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Response to Kutzinski - 2

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Response

Michelle M. Wright

In her essay “Improprieties: Feminism, Queerness and Caribbean Literature,” Dr. Kutzinski argues that the silencing, rejection, and erasure of homoeroticism in Caribbean texts is one of the key thresholds we in minority studies have yet to cross. As Kutzinski puts it, “What spells ideological safety, to today’s feminist scholars of Caribbean extraction, is heteronormativity, whose representations they happily pursue and locate in the fiction and poetry of those writers whose texts are most regularly called upon to deliver authoritative accounts of the socio-cultural experiences of Caribbean women.” Through her incisive reading of Shani Mootoo’s much-neglected novel *Cereus Blooms at Night*, Kutzinski shows us how juxtapositions of gender, sex, performativity, and the politics of mimicry speak less to the erotic ground so many critics across disciplines fear to tread, and much more to the broader implications of identity, language, and belonging that make up the bulk of contemporary literary inquiries.

The oppressive heteronormativity that Kutzinski critiques within Caribbean literary discourse is hardly unique to that field, and, I would argue, has very little to do with the hermeneutical concerns that attend literary production and analysis—*pace* Gadamer and Heidegger—and much more to do with the inscription and proscription of subjectivity and national belonging in both dominant and minority discourse. By this I mean that, as a controlling metaphor for the narration of nation and citizenship, heteronormativity is what links much of minority nationalist thought to dominant discourse, where women and other deviants are marginalized or erased in the same breath that demands human suffrage for *all men*.

Sexuality has everything to do with the nation, and within Western discussion of sexual norms, the assumption of what are considered “national morals”—and thus national ordering—are explicitly paired together. Those who would laugh at such a suggestion further demonstrate the deeply entrenched belief that women, queers, and racial minorities are *Other* to the nation, and the heterosexual white male remains the only one who can represent the nation because he *is* the nation. Women are the homeland, that apolitical passive space, existing to raise and serve the male citizenry. Blacks, of course, are the outsiders who, despite whatever claim historians might want to make,

simply do not belong “here.” As George Mosse argues in *Nationalism and Sexuality*, the construction of the bourgeois male as the citizen and the attendant construction of his family are always already framed within the heteronormativity that reifies both sexual and racial dominance, explaining quite clearly who is fit to lead the nation and who must remain in the shadows.¹ Or, as Benedict Anderson memorably notes in *Imagined Communities*, a nation is shaped by that which it opposes.²

Western discourses on nationalism have changed very little in the past 250 years—in other words, since the Enlightenment. This fact is all the more shocking when one considers the amount of newsprint we have dedicated in the past hundred years to seismic shifts in the composition of Western nations since the slave trade: colonialism; two world wars; Asian, South American, African, and European immigration; gains in women’s rights; and the rise of multinational conglomerates who speak so boldly of a new world order. Despite the overwhelming evidence to the contrary, our discourse and rhetoric on the nation still assumes whiteness, maleness, and ownership of property to be the representation norm for the Western subject, linking all of those assumptions together through heteronormativity.

Black fiction in the West has always been a site for the most complex negotiations, perhaps best simplified by—but not wholly limited to—the role that the black plays as *Other* to the (white) Western subject: a tableau for the projection of white fears and white crimes and desires, the targeted “enemy” whose destruction ensures the end to all evils, the intractable interloper whose sole desire is to destroy the nation, rape the women and seduce the men. And, of course, blackness is the opposition through which whiteness can come into being and the fiction of the nation maintained. From the narratives of Prince Hall, Olaudah Equiano, Ignatius Sancho, and Mary Seacole through *Négritude* and Black Arts up to the novels of our newest generation of writers such as Caryl Phillips, Andrea Levy, Victor Headley, Zadie Smith, Danzy Senna, and Edwidge Danticat, the proscribed, prescribed, and inscribed meanings of “blackness” *vis à vis* Western fictions on the nation and the subject have been analyzed on a level of complexity easily rivaling any white Western philosopher. Yet, because they are female and/or black, and not writing within the easily identifiable discourse of philosophy, few outside the academy recognize in them the philosophies of subjectivity and national belonging. As Vera Kutzinski shows us, Shani Mootoo is also writing a certain philosophy.

In seeking to disabuse the West of this illusion as well as its deployment of racial hierarchies, black male thinkers such as W.E.B. Du Bois, Aimé Césaire, and Frantz Fanon all provided alternative models and strategies to counteract those proposed by the likes of G.W.F. Hegel, Thomas Jefferson, and Count de Gobineau (also known as the Father of Modern Racism). Despite their brilliant and canny critiques of Western nationalism, Du Bois, Césaire, and Fanon all based their counter-discourses on the heterosexual rhetoric of the nation, in which white women signified the Western nation, white men the citizens/owners of those nations, and black men the interlopers. Black women, of course, did not merit much consideration on either side of the fence. With the advent of black nationalism—and internationalism—in the 1960s and 1970s, this erasure—and as Phil Harper has pointed out in *Are We Not Men?*, the rather ugly championing of heterosexuality as the only acceptable norm—compromises the otherwise extraordinary work of many activists and scholars, such as Amiri Baraka, Mensah Sarbah, Frantz Fanon, and Walter Rodney.³ As Awa Thiam writes in *African Intellectual Heritage*, “...the common condition [of all women] is one of exploitation and oppression by the same phallocratic system, whether it be Black, White or Yellow. Everyone behaves as if women had no human sensitivities.”⁴

The illusion of heteronormativity engenders a whole range of oppressive assumptions within nationalist discourse, encouraging states and citizens alike to view women as, at best, precious commodities, and, at worst, expendable pieces of property from whom a profit can be squeezed. As Valentine Moghadam argues, in this era of the “unified world market,” it is women who make up the majority of exploited labor, be it through prostitution or piece work, and it is women who bear the brunt of the violence that erupts when communities are impoverished or otherwise destroyed.⁵ Very clearly, the link between heterosexist rhetoric on nationality and the devaluation of women and sexual minorities is far from coincidental. So what are the alternatives?

In her reading of *Cereus Blooms at Night*, Kutzinski looks quite closely at how the almost utopian representation of sexual deviation is belied by a narrative punctuated with thick descriptions of rape, humiliation, bondage, and cruelty—the latter all committed in the name of hetero-

normativity. Framing these movements between subversion and the reification of dominant norms is our narrator Nurse Tyler, whose potential omnipotence with regard to the narrative is immediately compromised by his social—and therefore, quite cleverly constructed by Mootoo, his textual abjection. This narrative “betrays” nationalist discourse on many levels through its deconstruction of heterosexual *and* homosexual norms, laying waste to the Western illusion that any and all sexualities can and should be categorized, and that there is a clear dividing line between straight and queer, homo and hetero. The ugly truth is that the desire to categorize is part of the desire to consume, to package the treat as object and consume it as subject. We are, after all, loathe to eat something that cannot be categorized. We will reject that thing that is neither fish nor fowl. Neither Nurse Tyler nor his paramour Otoh is easily categorized by any of the terms Western queer theory is so careful to record for any and all “transgressive” sexualities. What Tyler and Otoh produce is a sexuality that is neither transgressive nor normative; it cannot be categorized and therefore it cannot be consumed or, really, championed by either side of the sexual divide.

This comes at a price. Kutzinski discusses the very material ramifications of writing and publishing outside of sexual, national, and linguistic norms, pointing to how some authors, such as Mootoo herself, are ignored and either loudly or quietly proscribed from further consideration. The marginal status of *Cereus* with regard to the minority canon resonates within the text itself, as Nurse Tyler addresses the text to readers she admits to being unaware of—and almost willingly vulnerable to—even as she elicits their help in tracking down the sister of his patient, who is somewhere out there in the Black Atlantic.

In her famous essay “Eating the Other,” bell hooks argues that black bodies, especially those of black women, have become fetishized by white readers who, under the guise of educating themselves about other peoples, read and listen not to learn but to simply consume, refusing to grant those bodies autonomy and endlessly reifying their perceived status as commodities.⁶ In her equally celebrated essay, “The Occult of True Black Womanhood,” written just a few years later, Ann du Cille provides depressing evidence of the ways in which minority texts are relegated to the margins through critical readings that re-center the discussion so that the author of the reading displaces the text. This renders the act of analysis little more than a quick meal at an ethnic restaurant, at the end of which, all the old “norms”—white, male,

middle class, and heterosexual—are returned to their “proper place.” At the time, du Cille concluded her essay with a polemic against any and all non-black and non-female readers of black women’s texts, opining that only black women are capable of analyzing black women’s texts without oppressing them.

While this ultimately essentialist conclusion — that completely ignores, one might add, class and national privilege — serves many purposes, including shocking readers out of their lethargy and drawing attention to the very real problems the essay outlines, there are, in fact, more useful alternatives to this racial bulimia, “bingeing” on the narrative as a reader and then purging through analysis. If minority texts are the goods that non-minority readers are so eager to eat, why not “tamper with the goods” — that is, render the text inedible by deconstructing categories?

Kutzinski’s choice of novels becomes increasingly telling as we begin to apply her reading of transgressive gender and sexual identities to the problems of representation, commodification, and nationalism. Superficially, the text is quite edible: the cover rife with lush flowers; the title rife with life in full flourish; the text rife with sweet, thick, warm descriptions of plant and animal life. Not too far beneath the text, however, are the inedible consequences of this hypervegetation. *Cereus*, as we learn, is a plant whose smell conflates the line between ripe and rotting, and the sexual activity in this novel, at first so easily organized — cross-dressers in exotic lands — is necessarily deferred except for the rotten and endless rape of a little girl by her brutally disappointed father.

As Kutzinski points out, the assumed essentialism of heteronormativity (against which steamy potboilers juxtapose their perverted characters) is present only in the reader’s mind, as he or she attempts to orient him or herself in it — and so the text falls away upon contact. Here the controlling natures of essentialisms are revealed as illusions that remain cogent only from a distance. “Improprieties” reveals the power of this structure through a reading of the performative. In one of the novel’s many climaxes, Nurse Tyler adorns himself in a most cherished item, a female nurse’s outfit, and prepares to celebrate the transformation with Mala, his charge who stole the dress for him. However, as Kutzinski notes, Mala’s reaction is no more than a glance and a return to her work of building a tower of furniture. Kutzinski explains that, “In refusing the role of audience, Mala declines to distance herself from Tyler, either to applaud his performance as a suc-

cessful construction of a convincing identity or to scorn it." In like kind, we, as reader/audience, are barred from consuming this spectacle, for the text reframes it as no spectacle at all.

Through her essay, Kutzinski tracks not only the deconstruction of frames, but also the moments of deferral and "de-centering" that also impede our ability to simply consume this novel or enjoy its exotic thrill. Mootoo very deliberately plays with us, leads us up to the plate and silverware, not only by punctuating the text with lush referrals to vegetation (I suppose if we are to eat, the meal will be vegetarian) but also by naming her locus after a flower. At the same time, if we have decided to consume, exactly *what* we are consuming remains obscured, for the vegetation takes on a life—and a stench—of its own. There are no objects in this narrative, we learn, only subjects whether fish or fowl, animal, vegetable, or mineral, and they are all, to some degree or another, "queer," subverting our expectations with very little effort. Indeed, it is our efforts at "normalization" that come into relief, and our nervousness increases. We begin to wonder if it is not those efforts and expectations that we are in fact chewing on. How queer of us.

When we read the heterosexual paradigms of nationalist discourse more closely, some queer things begin to emerge. For example, lesbianism, constructed simply as women turning away from men and to each other, must be at best ignored, and at worst erased, to maintain the myth of all women as patriotic mothers. Homosexuality between men, however, is less easily rejected because of the obvious homoerotic nature of nationalist discourse in which men, using the excuse of protecting their women, face one another to square off. In other words, while men must concern themselves with one another, a woman must always be present to mediate. This bizarre and yet logical arrangement helps to explain why Mootoo, in offering a panoply of deviations, does not provide a coupling between two men — well, not as we might expect it.

This is what is on the plate: a young man of color — perhaps of South Asian descent, perhaps of African descent, perhaps somewhere between the two, as Kutzinski carefully observes — falls in love with the daughter of his adopted white parents/missionaries. His adopted parents use the excuse of the semi-legal adoption to prevent Chandin moving from adopted son to son-in-law, a rather poignant summing

up of the intended relationship that the colonizer bears the colonized: the colonized male is encouraged to imitate but not initiate, to surrender his agency to the will of the colonizer.

Chandin Ramchandin, however, is not the domesticated exotic that the Thoroughlys pretend him to be, for he still does possess agency, and thus still desires Lavinia—which, in nationalist discourse, is the only way that the colonized (always already male) can understand how to realize his agency, as both Negritudist and black nationalist discourse has borne out. But, Mootoo reminds us, nationalist discourse is a fiction, and in buying into it—even as one opposed to it—Chandin realizes too late that his rival for Lavinia's heart is not a white male, but a woman of color, the woman, in fact, that he marries in an attempt to maintain his standing in the colonial environment without forfeiting his true desire for Lavinia.

What results is the premise of this whole novel, and whether it is more tragic or triumphant is for the reader and the future to decide. Lavinia returns to claim Sarah—but complicit with what we may want to term lesbian self-actualization is Lavinia's role as a colonizer, her inability to think of Chandin as anything but *Other*, as someone who might have a legitimate claim on what she desires. This assumption is what leads Lavinia and Sarah to abandon Sarah and Chandin's two little girls to the latter who, once again thwarted by those who insisted he was a beloved family member, is beside himself in rage as well as the attendant humiliations such an act incurs. Mootoo does not allow us to bask in the triumph of this lesbian escapade; instead, she leaves us in its wake with its attendant ramifications. She shows us that, like her missionary parents, Lavinia may be transgressive, but she nonetheless operates within colonialist paradigms, and that is what allows her to escape with her lover to the home of the colonizer, *her* home, leaving only the lasting photographic image of herself wrapping Sarah in her arms, underscoring her claim to her lover/colonial property. The only thing achieved, the reader suspects, is that Lavinia has had her desires satisfied while those colonized must pay the price.

The two little girls are claimed by Chandin as his property—this is the only outlet nationalist discourse truly allows—leading to years of sexual and psychological abuse until one of them escapes into the diaspora. Again, we have abandonment, for this seems to be the only way to escape nationalist discourse. But, as Mootoo reminds us in passages searing with burning, open wounds, to escape is not the same as

destroying. Those left behind must pay the price because, although an illusion, nationalist discourse is an illusion that many believe in.

As we come toward the end of the novel, we return to the implications of our narrator, who has let us know that romance may indeed be brewing for him, and not with a stereotypical gay male, for Mootoo is too canny to mistake the homoerotic of nationalism for the homosexual. After all, the homosexual is often little more than the equally restraining antithesis within the dialectic of nationalist heteronormativity, explaining not only *who* you must be but *how* you must be in order to be acknowledged. Nurse Tyler's paramour is biologically female, but a female who boldly transgresses gender lines to extort agency from both positions, an inversion of Tyler's sense that his transgressions do little more than underscore his perfect lack of agency.

As Rachel Blau Duplessis famously noted in *Writing Beyond the Ending*, the trope of marriage is often used to reassert the heteronormativity of nationalist discourse and belonging at the end of a work of fiction.⁸ Whether gay or straight, marriage recuperates the need to order all human beings into units of production where they will continue to serve the state and preserve the same hierarchy of relations on a "micro" level that the state reifies on a "macro" level. Unsurprisingly, *Cereus Blooms at Night* does not end with state or socially sanctioned pairings. Instead, we are left with visits, hopes, and innuendoes. Although Nurse Tyler and Otoh are in love, and although Miss Ramchandin, alias Mala, alias Pohpoh, is reunited with her childhood love Ambrose, they nonetheless still exist in a world that limits not only their agency within that space, but their capacity to even imagine ways of fully realizing their desires. At no point does the novel provide us with the gratification of a steamy, transgressive sex scene either between Ambrose and Miss Ramchandin or between Otoh and Nurse Tyler. They are not heroes but survivors, taking what they can get in so punishing a space—and all they can really get is a few visits a week from those who they love but who are equally helpless in doing anything other than returning that desire, and waiting for they know not what. As people who themselves know the pain and terror of abandonment, leaving provides little solution if one feels responsible for more than one's sexual desires.

So, instead of a closing narrative of escape, we are given a closing narrative imploring people to return. This is a beautiful and moving call to unity, one that reminds us that although nationalist norms are always being subverted, both willingly and inadvertently, those who

do so are those abandoned, and they are those whom we must reclaim. In his article “Nationalism, Gender and Narrative,” R. Radkrishnan writes this:

The project that the subaltern historian is in is the production of a subaltern critique of nationalism: a critique both to liberate those many spaces foreclosed within nationalism and to enable a nonreactive, nonparanoid mode of subjectivity and agency in touch with its own historically constituted inferiority: a prey neither to the difference of the Western subject nor to the mystique of its own indigenous identity.⁹

Cereus Blooms at Night makes clear that return holds the potential to recuperate histories fast becoming lost, and that return holds the potential to reframe the positionality of those left behind. If nothing else, Mootoo reminds us that dialectical structures, such as the construction of the nation, feed off of opposition: like colonizing readers, it likes to eat the other. In other words, solutions to nationalism’s oppressive power are not to be found in counter-nationalism, whether it is black, South Asian, or anything else. The solution is not in opposition, but in recuperation, repair, return—in other words, in validating those whom nationalism is eager to construct as marginal, perverted, deviant.

Both Mootoo’s novel and Kutzinski’s reading show us why queer theory must not assume that it “knows best” when it comes to minority fiction, even minority fiction in the West. It also shows us that imposing heteronormativity always, to some degree, (re)creates the very illusory but nonetheless oppressive binary between self and *Other*, white nation and non-white interloper, whose hegemony we so desperately need to challenge and dialogically relegate to its proper place as only one of several structures. As a dialectical construction, the fiction of the nation only welcomes opposition, ready to consume and incorporate it. So what does Mootoo imply with this concept of return? Surely, she cannot be asking those of us spread far and wide in the diaspora to return to our “homelands,” especially considering the ways in which “home” also feeds into oppressive assumptions about nations and belonging.

There are many meanings to extrapolate here, but I will close on simply one. Return, I would argue, proscribes consuming the *Other*—or at least redefines it with a caveat. At the risk of being nauseating (or, perhaps, so as to be nauseating), we must remember that whatever you eat can come back to haunt you, *should* come back to haunt you. Return is the negotiation between that which wants to eat, and that which does not want to be eaten. What Mootoo is perhaps showing us is that consuming the *Other* must be revealed as pure colonial fantasy—albeit a dangerous and destructive one. After all, in order to maintain their position as consumers, *Cereus'* colonizing subjects must retreat to the homeland to maintain that fantasy. Across the border, the colonized, clearly not consumed, not consumable, await the return of their equally “inconsumable” (how interesting that the vast landscape of English vocabulary lacks this antonym!) counterparts, those once mistaken as food, and now called upon to reveal their true identity by returning—right out of the mouth of the white West. In other words, Mootoo, through *Cereus*, is suggesting that we look at return less as movement, and more as that moment of realization, the reclaiming of oneself from colonizing hungers.

Notes

1. George L. Mosse, *Nationalism and Sexuality: Middle-Class Morality and Sexual Norms in Modern Europe* (Madison, Wis.: University of Wisconsin Press, 1985).
2. Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (London: Verso, 1983).
3. Philip Brian Harper, *Are We Not Men? Masculine Anxieties and the Problem of African-American Identity* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996).
4. Awa Thiam, “Black Sisters, Speak Out,” in *African Intellectual Heritage: A Book of Sources*, edited by Molefi Kete Asante and Abarry (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1996), p. 77.
5. Valentine Moghadam, Introduction to *Gender and Development in the Arab World: Women's Economic Participation*, edited by Valentine Moghadam and Nabil F. Khoury (London: St. Martin's Press, 1995).
6. bell hooks, *Black Looks: Race and Representation* (Boston: South End Press, 1992).
7. Anne Du Cille, “The Occult of True Black Womanhood: Critical Demeanor and Black Feminist Studies,” *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 19, no. 3 (1994).
8. Rachel Blau Duplessis, *Writing Beyond the Ending: Narrative Strategies of Twentieth Century Women Writers* (Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1990).

9. R. Radkrishnan, "Nationalism, Gender, and the Narrative of Identity," in *Nationalisms and Sexualities*, edited by Andrew Parker, Russo, et. al. (New York: Routledge, 1992), pp. 91–92.