potentially self-serving — concept of victimhood. If Tyler can be seen as something of an archivist or historian in his self-proclaimed responsibility for "setting [Mala's] story down" (3), it would seem that in his inability to extricate himself, his perceived connection with the lives he records move beyond mere empathic understanding into a unifying voice of narcissistic identification. This lack of differentiation is frequently noticeable in Tyler's speech, often expressing emotions and experiences in a collective *we* (21, 52, 267). Another example of Tyler's identification with Mala is in a curious scene in which he notes that he had to leave Mala's care because he was hungry to the point of dizziness; when Mala shows distress at his movement, he claims that he "had no choice" but to leave her because "*she* had to eat" (14; emphasis added). This strange slippage of pronouns is perhaps suggestive of a conflation of character, and it raises the question of whose account is really being revealed in this novel. These moments are thus illustrative of Tyler's step *outside* the peripheral and into the integral: through his strong wish to become recognized, respected, and above all to obtain "a feeling of ordinariness" (78), Tyler's initial role as mere relater becomes discredited in his handling of the accounts of others.

Returning to LaCapra's uneasiness regarding our current cultural interest in and sense of entitlement toward victim's experiences, I also critique the poststructuralist approach to historiography — radical constructivism — which contrasts historical facts and empiricism with

performance, interpretation, aesthetics, and narrative plot (LaCapra, *Writing History* 1). LaCapra expresses caution toward this historical methodology as it potentially results in the rather serious problem of excessive identification and ignorance of difference, and the rendering of human experience "sublime" or aesthetically appreciable. In his more recent *History and its Limits* (2009), he uses the example of the 1985 film *Shoah* by Claude Lanzmann, arguing that Lanzmann created his Holocaust documentary as an artistic piece rather than a representation of the real horrors his subjects had lived through. While recognizing the inexpressibility of trauma "as it happened" and the elements of creativity in any documentary, LaCapra suggests that this aestheticization of victimhood allowed Lanzmann to establish a "vicarious relation" and "projective identification" with the lives of the Holocaust victims he interviewed, as if their trauma was his own "lost object" (72) — not unlike Tyler's own romanticizing methods of "relating" life stories. To completely align oneself with another's account of suffering, as Tyler does, is to create a "fetishized and totalizing narrativ[e]" that denies the trauma "that called [the narrative] into existence," and unethically manipulates the past to develop "self-serving scenarios" (*Writing History* 78). Tyler continually works to persuade the reader of his intentions of remaining outside of the text; however, his role in *Cereus Blooms at Night* is far more active. In fact, he himself equates his actions with the constructive work of tailors. As the novel progresses, Tyler admits to "sifting, cutting, and sewing" what he *perceives* as Mala's dictation to him, "fashioning a *single* garment out of myriad parts" (113; emphasis added). In the act of "sifting" and "cutting," Tyler has clearly felt the need to withhold and alter certain aspects of his confidant's experience in order to make his text an aesthetically pleasing "garment." Admittedly, self-narrative is, to some extent, an act of tailoring as well, even when an individual gives an account of him or herself *without* being spoken through by another, for "the moment when we narrate we become . . . fiction writers" (Butler 78). The objective truth of any account is evidently a difficult subject, but this aspect of the narrative is made more problematic by Tyler's intentional "cutting" and autobiographical insertions into a story that is not his own. Moreover, Tyler's use of words that invoke the handling and incision of Mala's experience of abuse as if it were fabric eerily echoes the description of the abuse itself, which is frequently referred to by Tyler as the "ripping" or tearing of her body

(71, 188). That the violation of Mala's body is interpreted through a discourse similar to the patchwork process that her traumatic experience undergoes in the hands of Tyler reflects the degree to which the narrative voice in *Cereus Blooms at Night* is problematic, monologic, and ultimately appropriating.

Tyler's active manipulation of Mala's memories and the gossip of townspeople into a "single garment" also reflects the potential problems inherent within the contemporary imperative of making traumatic memory coherent — namely, the imposition of "uplifting closure" (LaCapra, *Writing History* 41) and "a falsification of [a] life in order to satisfy the criterion of a certain kind of ethics" or "cause" beyond that of the individual experience itself (63). Literary critics such as Vivian May inadvertently endorse this by praising the "relatability" of all traumatic histories in *Cereus Blooms at Night*, from "rape and incest" to "colonialist language[,] . . . arrogant scientific values[,] . . . Christian theological and religious practices and internalized racism and shame" (109). In this mode of thought, it would seem that the plight of the other is merely a lens or a voice to speak through. Tyler's view of similarities and understandings between his own "laments" and Mala's present the "problem of how to address traumatic events involving victims, including the *problem of composing narratives that neither confuse one's own voice or position with the victim's nor seek facile uplift*" (LaCapra 78; emphasis added). While Tyler's "empathic unsettlement" (LaCapra 79) in the telling of Mala's story reveals a necessary sensitivity to her suffering, his own objective of speaking through Mala's trauma (as well as the experiences of others) to obtain a sense of normality, and his desire to be not only accepted but also further lauded for his self-appointed "great understanding and magnanimity" (Mootoo 18), are morally questionable. Furthermore, that Tyler attempts to gain attention through careful hints into his own desire to be the "romantic victim" (16) suggests a fetishization of trauma that may well occlude Tyler's ability to recount Mala's experience reliably. Similar in ways to Claude Lanzmann's appearance in *Shoah* as "a martyrlike, stigmata-bearing figure" (*History and its Limits* 71), Tyler's identification with Mala, and with victimization more generally in an effort to be recognized — even lionized— and to establish a sense of "ordinariness" among other queer or marginalized identities, not only dissembles differences between his experience of sexual discrimination and Mala's own physical, sexual,

and psychological torment, but also, in his act of "sewing," further synthesizes accounts of non-victims.

Leigh A. Payne, in her book *Unsettling Accounts,* outlines the problem of perpetrators evoking a history of being wronged or abused themselves and then attesting to a "grey zone" of "role reversal" and identification with victims in their accounts (18). The obfuscation of responsibility through expressions of personal incidents of victimization or unknowing in perpetrator accounts is further explored by psychologists Linda Coates and Allen Wade in their article "Language and Violence." They analyze an account of a man who abused his wife, finding that the perpetrator's language is rich with vague descriptions that void any sense of agency, evoking helplessness or misunderstanding as well as victim provocation (515). A similar use of language can be found throughout descriptions of Chandin's abuse of his daughter in *Cereus Blooms at Night*, as the rape is frequently referred to as a "mistaking" of the daughter for the now-absent mother (Mootoo 70, 117), who left Chandin for a white woman he also desired (211). This ethical issue of perpetrator/victim conflation is evident as well in the recent investigation of what has been termed Perpetrator Induced Traumatic Stress, or PITS, which suggests that perpetrators often experience symptoms that could also "result from situations that would be traumatic if someone were a victim" (MacNair 7). However, evidence of a similar psychological response to stress in both perpetrators and victims does not "entail the equation or identification of the perpetrator and the victim" (LaCapra 79). Yet the fact that the post-traumatic accounts of perpetrators have a tendency to mirror or identify with victims' accounts and experiences — and likewise the use in psychological discourse of the post-traumatic stress of victims to define perpetrator-induced trauma — suggests a lack, or elision, of an ethical space for accounts of perpetrators and also for discussions of different and unequal forms of trauma, stress, suffering, and so on. The vast experience that has been condensed into this one term, while recognizing the variation of exposure to traumatic situations and individual response, is perhaps also troublesome in its levelling singularity. As noted above, to say one "suffers from trauma" could mean that one is *either* a victim *or* a perpetrator, or even someone who witnessed an event or listened to a recount of one. A blanket term such as PITS may, as LaCapra warns of identification more generally, create a normalizing removal of any limits that establish difference. This

important problem of distinguishing trauma and extricating unique accounts is intrinsic to Mootoo's novel, a work that reflects the potential for victim identification and the bringing together of various life stories to result in hegemonic monologue.

In Tyler's imposition of an overarching framework of victimhood in his narration, all accounts gathered into this pre-ordained novelistic space become problematically unified. Perhaps, just as narrativizing trauma functions, in part, to assimilate fragmented memory into a coherent story-like whole, Tyler's own narrative tailoring works to stitch disparate identities together with his own, attempting to claim a kind of normativity of alterity within a society that condemns difference as social deviance. Therefore, despite Tyler's apparent goal of pointing to the oppressive forces against social difference that function in his community, his narrative structure perpetuates these malevolent influences that label all sexual difference and subjugated identity as deviant by further collapsing distinctions between the accounts of other characters and his own. Tyler's desire to "play the "romantic victim" (Mootoo 16) and his identification with what he sees as his and Mala's common peripheral experience in society also extends to more controversial characters in the novel; while Chandin Ramchandin is undeniably a perpetrator in *Cereus Blooms*, he is portrayed as an abuser only when Tyler aligns himself with Mala. Moreover, it is not even Chandin himself as the perpetrator who attempts to obscure responsibility through claims that he had "mistaken" his daughter for his wife, but *Tyler* who mitigates responsibility and dictates any forms of absolution through his narration. The only actual account the reader receives from Chandin — or rather through Tyler's interpretation of Chandin's story, as the two have not actually met — is one of colonial oppression and the violence of racial discrimination, furthering the formulaic pattern of representing marginality and lack of agency under Tyler's dominating intention to make difference same.

In the earlier half of the novel, Tyler provides a historical account of Chandin's upbringing. He tells how Chandin was selected at an early age to become "a prop to help the Shivering Northern Wetlands mission school and church to succeed," as, later, through his adoption into a white Reverend's family, he would become "useful for the ministry on Lantanacamara because he's a model convert of colour" (May 112). Chandin's life with a wealthy white family produces in him a disdain

for his "background and the people in it" (Mootoo 34), and "in his innocence," Chandin believes that it is only a "result of apathy and a poverty of ambition" (33) that other Lantanacamarans do not have similar affluence. Thus, in his conversion, Chandin becomes "embarrassed by his parent[s]" (32) and distances himself as much as possible from his former life. When Chandin desires Lavinia, a white woman who is also his adopted sister, he is denied her because, as he is told, the pair are brother and sister, despite a difference of lineage (39); this caveat becomes confounded and revealed for its racist actuality when Lavinia becomes engaged to another *white* family member (48). Chandin is, therefore, a clear example of a Homi Bhabha's theory of "not quite/not white," as he is a "part-object" of colonial discourse (131). In his inability to access the full privileges and acceptance of whiteness, Chandin comes to experience feelings of "anger and self-loathing," sparked by a "hatred for his looks, the colour of his skin, the texture of his hair, his accent" (Mootoo 36). In his ensuing identity crisis, Chandin comes to fully comprehend the betrayal of a system he once believed in, and the actuality of his position outside of a social sphere he wants to belong to. It is this exclusion from the white/dominant class that Tyler identifies with and views through his own personal experiences of discrimination and the prohibition of his desires (76), which are revealed through various interruptions in Chandin's account — interruptions that, it is worth noting, have no integral position in the narrative flow other than to establish a connection or similarity between Chandin's "plight" (3) and Tyler's own.

The first of these tangential passages occurs at the beginning of Tyler's account of Chandin's history: after we learn that Chandin was to be "the first Indian child in Lantanacamara to get a title," we learn that Tyler himself hoped "to go abroad to study" (31). Some pages later, Tyler suggests a deeper tie to this character through (once again) a "shared queerness," or "perversion" (51). Perhaps this feeling of commonality is why Tyler holds back from an account of Chandin's perpetration, as this may instigate further condemnation of non-normative sexuality — a category, more generally, that Tyler feels includes himself and Chandin. Thus, the justification of Chandin's sexual "perversion" is perhaps a veiled legitimization of his own queer identification and ambitions of establishing normalcy and acceptance, a desire that is, of course, in and of itself, not being questioned here. However, what becomes

morally questionable in this novel is Tyler's unlimited identification, appropriation, and manipulation of accounts of others for the creation of "self- serving scenarios" (LaCapra 78) — in Tyler's case, a means of establishing both personal heroism and perhaps even the obtainment of a kind of sublimity in claiming the role of "romantic victim." This is not to nullify the abuses that Tyler — or Chandin — have endured, as it is not my intention to establish a valuation or scale of importance with relation to victimhood. Yet, in claiming notoriety from a creatively manipulated telling of Mala's traumatic history, Tyler fails to acknowledge the ways in which he has elided and even bolstered his own privilege through the lived experiences of his patient. Indeed, that two people may share a queer *or* victimized identity does not make the ever-shifting assemblage of memories, relationships, social contexts, and personal attributes that is a life story equitable, or openly accessible, as identity itself can rarely be defined as a static ontological property that falls on one side of a marginalized/normalized binary. As Ambreen Hai astutely points out, those that "experience discrimination or injustice" may also "hold certain forms of privilege" in other contexts or aspects of their identity (161). Moreover, she explains that this complexity of "privilege may lead to blindness, where the privileged cannot see the benefits that their privilege brings them (being male, white, etc.)" (162). Thus, while Tyler's feelings of being outcast from society based on his queer sexuality in many ways opens a path of empathy to Mala's own sexual traumas and social exclusion, Tyler's differences in class, education, gender, and his relationship to physical and sexual violence indicate important differences between the two characters that must be respected. Further, still, the development of a levelling interchangeability of all victimizing experience may forge some deeply unethical connections. For instance, that the accounts of both victim and perpetrator exist together in Tyler's narration as descriptions of victimization under the same monologic and appropriating voice is surely more than a troubling error of narrative choice — it is an act of violence.

In *From Guilt to Shame,* Ruth Leys discusses and critiques the perspective of philosophers such as Giorgio Agamben who claim that people who have never known a specific experience can nonetheless "contagiously" inherit the memories of those who have (164); Leys describes this tendency as an act of "collaps[ing] history into memory" for the purpose of finding "the key to *one's own* identity." This

"redescription" of the past as a "source of identitarian sustenance" is parallel to Tyler's narrative tactic of veritably re-imagining the experiences of others "as the fabric of [his] own actual experience" (164). As mentioned, in a self-reflexive passage, Tyler openly admits to "fashioning a single garment" out of the "myriad parts" of Mala and others' lives, creating a textual weave that he can "wear" or inhabit as his own. Tragically, in this collapsing of history into a more pliable and self-serving memory, Mala's account is also compressed and interwoven into the account of her tormentor. In the removal of boundaries of individual difference through Tyler's narrative "fashioning," Mala is relegated to Agamben's interpretation of the grey zone as a "zone of irresponsibility," in which she begins to mimetically adopt the position of her oppressor. In Tyler's account of the final scene of Mala's youth, after her lover Ambrose's abandonment and the murder of her father, Mala fell "to the ground" and with a "bizarre familiarity . . . [s]he remembered her father clutching at that same banister, and felt herself lying on the verandah in that same position. Long ago. Today" (247). In this moment, Mala is captured in both an actual and textual space, the identical one where her father similarly mourned the loss of his lover in a moment demarcating his turn to "insanity" and role as sexual abuser. Thus, Mala finds herself at an intersection between victimization and perpetration, not only in the memory of her father's loss but also in the very fact that she adopts her embodied mimesis after the violent act of killing him. After recognizing this terrifying familiarity, Mala "jumped up and ran into her room and dragged a dresser, an arm chair and a stool into the centre of the drawing room. She went into her father's room and did the same with his furniture … *she worked until she had created an admirable wall that was almost impenetrable*" (249; emphasis added). Mala's building of walls is repeated throughout the novel (83, 106) and is perhaps symbolic of a need to create divisions and to find safety in establishing difference between herself and her perpetrator. Regrettably, these walls are perpetually taken down in Tyler's desire to conversely deconstruct boundaries and exceed limits, and it is perhaps this interplay between difference and deconstruction in the novel that effectively situates LaCapra's criticism of writing trauma within a post-colonial and gendered context. Moreover, Mootoo's novel furthers the ethical issues and impasses that arise from accounts and accounting for perpetrators and victims currently.

And so, what at first appears to be an effort to work through and represent various forms of trauma that have arisen from colonial, discriminatory, and sexual forms of violence is unveiled through a closer reading as an appropriation and manipulation of the experiences of others for the validation of *one* character, Tyler. In his desperation to become accepted as an "ordinary" member of the community, Tyler, through an omniscient narrative voice, dissembles the difference between himself and others in the effort to engender a feeling of normality, as well as to be further recognized as inhabiting the aestheticized role of victim at the unethical expense of others. It is perhaps, then, unsurprising that Tyler benefits most from his retelling of Mala's story, for the novel concludes with the budding romantic relationship between Tyler and the son of Mala's past lover, Otoh, whom he has met through the unravelling of her past. Although Tyler describes Mala as experiencing joy and a general feeling of well-being in the final pages — here she is being visited by the Ambrose who had abandoned her all those years ago — it is difficult to discern the reliability of Tyler's interpretation of Mala's emotions, given his previous inability to differentiate his own feelings and ambitions from those of his charge. While it is perhaps a culturally sanctioned desire to see the unknowable and incomprehensible made legible, to have open ends closed, and difficulties and complications neatly resolved — particularly in a so-called political age of reconciliation — the multiple indications of Tyler's indiscretion and keen self-interest that Mootoo gives us throughout the novel suggest that we must bring ourselves to a critical distance from the "uplifting closure" (LaCapra, *Writing History* 41) that Tyler has tried to impose. This becomes strongly apparent within the last paragraph of the novel, in which Tyler admits that his excitement for his impending sexual encounter with Otoh "is diminished only by the fact that there is still no word from Asha Ramchandin" (269) — an acknowledgment that Tyler may not fulfill what Mala truly longs for, to be reunited with her sister (270). By ending the novel with the continued loss of Asha — the only other person who may have truly shared Mala's experiences — Mootoo reminds us that Tyler's declaration of community acceptance must not come at the cost of appropriating the experiences of others.

Mootoo's novel *Cereus Blooms at Night* shows us that the philosophical and psychotheoretical trend of equating the subject with an inherent victimization or lack of agency and furthering the popularization of vic-

tims' accounts in general not only creates a problematic space where all experience can be accessed indiscriminately, as in the case of Agamben and Caruth, but can also further elide perpetrator responsibility for harmful actions. Thus, if we are all victims, where can accountability be found? If victimization is inherent, or perhaps part of a national identity (such as Canada) or cultural ethos (such as Wieviorka's "era of the witness"), how can individual experiences of abuse, suffering, and discrimination ever be rectified or even recognized? The novel *Cereus Blooms at Night* illuminates these weighty issues that strain the fabric of the field of "trauma studies," as well as social and political life more generally, invoking a need for a greater awareness of *what* story one may call one's own and what limits must be respected in the engagement of an ethical relationality — whether as writers, critics of literature, culture, and politics, or members of local and globalized communities. While recent criticism and contemporary literature have provided important and norm-challenging vantage points from which we may view identity and psychosocial experience, critiquing the authority of individualism and encouraging fluidity, hybridization, and indeterminacy, not all ontological or socio-historical thresholds can ethically be crossed. Perhaps the onslaught of critiques by theorists such as Dominick LaCapra, Ruth Leys, and Leigh A. Payne on identification, inherited trauma, and boundless attributions of victimization in recent years, as well as my own analysis of *Cereus Blooms at Night*, suggest an imminent need for the remapping of ethics in a cultural ethos of "witnessing." As LaCapra suggests in *Writing Trauma*, in our poststructuralist zeal, we have potentially exceeded some important limits, and thus part of the necessary re-engagement with the delicate relationships between perpetrators, victims, bystanders, and witnesses must involve a certain reconstruction of boundaries, as Mala exemplifies in the obsessive rebuilding of borders between herself and her father.

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