

A queer vision of Nation through nostalgic Diaspora in Shani Mootoo's *Cereus Blooms at Night*

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Abstract

One of the key themes of Shani Mootoo's *Cereus Blooms at Night* is passing through various locations. The thematic specialization, which is decisive for debates, is expressed in physiological features and presence of the Caribbean diaspora. I try to see the novel by Mootoo as a text that not only reintroduces and reforms the unique affiliation, but also the physical and social space. She points out the value of shifting diverse bodies across different areas and interactions with each other's community by constructing a living environment that re-imagines and displaces belonging. This reveals that the vengeful concepts of belonging, diaspora history, and nationalism that run deep inside the nostalgia of the novel are embedded. Decolonization may be a scientific approach in Mootoo's novel that challenges and contradicts heteronormative ideologies as it leaves space for multiple forms of belonging by beginning to 'to challenge, to unsettle, to queer'. (Z.Pecic. Queer Narratives of the Caribbean Diaspora, 2013.)

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Introduction

Shani Mootoo's *Cereus Blooms at Night* (1996) is based on a fictitious Caribbean island. It's posing itself between the Caribbean and Canada, by their protagonists' effort to break from their colonial history. It looks forward to a neo-post-colonial future and centers its emphasis on liminal positions in relation to race and sex in a liminal fictitious form close to surrealistic world. She establishes a Caribbean island, Lantanacamera, as a Diaspora writer, also to question the types of ethnic and sexual inequality that exist in Canada just as they thrive as the Caribbean. While *Cereus Blooms at Night* raises a potent criticism of both colonial-racial oppression and sexual prejudice, this essay pays special attention to the likely numerous ways of rejection, feelings of dislocation, of the Queer diaspora men and women. The development of diasporic unity also mitigates geographical, cultural and historical relationships, but from its diasporic perspective, these relationships can be compromised by nationality, ethnicity, race and extreme sexual biases. As Mootoo intervenes inside the co-assembled stereotypes that remain in Caribbean and Canadian communities, her *Cereus Blooms at Night* is bestowed as a supply of hope for queer diaspora topics.

The extraordinary "Caribbean Paradise" has an ancient history that forms the structure and foundations of the diasporic vision. The story of the immigrants has

become a major theme- both in both *South Asian* and *Caribbean* literatures. Natural disasters, refugee problems, and political upheavals have forced human life to be more uncertain than ever before. The new hemispheric concept allows us to reconsider the extremely determined definitions of the earth in the south and, as a result, in the northern hemisphere, so that we can investigate the geographical decline and the electrical vectors producing the diaspora at present. The word "queer" in the queer diaspora involves a number of sexual lesbians in which only gay or lesbian diasporas would not be allowed. A modern, quite unlike the Lesbian Nation limitation, the use of the word "queer" opens up, because "queer" does not only dislocate the assertive "gay" and "lesbian" category but also "encourage[s] the breakdown of traditional scholarly or cultural categories [as it refers to] topics outside of the range of lesbian/gay studies, employing it instead as a kind of position against normative or dominant modes of thought" (Whittington 2012:157).

Diasporic consciousness is one process of mobilizing in a broader struggling for global social justice. South Asian and Caribbean writers identify a plethora of baleful metamorphoses of a large community of fiction of *neofantastical* (Roas 2019) creatures and bodies of male-female, physical viciousness, or psychological disabilities as imaginative expressions of

cultural differences. The sinister and the gothic, combined with the paradox of home and homelessness, are one of these manifestations. The discomfort with queer in these racial and ethnic bodies is a formation of a cultural dissent. When the concept of “general will” get resisted and *heteronormative* “happiness” operates as a strong social influence mechanism, “the unhappiness of the deviant performs a claim for justice” (Ahmed, 2009:11). The denaturalization of gender and sex norms advocated by Butler and other queer theorists provides an important context for conceptualizing the resistance to sexual prejudice that Mootoo offers in *Cereus Blooms at Night*.

Cereus Blooms at Night was first published in the United States in 1999; is the first novel by visual artist Shani Mootoo. Shani Mootoo, of Indian descent, born in Ireland, grown in Trinidad, and at age 19 won a scholarship to study art at the University of Ontario (Canada). This multiple origin has marked his work in a fundamental way. Her literary work (*Out on Main Street* (stories) and *Cereus Blooms at Night* at which we review here) always contains characters that move between the blurred boundaries of identities, crossed by the feeling of belonging nowhere, either to a cultural identity, sexual or racial.

Another bibliographic aspect that underlies her work is the fact that when as a child, she was raped by an uncle. When she told her grandmother what had happened, she asked her not to repeat that story again. The prohibition to tell the event led, according to her, to visual arts. Thus, her first novel is at the same time an attempt to recover his voice. Likewise, in *Cereus Blooms at Night* the subject of abuse, incest and the loss of talk about characters who have experienced sexual abuse.

Her literary work (*Out on Main Street* (short stories) and *Cereus Blooms at Night*, always contains characters that move between the blurred borders of identities crossed by a sense of not belonging in any place, be it a cultural, sexual or racial identity. The prohibition of telling the event in her opinion, to the visual arts, so her first novel is at the same time an attempt to recover her voice, likewise *Cereus Blooms at Night* addresses the issue of abuse, incest and loss and experienced sexual abuse.

The culture stretches beyond “ethnicity” or country to include the entire community in Mootoo's ethical vision. Mootoo demands a group philosophy that sees variation

as a critical and life-saving aspect of the whole. It is not confusion, but continuity. It's not mechanical self-preservation but the survival of compassion. As such, this novel transmits a new, poetic and egalitarian tradition that places local societies into a larger sense of the global community. In addition to ethnographical limits, Mootoo depicts people as members of a diverse, diasporic and globalised ethno-scape. (Ty and Verduyn, 2008 21).

Therefore, the text of Mootoo tends to defend the values of cultural awareness or trans-territorialized national identity, which considers the interdependent relationship between past and present hegemonies to be, in essence, (re) constituted simultaneously within local and global geographies, and therefore the text acquires significance both within and “beyond the framework of its historical and cultural specificities (Pirbhay, 2008: 248).”

The text of the Mootoo therefore seeks to maintain cultural awareness ideals or trans-territorialized national identity, which, in essence, recognises the interdependent relationship between past and contemporary hegemonies that they consist (re) simultaneously in local and global geographies.

As the marked symbol of Canadian identity, Mootoo dislocates ethnocentrism. Its position in between, the need for escape and its transformation of identity she selects the locale of the novel on a fictional island. Bodies, both living and deceased, are very significant here, but sexuality and gender problems are far more socially relevant. The older Indo-Caribbean Mala and her homosexual Afro-Caribbean nurse Tyler are oppressed by their peculiar social dysfunction as “this novel translates the historical traumas of colonial resistance into domestic dysfunctional families and damaged individualities” (Howells, 2003: 149). Tyler was “trying to understand what was natural and what perverse ... for it was a long time before I could differentiate between his [Mala's abusive father] perversion and what others called mine” (*Cereus*.pp. 47-48). Tyler offers the possibilities of “feeling unsafe and unprotected, [and] either end up running far away from everything we know and love, or staying and simply going mad” (*Cereus*.p. 90). But neither Mala nor Tyler was insane, they only showed “the symptoms of trauma” (*Cereus*.p.13). This is the restorative role of storytelling, the effort to expose the latent psychological harm of historical knowledge before expanding into new living spaces for the future.

I'm looking to explore how migrant narratives represent the connection between State oppression and explicit intercourse, or how "home" and "family" are used as places for spreading state violence, incidents where political power is privatised and thus normal, private or invisible to the family. We can see that the production of these subjects requires the privatised unique modes of labor as well as the public control of topics that appear to be private interest, connection and kinship. In my view, for new queer scholarship, such topics are especially imperative.

The space of the home becomes the site of the most complicated raid in history, a displacement whereby "the boundaries between home and the world are blurred; and, surprisingly, the private and the public become part of each other"(Howells, 2003: 154). These novels analyze daily practices, intervention tactics, and stories of social and political upheaval that accompany the dislocation of the characters: "global culture creates a post-national context to reinvent, organize and spread subjectivity through all devices formally associated with literary (or cinematographic) narrative"(Jay, 2001: 39).

The sense of cosmopolitan in their works is what makes these writers global. Their stories are also multifaceted and multi-centre, as a recurring theme connected with establishing neo-liberalism in the late 80s and 1990s, the idea of the marginality of society is still emerging. The depiction that uncertainty, acknowledged human relationships, lack of solidarity and the increasing feeling of isolation are recurrent themes, mainly focused on the co-existence their stories. Not being magical, but surrounded by cynicism, violence and graphics, the reality depicted that the marginal subject was wholly arbitrary, which, except the fractured, mutilated body, lost all humanity.

The home is indeed the location of sexual harassment that is no less involved in retaining state influence, as Mootoo shows via different ways of prohibited longing and unwelcomed affections that takes place in the book. His willingness to take his adoptive Sister, Lavinia, illustrates and executes Chandin's complete interpolation into the sense of colonial rule. Though the "members of worship and desire" (*Cereus*.p.33) first inspire respect for her, they soon smooth into "flames of wrath and self-welcome" (*Cereus*.p.33) in which Chandin starts to 'hate her eyes,

the skin colour, the texture of her hair, its accents, the casks, her true parents, even the Reverend and her divinity.' (*Cereus*.p.33) Their anger is complicated because they often talk of the falsehood of the role of Chandin in the family though embodied in the fear of tormented teenage love. Not really Lavinia's brother, he's not shared by other members of his family with the sense of protection and belonging, but he continually doesn't know about his place. Meanwhile, the expectation of a family bond – the standing proclamation of the narrative in the family to justify what really is colonial guardianship – makes his wish unspeakable, making his feelings "too unsustainable because he knew he didn't dare to tell them" (*Cereus*.p. 33).

While this home is a place for the racially based discipline of Chandin, it is also a place for sexual and state-run discipline. This was discovered in years after Lavinia began love with Sarah, the boyfriend of the Shivering North Wetlands and now the wife of Chandin. The eldest child, Mala (called Pohpoh), discovers the intimacy among Lavinia and Sarah and realises particularly her condition for not having words to explain what she suddenly realises as a secret (*Cereus*. p. 56). The impulse seems to be indiscriminate. While Lavinia and Sarah leave the Paradise together, the attempts they make to get the kids will be frustrated and Pohpoh and Asha are left behind to the custody of their aunt, who one night 'mistook the Pohpoh for Sarah' (*Cereus*. p. 65). Several factors are important here. First, the departure of Lavinia and Sarah is mandated by the injunction against same-sex attraction, thereby exposing the mechanics of sexual orientation that persuade them of their migration. Furthermore, the traumatic and horrific blunder which turns to a socially accepted mode of patriarchal hegemony and retribution shows the way a home becomes a place of sexual violence that is highly political, not private. The departure of Lavinia and Sarah appears to set the stage for Chandin's incestuous rape of his daughters. The violence of Chandin promulgates a type of social control exerted by patriarchy that at once represents the state's racial prejudice, gender specific colonial hierarchy and registers its own objectives in the false promises of cultural integration.

Most notably, if not normalized, this practice is sanctioned more widely at the community. Mootoo explains as:

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 rage akin to insanity if his own wife, with a devilish mind of her own, left her husband and children' (*Cereus*. p. 195).

Rumour and gossip of the town attributes the unfortunate events to a series of decisions committed by Mala as an adult. "a woman whose father had obviously mistaken her for his wife, and whose mother had obviously mistaken another woman for her husband" (*Cereus*.p. 109). This erroneous language attempts to make the brutality of such acts innocuous, almost to ignore them as normal, even as the causes and consequences of such events are hidden from view. Thus, the home is seen to be a location concealed inside the closed walls of the private sphere, not to take shelter in the brutality of the state, but to cooperate with it.

Finally, Mootoo suggests a kind of answer to this violence in the comfort and treatment of queer kinship. As Mala is regarded incorrect, the Paradise Alms House is taken to a nursing home. Finally, she is nurtured by Tyler, a male nurse who says that she seems to be dwelt in a shared queerness and who takes care of her as a way to prevent her own isolation and oppression as a female man who is most frequently insulated from others' affection. In fact, the care of Tyler reflects a certain intimate maternity; he gently and intentionally nourishes her by hand, and Tyler weeps and comforts Mala in a first night at the Paradise Alms. But the abuse that Mootoo experienced cannot be covered by such a settlement, a brutality which he describes in care and horrendous information. When the novel ends with a letter of quest for Asha, the niece of Mala, who fled to Shivering North Wetlands and then to Canada, suggests that the problems created by the violence cannot be resolved, like the letter itself. Mootoo reversed its criticism of the home as a venue for enacting violence in the colonial lackeys and post-colonial state-building period, forcing her readers to take public and private involvement in the sexualized discipline of women and the sex of diaspora - politics and diaspora- into account.

The story of the novel takes place in the city of Paradise, a town of Lantacamara, a fictitious island, but which due to its socio-cultural characteristics could be any Caribbean nation (economy based on sugar cane plantations, population "imported" for its cultivation, cultural hierarchies, social, economic, etc., based on racial criteria). The tranquillity of this town is disturbed by the discovery of what appears to be a corpse in an advanced state of decomposition. The body is that of Chandin Ramchandin and it is presumed that the murderer was his daughter; an old hermit who for years was the town's scapegoat. Faced with her mental deterioration, the alleged murderer is confined in a retirement home for the elderly on the same day and at the same time that Tyler, a nurse whose gender ambiguity arrives, causes the immediate rejection of the other staff in charge of the house. It is precisely the condition of marginalized that makes a particular friendship arise between the two that will allow us little by little to know the true story of "Mala Ramchandin". Tyler, in the purest style of a detective novel, before the silence that the old woman keeps, begins to connect the dots, recalls the old rumours about the old woman and the stories that her own grandmother used to tell her, thus revealing a story in which the mother and paternal aunt of a pair of girls fall in love and run away together, leaving the girls at the mercy of the abuse of a resentful and drunken father; later one of the girls escapes and the other stays but goes crazy; at the same time we see the past of that father, we see him as a child who becomes obsessed with his adoptive sister; he is ashamed of himself; of their skin colour; of the shape of his hair, etc. (direct effects of the colonial machine). But it is until the arrival of Otho Mohanty, the son of the only love of the youth of "Mala", who upon noticing his father's extreme concern for this particular character, does his best to know the details of the story mysterious that surrounds the old woman, when we know what really happened with Chandin Ramchandin.

The main group of characters revolves around the theme of gender, sexuality and body building. For example, "Aunt Lavinia", who since she was little he ignored all male innuendo; Sara, who is the victim of a dispassionate marriage and a husband who hates her for her dark skin tone; The mysterious story of "Raul", the brother of "Hector the gardener", who is beaten by his father and object of ridicule of the children of the town, since he does not fit into the schemes gender of the patriarchal

system, hence he is disappeared by his mother to keep him away from the violence of the father; also "Mala", who in a certain way feels guilty for the abandonment of the mother and accepts to be the object of belonging to the father; likewise Otho, a girl who ends up "magically" turning into a boy; and finally Tyler, the narrator, who feels free to don a dress from nurse. These last two characters end up forming a couple that defies any concept of gender, even those included within words like gay, lesbian, homosexual, transvestite, transsexual, etc. The refusal of the novel to use any of these concepts and instead use the phrase "my perversion" reveals how identity is a difficult matter for the characters. They all highlight that the rules of gender and sexuality, what is allowed and what is prohibited in this field, and who determines it, they would be part of a complex system of power.

The colonial perspective is evident when we learn the history of the Mala family. Chandin, Mala's father and Indian parents, becomes a child envied within the Indian population that works in the sugarcane plantations Trinidad when a missionary couple expresses their intention to adopt him. The Thoroughly's deep down desire a "Trojan horse", a tool to convert Indian immigrants to Christianity. The Ramchandin couple, for their side, he comes to Lantacamara with the intention of escaping the rigid caste system of India, but it is found that living conditions are also harsh on the island and that only if they work as slaves will they be able to take their child out of the endless line of servitude, so they give the child to the couple in exchange for education and a false conversion on their part. Throughout the novel we see how his new family and the "white" context in which Chandin now lives give birth to a shame for his natural parents, for his religion, a self-hatred for him color of his skin and the desperate search to blend into the new family.

Looking carefully to a fateful discussion between Chandin and Reverend Thoroughly, where the role of Chandin is most specifically debated in the Thoroughly household, the colonial family's peculiar logic becomes evident. Beginning of the novel, during one of the many flashbacks, we learn that in very self-conscious ways, during the several years of Chandin's residence with the Thoroughlys, he sought to adapt to the demands of colonial authorities. He experiences a deep sense of guilt about his own modest origins, attributing incredible

coherence within the dominance of the Thoroughly tribe and their traditions; 'embarrassed by his parents' 'reluctance to embrace the smarter-looking, smarter-acting Reverend's religion', and vowing to 'change. . . what he had the power to change', Chandin observes Reverend Thoroughly's stance, carriage, behaviors, and mannerisms, teaching himself away from "his own father's propensity to bend or twist or fold his body whichever way the dictates of comfort tipped him" instead and "practice[ing] sitting upright, with his back unswayed and his legs planted firmly on the ground or crossed severely at the knees" (*Cereus*. pp. 30-34). This is a physical fitness program in which Chandin "studied and imitated the thoughtful stroking of his chin by the Reverend" and "made strides as wide as the towering Reverend's," (*Cereus*. p. 34) considering his short stature.

The forced evacuation of queer lovers Sarah and Lavinia sets the stage in Mootoo's *Cereus* for a central dispute in the book that erupts in the heterosexual nuclear family but inevitably encourages their resolution of family and queer modes. The fact that this resolution is not 'here' but 'at home' in Paradise, Lantacamara, the fictional island in the setting of the novel, shows clearly the legacy and the manner of longing and parental relationship that continues to evolve long after the departure period. Both perspectives show us how gender and race are intertwined in this socio-cultural context. How the rules for one or the other are mounted on the privilege of the white male, heterosexual, Catholic or Protestant, European; and how at the same time those of us who do not belong to that select group, due to one or another shortcoming we are accomplices and we reproduce their power system.

The context of this novel evokes the history of Trinidad and Tobago. There, after the abolition of slavery, cheap labor was scarce, so the landowners began a campaign to bring it, first from China and then from the India. The new immigrants thus became the new base of the pyramid Social. However, Mootoo's novel goes beyond telling a specific historical context; speaks of the consequences, still present today, of coloniality, not only in the Caribbean, but also in other colonized territories. This coloniality creates social exclusion, gulf between rich and poor, self-hatred. This is why that a book like *Cereus*... encourages reflections that can even be applied today to the context of some Latin American countries such as Colombia. Therefore, the review of a book

published more than ten years ago seeks above all to propose the translation of *Cereus Blooms at Night* in such a way that this book, among others, encourages political, social and human reflection on to the ignominious aftermath of colonialism.

This article focuses on the novel *Cereus Blooms at Night* in which Shani Mootoo explores themes of maximum disgust - incest, extramarital relationship, child abuse, sexual violence, among others. The author dismantles conventional image of "family" and redefines the term. His novel is an example of how the traditional family Structure sometimes becomes an imposed concept that often fails to survive the coercion of caliginous. In reality, forced transnationalism is one of them. While he distrusts the traditional family structure, expresses faith in a relationship of empathy and communion. This document is committed to the study of disgust and dysfunctionality in the novel that includes the "third space". The "third space" that is a construct intended to accommodate the diasporic "other" is not always a happy concept. The diasporic lives of individuals are often interspersed with the typical attributes of a transnational life: identity crisis and uprooting. Mootoo's novel explores the collapse of an individual who is not at peace with himself. Due to his inability to build a formidable identity for himself. The characters in his novel are in a constant state of confusion and lack of originality. This state of perpetual confusion constantly leads all characters towards self destruction. While the inevitable self-destruction is complete, the author explores an optimistic aspect of the "third space" that constitutes people relegated to the condition of "Outcast" because of their dark life stories. Being in this newly formed place, people find empathy and mutual company in a world of their own that is never understood by the "majority" society.

This paper is focused on the novel, 'Cereus Blooms at Night' in which Shani Mootoo explores themes of utmost disgust—incest, extra-marital affair, child abuse, sexual violence among others. The author dismantles conventional image of 'family' and redefines the term. Her novel is an instance how the traditional family structure at times becomes an imposed concept that often fails to survive the coercion of caliginous reality—forced transnationalism being one of them. While she is distrustful of the traditional family structure, she expresses faith in a relationship of empathy and

communion. This paper is committed to the study of disgust and dysfunctionality in the novel that comprises the 'third space'. The 'third space' which is a construct aimed to accommodate the diasporic 'other' is not always a happy concept. The diasporic individual's lives are often interspersed with the attributes typical of a transnational life—identity crisis and rootlessness. Mootoo's novel explores the collapse of an individual who is not at peace with his/herself due to his/her inability to construe a formidable identity for own. The characters in her novel are in a constant state of confusion and lack a sense of originality. This state of perpetual confusion steadily leads all the characters towards self-destruction. While the inevitable self-destruction is complete, the author explores a sanguine aspect of the 'third space' which constitutes people who are relegated to the status of 'marginalized' due to their obscure life-stories. Being in this newly formed locale, the people find empathy and company in each other in a world of their own which is never understood by the 'mainstream' society.

This article questions how family and kinship both for those; who are part of the diaspora and for those left behind, are made uniquely queer in the context of the diaspora. It indicates that a crucial vocabulary for resisting family romance that subdues the liberal humanist paradigms of citizenship and advocacy must be built for the queer diaspora crisis. More precisely, it attempts to broaden the notion of queer diaspora in the form of resettlement, displacement, and exile, to imply that queer diaspora offers to point out a financial capitalist industrial repression and accumulation regimes, desire and attachment mechanics beyond the basic circumstances of same-sex attraction. It suggests that the queer diaspora problem must establish a vital vocabulary to resist family romance that subdues the liberal humanist paradigms of citizenship and activism. Stuart Hall asserts in "Cultural Identity and Diaspora" that diasporic identity does not rally around a "simple, factual 'past,'" but is "always constructed through memory, fantasy, narrative, and myth" (*Cereus*. p.226). Hall's emphasis in this piece is on cinematic production, but his argument about diasporic identity holds for literary production when he cites Benedict Anderson's notion that communities "are to be distinguished, not by their falsity/genuineness, but by the style in which they are imagined" (*Cereus*. p.237). These versions of

diasporic nostalgia, even as they seek to avoid the bland sentimentality usually conveyed in the term "nostalgia," gesture to the kind of potent diasporic narrative mode embodied in *Cereus Blooms at Night* that employs unreconciled, unassimilated memory/myth as social critique.

Conclusion

This affective queer connection is the core of the novel, but Mootoo demonstrates that such relational identification does not demand the sacrifice of particular identity. Tyler and Mala's connection, in Glissant's words, "challenges the generalizing universal and necessitates even more stringent demands for specificity" (142). When cracks finally begin to appear in Mala's post-traumatic psychological barriers, she shows her affection for Tyler by presenting him with a female nurse's uniform stolen from the garden clothes-line. Tyler is stunned that the still largely incoherent Mala has recognized his queer "nature," but he dons the clothes and shyly presents himself to her. He is initially disappointed that she barely reacts, but then he realizes that her lack of reaction is itself a positive, though un-self-conscious affirmation. He senses that:

The reason Miss Ramchandin paid me no attention was that, to her mind, the outfit was not something to either congratulate or scorn—it simply was. She was not one to manacle nature, and... she was permitting mine its freedom" (*Cereus*.83).

Despite his initial disappointment at the non-impact in this episode, moreover, Tyler's joy satisfies his desire for even minimal human acceptance, a desire that is repeated throughout the novel. In just such a moment, he concludes this section of the novel by stating! "It had been a day and an evening to treasure. I had never felt so extremely ordinary and I quite loved it" (*Cereus*.p.84).

Added to this is the importance of geography, place, space and various changes faced by different bodies over the acquisition of nationality, places with diverse roots and histories, which can also be reached only by tourism, away from exclusion sites. Identity is what links *Cereus'* multi-identity and stories, questions imperial and neo-colonial sexuality assumptions and addresses knowledge-based problems, authorities and portrayals, as well as exploitation of these assumptions. In this

violent geography, Mootoo expresses faith and pride in the nationality of homosexual, lesbian and transgender subjectivities by establishing a queer climate within the Caribbean diaspora. This citizenship, however, is not a total history of domestic membership but a crisis that threatens the prospect of a full and absolute record. In this case, Mootoo gives a complex answer to the notions of Berlant and Freeman. It involves a variety of positions in *Cereus* that refer to lust and affinity in the history of violence and slavery, and not race and sexuality.

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