

Kunapipi

Volume 27 | Issue 1

Article 5

2005

Development and same-sex desire in Caribbean allegorical autobiography: Shani Mootoo's *Cereus blooms at night*, and Jamaica Kincaid's *Annie John* and *Lucy*

Roberto Strongman

Follow this and additional works at: <https://ro.uow.edu.au/kunapipi>

 Part of the [Arts and Humanities Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Strongman, Roberto, Development and same-sex desire in Caribbean allegorical autobiography: Shani Mootoo's *Cereus blooms at night*, and Jamaica Kincaid's *Annie John* and *Lucy*, *Kunapipi*, 27(1), 2005. Available at: <https://ro.uow.edu.au/kunapipi/vol27/iss1/5>

Research Online is the open access institutional repository for the University of Wollongong. For further information contact the UOW Library: research-pubs@uow.edu.au

Development and same-sex desire in Caribbean allegorical autobiography: Shani Mootoo's *Cereus blooms at night*, and Jamaica Kincaid's *Annie John* and *Lucy*

Abstract

The representation of gay and lesbian sexualities in the Caribbean began receiving much attention in US popular culture when, on May 24, 1998, a New York Times article cited The Cayman Islands' Minister of Tourism as having said he had denied docking rights to a Norwegian Cruise Line ship that was chartered as a gay cruise because 'a ship chartered by gay tourists came to the Cayman Islands in 1987, and the visitors' public displays of affection offended many residents' (McDowell 3).

ROBERTO STRONGMAN

Development and Same-Sex Desire in Caribbean Allegorical Autobiography: Shani Mootoo's *Cereus Blooms at Night*, and Jamaica Kincaid's *Annie John* and *Lucy*

The representation of gay and lesbian sexualities in the Caribbean began receiving much attention in US popular culture when, on May 24, 1998, a *New York Times* article cited The Cayman Islands' Minister of Tourism as having said he had denied docking rights to a Norwegian Cruise Line ship that was chartered as a gay cruise because 'a ship chartered by gay tourists came to the Cayman Islands in 1987, and the visitors' public displays of affection offended many residents' (McDowell 3). The exclusion of these gay and lesbian tourists from the Cayman Islands illustrates a certain theoretical representation of the Caribbean as devoid of a space for alternative sexualities. This has been remarked by Arnaldo Cruz-Malavé who, in his reading of *Peau noire, masques blancs*, points out how Fanon 'banish(es) all discussion of Martinican homosexuality to the footnotes of his text' (139).

In response to Fanon's brief footnote on 'l'absence de l'Oedipe aux Antilles' (146) and the general marginalisation of the topic of Caribbean same-sex desire, in 'Not Just (Any)Body Can be a Citizen: The Politics of Law, Sexuality and Postcoloniality in Trinidad and Tobago and the Bahamas', M. Jacqui Alexander studies the interconnectedness between West Indian nationalism and homophobia by examining how, after the achievement of political independence in the Bahamas and Trinidad and Tobago, West Indian 'Black nationalist masculinity needed to demonstrate that it was now capable of ruling, which is to say, it needed to demonstrate moral rectitude' (9) and, in so doing, naturalise heterosexuality through legislation. This naturalisation of heterosexuality has resulted in the coding of same-sex desire as a foreign element and as an invader from the first world — the turning away of gay cruises re-enacting Carib and Arawakan arrows against European battleships.

These exclusions necessitate an investigation of discourses of local Caribbean homosexualities and the ways in which they intersect with the moral Caribbean state and the globalisation of gay and lesbian identities. The coming-of-age

narrative appears to be a pertinent place within which to examine these competing discourses as it contains aspects of sexual maturation in relation to larger social structures and allegiances. Unlike white Euro-North American coming-of-age/coming-out narratives such as those in Bennet Singer's anthology *Growing up Gay* and Edmund White's *A Boy's Own Story*, coming-of-age narratives by queer people of colour from outside the industrialised first world are multiply modulated by discourses other than those of sexuality. As Gayatri Gopinath notes in her comparison of Edmund White's *A Boy's Own Story* — a gay coming-of-age story in the US in the fifties — and Sri Lankan-Canadian writer Shyam Selvadurai's novel *Funny Boy*:

Unlike White's text, where sexuality is privileged as the singular site of radical difference and the narrator's sole claim to alterity, sexuality in *Funny Boy* is not one but many discourses — such as those of ethnic identity and forced migration — all of which speak to multiple displacements and exiles (134).

To take Martin Manalansan's theorised ethnographic study of Filipino gay men in New York City as example, it becomes important to take into account 'the ways in which the globalisation of gay and lesbian oppression obfuscates hierarchical relations between metropolitan centres and sub-urban peripheries' (428). Such a study needs to ask how those narratives might be utilising allegorical strategies that, following Fredric Jameson's argument, could place them within larger narrative strategies in the so-called 'third-world'.¹ This matter becomes particularly important for the Caribbean, whose native and imported inhabitants were constituted as individual and political "others" at a time in which these very terms emerged in the Early Modern discourses of European colonial expansion in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. This article is therefore mindful of the ways in which the self becomes a synecdoche for the nation in the narratives of colonised peoples.²

Unlike Euro-North American queer coming-of-age narratives, many Caribbean coming-of-age narratives present homosexuality as an alternative which is considered or experienced and then bypassed, seldom embraced as the ideal orientation over heterosexuality. Many of these narratives contain a strong overt homosocial³ aspect in which intense, romantic childhood friendships are definitive in the formation of the protagonist's personality. In both homosexuality and homosociality, the pressure of societal opprobrium on a young person often results in the dissolution of the same-sex bond and promotes the progression of the individual towards a heterosexual orientation. This essay traces two distinct representations of homosexuality in three Caribbean novels: Jamaica Kincaid's *Annie John* (1983) and *Lucy* (1990) and Shani Mootoo's *Cereus Blooms at Night* (1996). While these writers' texts are complex and multi-faceted, I want to trace among the many issues addressed in their works the different developmental paths through which homosexuality is narrated.

Both Kincaid's *Annie John* and Mootoo's *Cereus Blooms at Night* present homosociality and homosexuality as a prominent thematic current. However, a wide epistemological gulf separates Kincaid's and Mootoo's treatment of these same-sex relationships. In Kincaid's work, while homosociality and homosexuality are described with unashamed openness, same-sex behaviour remains fixed to a developmental matrix in which it occupies a subordinate role to a goal or telos which is decidedly heterosexual. For Kincaid, same-sex desire remains a form of social and physical experimentation, which, when contained and restricted to the early years of a person's life, functions as a rite-of-passage into a predictable heterosexual adulthood. Same-sex desire plays an important structuring role in Kincaid's texts for the history of Annie John's social life is punctuated by her various homosocial attachments. Throughout the course of her childhood and adolescence, Annie develops important friendships with Sonia, Albertine, the Red Girl, and Gwen. The life-story of *Annie John* is so profoundly marked by these same-sex emotional attachments that the characterisation of two of these females, the Red Girl and Gwen, is elaborated in extended individual chapters.

In contrast to Kincaid's presentation of homosexuality as a rite-of-passage, Shani Mootoo's *Cereus Blooms at Night* moves away from linear and hierarchical categories which undermine the validity of homosexuality and alternative genders. Mootoo's postcolonial identity — born in Ireland and raised in Trinidad — as well as her lesbian self-designation (Condé 63) provide rich autobiographical material for the framing of homosexuality and alternative genders within the enterprise of Empire. As such, in *Cereus* it is possible to see a dislocation of heterosexuality as centre and telos of the sexuality model, and a fragmentation and proliferation of genders that has as one of its consequences a challenging of the colonial project. Precisely, in her doctoral dissertation, *Queer Diasporas: Gender, Sexuality and Migration in Contemporary South Asian Literature and Cultural Production*, Gayatri Gopinath describes how the indentureship of South Asians in the British Caribbean colonies instituted practices of domesticity and constructions of 'home' that produced the violent gender normativity that Mootoo's novel challenges. She writes:

Indeed the novel suggests that if heteronormativity — and more specifically heterosexuality — is a means by which to discipline subjects under colonialism, then one of the means by which to escape the sexual and gendered logic of colonialism is by escaping heterosexuality. (143)

In the same way in which *Cereus* bears autobiographical traces of its author's rearing in Trinidad, Kincaid's *Annie John* is the story of a young girl whose coming-of-age narrative bears a strong biographical resemblance to the author's own upbringing and identification with the Caribbean island of Antigua. Moira Ferguson points out in *Jamaica Kincaid: Where the Land Meets the Body*, that

Jamaica Kincaid writes *Annie John* fifteen years after she came to the United States and after Antigua becomes independent. In several interviews, Kincaid invites readers to equate *Annie John* with herself. *Annie John* is one of Jamaica Kincaid's avatars.

(75)

Following *Annie's* growth in her social, educational, and familial contexts, the narrative of *Annie John* presents the idyllic picture of a West Indian childhood. Ending in the protagonist's departure from the island-colony to a life in the colonial metropole, Kincaid's novel bears a striking similarity to other major Caribbean coming-of-age novels such as Lamming's *In the Castle of my Skin*, Zobel's *La Rue Cases Nègres* and Naipaul's *Miguel Street*. *Annie's* circle of friends is composed of a number of girls with whom she develops important homosocial friendships, her attachment to Gwen standing as particularly important. Her educational career is marked by a British colonial ideology of which *Annie* is not entirely uncritical, allowing the narration to have a strong anti-colonial impetus. Like many of the protagonists of Caribbean autobiographical allegories, *Annie* bears the stigma of bastardisation, any description of *Annie's* father being entirely missing except for passages that make reference to his numerous extra-marital affairs and the violence of his mistresses against her mother. The mother is the most notable figure in the family and *Annie's* relationship with her can be described, at its best, as turbulent. The characters of *Annie* and her mother are often revealed through heated dialogues concerning the adequate socialisation of 'a proper young lady'. *Lucy's* departure for nursing school in England marks the end of the narrative as well as the fulfilment of the goals prescribed by her colonial education and the gendered expectations of her mother.

Annie John's 'Gwen' chapter is prefaced by a comment revealing the self-conscious nature of her attraction to other girls and of the rapidly sequential nature of these homosocial affairs for *Annie John*. On the first day of school, *Annie John* declares: 'I liked a girl named Albertine, and I liked a girl named Gweneth. At the end of the day, Gwen and I were in love, and so we walked home arm in arm together' (33). The allusion to the Proustian character of Albertine strongly foregrounds female same-sex desire. As Eve Sedgwick remarks in *Epistemology of the Closet* 'there is no way to read the Albertine volumes without finding same-sex desire somewhere' (231).

The open display of *Annie's* affection for Gwen characterises most of her relationships with her other girlfriends. This openness translates into uncommon boldness with Sonia, whom she pursues voyeuristically: 'I loved very much — and so used to torment until she cried — a girl named Sonia. I thought her beautiful. I would then stare and stare at her' (7). The narration of *Annie John's* attraction to these many girls attains certain refinement in the description of the Red Girl, whose tomboyish behaviour is admired and coveted by *Annie John*: 'I had never seen a girl do this before. All the boys climbed trees for the fruit they

wanted, and all the girls threw stones to knock the fruit off the trees. But look the way she climbed that tree: better than any boy' (56).

The chapter of 'The Red Girl' serves to articulate the falsity of the gender dichotomy used to discipline individuals in society, an observation that brings into question relations of power more generally in the colonial context. Aware of a certain societal dissonance between her feminine gender and her desire for other girls, the Red Girl offers the salvation of a *via media* at the male/female bifurcation of the gendering road. Annie John looks up to the Red Girl not only for her ability to compete with boys but also for her ability to surpass and conquer boys' performances of masculinity. The Red Girl is 'better than any boy' also at the game of marbles: 'She loved to play marbles, and was so good that only Skerrit boys now played against her' (58). The Red Girl's ability to outperform boys stands as proof of the falsity of the myth of male supremacy and concomitantly in the colonial context the myth of Euro-North American superiority. Under the influence of the Red Girl and against the approval of her mother, Annie John questions the validity and legitimacy of colonialism as she defies her prescribed gender role by playing marbles. The testicular appropriation of the boys' marbles underscores the enabling uses of the trope of castration in the successful subversion of patriarchy and empire. The masturbatory *jouissance* of playing with marbles illustrates the joys of a reclaimed personal and political autonomy.

Annie John's attraction for the Red Girl overshadows her earlier infatuation with Gwen and stands as further proof of the rapid succession of multiple same-sex love-affairs during her childhood and adolescence. Annie describes her fantasies of infidelity as she strolls around with Gwen:

We walked into our classroom in the usual way, arm in arm — her head on my shoulder.... The Little Lovebirds, our friends called us. Who could have guessed at that moment about the new claim on my heart? Certainly not Gwen. For, of course, in bringing her up to date I never mentioned the Red Girl. (60)

The description of Annie John walking hand-in-hand with her girlfriend stands as evidence of the straightforward presentation of same-sex attachments in the novel, for the description of homosocial desire is clear throughout and very much at the surface of this text. Physical and verbal expressions of same-sex affection are not concealed, but are expressed with openness. For instance, the favourite topic of conversation between Annie John and Gwen consists of repeated declarations of romantic desire: 'we told of our love for each other' (48). Annie John does not mince words to describe the homosocial bond between the schoolgirls as a deep romantic attachment rivalling and competing with the discourse of heterosexuality. When Gweneth gives Annie John a present — a rock found at the foot of a sleeping volcano — Annie says: 'It may have been in that moment that we fell in love. Later, we could never agree on when it was' (46). Moreover, Annie John's plans for living in a house of her own with Gwen

(51) speak to the depth of the girls' mutual attachment and the challenge which this poses to the compulsory ideal of heterosexual domesticity.

If homosociality is presented frankly in Kincaid's work, homosexuality is not. In fact, more sexual descriptions of desire between Annie John and her girlfriends are relegated to the subtextual level in coded form. Such forms of coded homosexual acts involve Gwen and Annie John's practice of lying down in a pasture to expose their breasts in the moonlight (74). One of the most outstanding of these coded forms of homosexuality involves the curious 'affectionate pinch' (45) Annie John practices with her girl-lovers: 'Then I would pull at the hair on her arms and legs — gently at first, and then awfully hard, holding it up taut with the tips of my fingers until she cried out' (7). Clearly, this bodily play between Annie John and Sonia involving the excitement of the senses through touch articulates a certain sensuality that remains mute except for the wordless cries of Sonia. Annie John also practices this coded form of sexuality through pinching with other girls. With the Red Girl, for example, Annie John refines and perfects this activity through her articulation of intense emotions — especially the transformation of pain into pleasure:

Then, still without saying a word, the Red Girl began to pinch me. She pinched hard, picking up pieces of my almost nonexistent flesh and twisting it around. At first, I vowed not to cry, but it went on for so long that tears I could not control streamed down my face. I cried so much that my chest began to heave, and then, as if my heaving chest caused her to have some pity on me, she stopped pinching and began to kiss me on the same spots where shortly before I had felt the pain of her pinch. Oh, the sensation was delicious — the combination of pinches and kisses (63).

It has become customary for critics to pathologise Annie's eroticism, when they do not ignore it. For instance, Diane Simmons interprets these expressions of same-sex desire of Annie John's as one of 'several attempts to replace her mother's love' (108), following a developmentalist model of psychological growth with heterosexuality as a proper telos.⁴ Whether it is easily recognisable at the surface level or requires a more intricate exegesis to bring it to light, homosexuality is problematically presented by Kincaid as a stage to be overcome in the process of maturation. One of the coded homosexual acts between the girls, the fondling of each other's breasts, is explained as a necessity due to the absence of boys: 'On hearing somewhere that if a boy rubbed your breast they would quickly swell up, I passed along this news.... [W]e had to make do with ourselves. What perfection we found in each other!' (50). In other words, homosexuality is presented as childish exploratory behaviour. Lesbianism, in Kincaid, is permissible as experimentation and as a second-choice option to the goal of heterosexuality.

Menstruation signals the end of this period of homoerotic experimentation. After Annie John begins menstruating, a rift is created between herself and Gwen which signals the end of their emotional attachment: 'Gwen and I vowed to love

each other always, but the words had a hollow ring, and when we looked at each other we couldn't sustain the gaze' (53). It is significant that this division between Gwen and Annie John occurs after Annie's first menstrual period, for her maturation involves the shedding of the homosocial and homosexual associations which for Kincaid are only permissible as childhood sexual experimentation.

Annie John's same-sex relationships exist within a wider societal circle which tolerates the attachment as part of female socialisation before puberty. As Annie John says, '[w]e separated ourselves from the other girls, and they, understanding everything, left us alone' (46). Nevertheless, the strong societal compulsion towards heterosexuality exerts a strong, destructive pressure on Annie's relationships. Annie John is aware of the non-normative quality of these attachments and is carefully furtive and secretive concerning her sexual attachments to other girls: 'When I got home, my mother greeted me with the customary kiss and inquiries. I told her about my day ... leaving out, of course, any mention at all of Gwen and my overpowering feelings for her' (33). Eventually Annie John fails to conceal from her mother her attraction to girls, for Miss Edwards, the school teacher, catches the girls exposing their body parts in sexual games and denounces Annie to her mother: 'Tears came to my mother's eyes when she heard what I had done ... my mother couldn't bring herself to repeat the misdeed to my father in my presence' (81).

Annie John's affection is the love that dares not speak its name in her family circle. As such, it is tempting to consider Annie John's a case of the 'closetedness' Sedgwick has studied in *Epistemology of the Closet*:

'Closetedness' itself is a performance initiated as such by the speech act of a silence, but a silence that accrues particularity by fits and starts, in relation to the discourse that surrounds and differentially constitutes it. The speech act that coming out, in turn, can comprise are strangely specific. (3)

Annie John never enunciates the speech act of 'coming-out' found in queer first world coming-of-age narratives, which suggests the inability of first world models of sexual alterity to travel to other parts of the world, such as the Caribbean. As Martin Manalasan writes, 'the closet is not a monolithic space and coming out is not a uniform process' (435). Annie John does not come out because for her same-sex desire is a pubescent experiment and does not constitute a fixed identity for life, as occurs in Euro-North America.

Nevertheless, the stigma of homosexuality, even as a non-identitarian behaviour, is too much for Annie John to bear and she capitulates to the progressive narrative of sexual development with heterosexuality as telos. The end of her sexual attraction to Gwen is described as a major re-orientation of her desire, and a radical transformation of her sexual sensibility. Annie John confesses: 'Gwen ... was no longer a thrill for me. It was as if I had grown a new skin over the old skin and the new skin had a completely different set of nerve endings' (91). To a great extent, the end of Annie's relationship with Gwen marks the

termination of her homoerotic desire as an acceptable form of relating to other girls. It is important for Annie John to declare her overcoming of this attachment in her maturational process: 'Gwen, formerly the love of my life, [is] now reduced to an annoying acquaintance' (129). More poignantly, Annie's dismissal of Gwen is a self-conscious attempt at establishing her homosexuality as an anterior and immature form of desire which she has left behind and has no intention of returning to: 'When I saw her [Gwen] now my heart nearly split in two with embarrassment at the feelings I used to have for her and the things I had shared with her (137). Annie John's embarrassment marks her internalisation of society's compulsion to heterosexuality and her capitulation to its normative power.

As Annie John matures, she feels socially compelled to consider the subject of marriage. Her rejection of marriage should not be understood as a rejection of heterosexuality *in toto*, but rather as her refusal of an institution that oppresses women. Annie has witnessed how women like her mother must tend to the needs of faithless men like her father. In fact, she resists marriage only in the sense that she does not wish to meet the same fate as her mother — a servant to an aging, irresponsible man.

Kincaid's more recent novel, *Lucy*, functions as a sequel to *Annie John* as it follows the story of a young Caribbean woman in her late teens who migrates to the United States to work as an *au pair* for a wealthy, white couple. If Annie John resisted the Western notion of "the closet" as an adequate descriptor of Caribbean same-sex desire, the first world metropolitan narrative of *Lucy* moves closer to an acknowledgment of homosexuality as a condition of the self. However, this condition of the self is presented as temporary and puerile in nature. In *Lucy*, Kincaid further refines the homosexual experiences of Annie John's childhood and clearly presents homosexuality as a rite-of-passage to be overcome in the process of personal maturation. Lucy declares how before having been initiated into heterosexual sex by Tanner, 'there was a girl from school I used to kiss, but we were best friends and were only using each other for practice' (83). Here, Kincaid leaves no doubt as to her conceptualisation of homosexuality as rehearsal and as antechamber for heterosexuality. Her 'practice' with girls helps her sort out her feelings with respect to a young man, Paul, with whom Lucy proves that she has acceded to a heterosexual identity. Therefore, while in *Lucy* there might be a representation of homosexuality as a state of being, this falls short of full assimilation of the Western idea of homosexuality as a permanent quality of the subject that is manifested as an adult orientation. As if articulating the counterpunctual postcolonial debate between acculturation and deculturation, Kincaid's discourse reveals a deep ambivalence between a drive for complete rejection of Western modes of sexual alterity and a consideration of partial adoption of these imported values.

After an unsuccessful date with a boy whom they meet at a record store, Lucy and Peggy, her best friend, seek romantic solace in each other: 'We were so

disappointed that we went back to my room and smoked marijuana and kissed each other until we were exhausted and fell asleep' (83). Lucy fantasises about Hugh during this homoerotic experience. In a manner similar to the 'practice kisses' mentioned earlier, Kincaid returns to her representation of homosexuality as a situational, furtive behaviour which must stand as a second-choice alternative to an all-aspiring heterosexuality. As such, Kincaid's discourse presents homosexuality and homosociality as a stage to be overcome in the maturational process of personal development. The young female protagonist is a seducer of girls who, becoming aware of the societal stigma to her desire, disavows her same-sex orientation and adopts the norms of heterosexuality as telos because, as Antonia MacDonald Smythe notes:

The sexual identity that the child Annie begins to form is interrupted by social conventions that return young women to heterosexual compliance. Her Antiguan society does not name women living and working together as friend and as lovers to be an option. Instead, female community is subordinated to masculine desire and the institution of heterosexuality. (58)

In contrast to Kincaid's presentation of homosexuality as a rite-of-passage to be overcome in order to achieve a teleological heterosexuality, Shani Mootoo's *Cereus Blooms at Night* makes an important departure from the linear and hierarchical categories which stigmatise homosexuality and alternative genders. In fact, Mootoo's presentation of homosexuality and alternative genders subscribes to the postmodernist aesthetic of decentredness, a model that replaces the modernist progressive models of modernity. In *Cereus*, it is possible to see the dislocation of heterosexuality as centre and telos of the sexuality model, and the fragmentation and proliferation of genders.

This dislocation of heterosexuality and the proliferation of genders becomes evident in an analysis of the four main couples of the *Cereus* narrative: Sarah and Chandin, Mala and Ambrose, Sarah and Lavinia, and Tyler and Otoh. Sarah and Chandin are the only people of East Indian descent at a seminary founded and run in Lantanacalara by missionaries who have come from the colonial metropole, the Shivering Northern Wetlands. Their marriage is esteemed by the seminary community as a natural event, due to their miscegenation fears. Chandin and Sarah marry more as a result of social pressure than from any romantic attraction between them. In fact, Chandin only proposes to Sarah after being rejected by Lavinia, the daughter of his Wetlandish adoptive parents. Utilising the rhetoric of incest to prohibit his union with their daughter, their racism is exposed when she is betrothed to a wealthy cousin in the Wetlands.

Mala, the main protagonist of *Cereus*, is Ambrose's childhood playmate and adolescent lover. Ambrose repeatedly fails to defend Mala against the attacks of abusive children and her father. Guilty, he falls into a comatose-like state from which he arises once a month to make amends to Mala by sending food to her house. He marries Elsie Mohanty, who becomes a servant to her ill husband.

After years of lethargy, Ambrose leaves his bed-ridden state and renews his friendship with Mala, who is now at the nursing home. Their re-encounter at the end of the narrative, however happy, is tinged with regret: 'No time to waste, not a moment to be wasted' (248).

The failure in the marriages of Chandin and Sarah, Elsie and Ambrose points to Shani Mootoo's attempt to decentre heterosexuality through her representation of it as an unsuccessful institution. Also in line with this motivation, it is significant to note that the males in the heterosexual relationships of *Cereus*, Chandin and Ambrose, do not marry their first-choice partner and are forced to settle for second-choice partners with whom they have unsuccessful relationships. As if responding to the Kincaidian discourse in which homosexuality is presented as an inferior alternative to the heterosexual goal, Mootoo presents heterosexuality, generally, as an unhappy consolation.

Chandin and Sarah's loveless marriage finally dissolves when Sarah leaves her husband in order to live abroad with her female lover Lavinia, the missionaries' daughter who had earlier rejected him. Sarah and Lavinia form a lesbian couple, challenging the patriarchal and heterosexual constraints of West Indian culture. Sarah, from the island of Lantanacamara, is of East Indian descent. Lavinia is Wetlandish. Their relationship triumphs over the abusive patriarchal rule of Chandin and over the deep racial prejudices of the island and the missionary school in particular.

The departure of Lavinia and Sarah from Lantanacamara contrasts sharply with the relative unproblematic existence of male homosexual relations in the island and speaks to the incredible affront that lesbianism poses to the Caribbean patriarchal nation Alexander describes. In terms of a queer exile, their flight is similar to the Cuban writer Reinaldo Arenas' escape from Fidel Castro's Cuba described in his fictionalised autobiography *Antes que Anochezca*, translated in English as *Before Night Falls*.⁵ Because of their expulsion from the national body, it becomes important to note that these protagonists do not appear to be othered as ordinary objects, but that they evacuate their respective islands as national subjects. Arnaldo Cruz-Malavé has utilised Kristeva's notion of abjection to understand the societal role of the Puerto Rican homosexual protagonist of Luis Rafael Sanchez's novel *¡Jum!* (134) and this deployment of Kristeva's notion appears relevant here as well. The extension of Kristeva's notion of the corporeal human being to the national body appears to be an appropriate step, for in these texts queer subjects are expelled from the body politic in the much the same way as the biological body excretes faeces and vomits food. Kristeva writes:

nausea makes me balk at that milk cream, separates me from the mother and father who proffer it. 'I' want none of that element, sign of their desire; 'I' do not want to listen, 'I' do not assimilate it, 'I' expel it. But since food is not an 'other' for 'me,' who am only in their desire, I expel myself, I spit myself out, I abject myself within the same motion through which I claim to establish myself. (3)

For Kristeva the abject is not an other, it is the thing itself. Abjection is an act of self-evacuation. Reading allegory into Kristeva's *Powers of Horror*, the abjected protagonist is an allegorical representation of the nation expelling her. The abject is in fact the subject: 'It is no longer I who expel, "I" is expelled' (4). As such, the queer exile presented in Mootoo's and Arenas' texts depict the Caribbean state's mechanism of shedding and hiding away a sexuality that is inadmissible to itself because it contradicts the moralities of patriarchy it inherited from colonial rule and which it still seeks to emulate, as Alexander demonstrates. Mootoo's representation of abjected lesbianism then addresses the idea of the anxious patriarchal state that cannot contain the idea of its own dispensability and must hide from its view a vacuous image of itself.

Ambrose and Elsie's unhappy marriage remains undistinguished except for their child Otoh. Born as a girl and named 'Ambrosia' at birth, Ambrose and Elsie's child, in an exemplary case of Caribbean magical realism, is successful at a gender re-assignment which is accepted by everyone in the community:

By the time Ambrosia was five, her parents were embroiled in their marital problems to the exclusion of all else, including their child. They hardly noticed that their daughter was transforming herself into their son.... [T]he child walked and ran and dressed and talked and tumbled and all but relieved himself so much like an authentic boy that Elsie soon apparently forgot she had ever given birth to a girl.... [E]ven the nurse and the doctor who attended the birth, on seeing him later, marvelled at their carelessness in having declared him a girl. (109–10)

Otoh's gender-reassignment becomes more significant when he begins a love affair with Tyler, the effeminate male, cross-dressing nurse of the nursing home. The nature of their union makes the question of Otoh's gender appear to be, in comparison, very simple: are Otoh and Tyler a homosexual couple? Are they a heterosexual couple, by nature of their gender at birth? Through the characters of Otoh and Tyler, Shani Mootoo presents gender as a proliferating and fragmented idea and undoes such binary distinctions as male/female and homosexual/heterosexual. In this manner, Shani Mootoo uses 'utopianism to explore what it might mean to imagine a space for lesbians and gay men in the Caribbean' (Smyth 156). In general, the success of the non-normative sexualities in the narrative of *Cereus*, as opposed to the failure of the heterosexual unions, points to Mootoo's dislocation of heterosexuality as being an ultimate, desirable goal.

Unlike Kincaid's narrative in *Annie John* and *Lucy*, there is no developmental narrative in Mootoo's *Cereus* towards heterosexuality. In fact, considering structure, there is no progress at all, at least not one that can be considered linear. Fragmented narrative flashbacks are held together by the overarching story of Mala. Nevertheless, it becomes important to consider that Mala, because of her mental illness, is herself fragmented between Popoh, her childhood self, and her current state of being and therefore, the novel's only point of coherence

is already fragmented and multiple. With respect to homosexuality, Kincaid's *Annie John* stands as a presentation of the Caribbean in which modernity's linear time is used to position homosexuality as a test to be surpassed on the road towards a subjectivity which is decidedly heterosexual. In contrast to this, Mootoo's *Cereus Blooms at Night* attempts a non-linear, postmodernist narrative in which heterosexuality is destabilised as normative centre and in which multiple, alternative genders freely proliferate.

The 'sexually deviant' protagonists of *Annie John* and *Cereus Blooms at Night* function as competing allegorical representations of the Caribbean as a libidinous zone. Annie John functions as an allegorical representation of the Caribbean insofar as she is an African-descent servant to a white, wealthy family. This allusion to the Caribbean experience of slavery is further re-enforced by Annie's migration from Antigua to the US, a modern-day reference to the importation of large numbers of Africans to the cane-fields of New World. Annie John's allegorical connection to the Caribbean nation is clear when she describes her own emotional condition as being 'in a state of no state' (121). Lucy continues Annie John's allegory of the Caribbean. Lucy becomes aggravated when her employers' circle of friends associate her with vague representations of the Caribbean that demonstrate their geographical ignorance:

'So are you from the islands?' I don't know why, but the way she said it made a fury rise up within me. I was about to respond to her in this way: 'Which islands do you mean? The Hawaiian Islands? The islands that make up Indonesia, or what?' (56)

Lucy's sense of self is intricately enmeshed with her place of origin to such a degree in this diasporic situation that she becomes the spokesperson for the region, voicing its complaints concerning colonial representations. Lucy is particularly incensed by the representation of the Caribbean as a holiday destination for travellers from wealthier countries: 'Somehow it made me feel ashamed to come from a place where the only thing to be said about it was: "I had fun when I was there"' (65). The degree to which Lucy feels the pain of misrepresentation of the Caribbean in the form of shame points to the ways in which the Caribbean and herself are fused in an allegorical construction. In contrast to the shame produced by these colonialist representations of the Caribbean, Lucy is excited about Hugh who possesses a more informed idea of the Caribbean, '[T]he first thing he said to me was "Where in the West Indies are you from?" and that is how I came to like him in an important way' (65). Moira Ferguson makes the allegorical connection of Kincaid's protagonist with her Caribbean island most clear:

Lucy is also Antigua of 1967, a territory freeing itself from the coloniser, already tentatively entering an early postcolonial phase. In the late nineteen sixties Antigua was struggling toward partial independence ... just as Lucy struggles successfully toward a form of independence. (131)

The presence of allegory in Shani Mootoo's *Cereus Blooms at Night* is clear in the developing, overarching character of Mala, who operates as a mad-woman-in-the-attic figure, a literary descendant of *Jane Eyre's* and *Wide Sargasso Sea's* insane Caribbean mistresses. The allegorical aspect is also evident in the choice of a fictional name for the island-setting in order to make it stand as Every-Island. Other choices in names such as 'The Thoroughlys' for the last name of the family of Wetlandish missionaries is a noteworthy use of allegory to promote a representation of British colonialism that resonates with Victorian values. However, it might be difficult, initially, to perceive the ways in which Tyler and Otoh, considered to a large degree peculiar and eccentric by the inhabitants of the island of Lantanacamara, operate as allegorical representations of their community. When one takes into account the ways in which eccentricity has been a trope utilised to define the Caribbean — one only needs to think of the carnivalesque representations of the region — the allegory becomes more evident. Moreover, Tyler and Otoh's undefined gender-status speaks to the nebulous representations of the Caribbean Lucy confronted. When Tyler, in drag, says: 'I felt flatfooted and clumsy. Not a man and not ever able to be a woman, suspended nameless in the limbo state between existence and non-existence' (77) it becomes difficult not to read into his gender performance certain ideas of the Caribbean as the politically, socially and ethnically undefined place the friends of Lucy's employers visited during their vacations. The same can be said of Ambrosia's transformation into Otoh and of his subsequent impersonation of his father. In this way, Tyler and Otoh's gender ambiguity is allegorically representative of the island community and of the Caribbean as a whole as spaces without fixed identities. Mary Condé notes the allegorical content of *Cereus* when she writes that:

Mala is the character who comes closest to being a personification of Lantanacamara: she blends into the background of its vegetation, and can imitate perfectly the cries of its birds, crickets and frogs. She, like the island, is left again and again by those who leave home for the Shivering Northern Wetlands.... Just as the cereus only blooms one night in every year, so Mala, the embodiment of Lantanacamara, experiences only brief intervals of happiness with the mother, sister, and lover who all desert her. (69)

Kincaid's character, Annie John-Lucy, and Mootoo's characters, Otoh and Tyler, present different manifestations and uses of the Caribbean as a hypersexualised, libidinous zone. The work of both writers occupy different places within one tradition which sees the Caribbean as a place of unrestrained sexual freedom, as a Garden of Eden in which the traditionally accepted rules for sexual conduct are not applicable. For Kincaid, the historical representation of the Caribbean as a libidinous zone needs to be surpassed by one in which the Caribbean matures towards heteronormativity. For Mootoo, the representation of the Caribbean as a libidinous zone, essentialist as it has been, can be re-

deployed for purposes such as the validation of alternative sexualities. These competing views expose two divergent progressive narratives concerning Caribbean sexuality. Both acknowledge and accept the problematic view of the Caribbean as an area of unrestrained carnivalesque sexuality. Nevertheless, while Kincaid seeks to rid the Caribbean of these semantic associations by positing homosexuality as an infantile stage towards a decidedly heterosexual maturity, Mootoo reacts against this developmental narrative by highlighting an indigenous, regional tradition of accepting sexual difference.

As allegorical representations of the nation and region, Annie John-Lucy as well as Otoh and Tyler present different paths towards the inclusion of dissident sexualities in contemporary Caribbean societies. Annie John-Lucy stands as the route of sexual conservatism. The acceptance of Otoh and Tyler's in the fabric of Lantanacamara's social life at the end of *Cereus Blooms at Night* stands as an optimistic note on the part of Shani Mootoo concerning the de-stigmatisation of alternative sexualities and genders in the Caribbean and as the possibility of overcoming the anxious patriarchal West Indian state Alexander describes.

NOTES

- ¹ For a complete overview of the Jameson-Ahmad debate, the reader is referred to the following articles: Aijaz Ahmad, 'Jameson's Rhetoric of Otherness and the National Allegory'; Frederic Jameson, 'A Brief Response'; 'On Literary and Cultural Import-Substitution in the Third World: The Case of the Testimonio'; *Postmodernism of the Logic of Late Capitalism*; 'Third World Literature in the Era of Multinational Capitalism'.
- ² For a more extended study of the relationship between nation and subjectivity in Caribbean literature, see Roberto Strongman, *Allegorical I/Lands: Personal and National Development in Caribbean Autobiographical Writing*.
- ³ See Sedgwick, Eve Kosofsky's *Between Men: English Literature and Male Homosocial Desire*. This work analyses the developing of male-male bonds through triangular relations involving a woman. Sedgwick's subsequent work, *Epistemology of the Closet*, suggests the possibility of female homosocial bonds as well (88).
- ⁴ For an extended treatment of this topic, see Lucy Wilson's 'The Novel of Relational Autonomy: West Indian Women Writers and the Evolution of a Genre'.
- ⁵ The following articles are helpful in considering Arenas' flight to the United States as a queer exile and abjection: Emilio Bejel, 'Antes que Anochezca: Autobiografía de un disidente cubano homosexual'; Johannes Birringer, 'Homosexuality and the Revolution: An Interview with Jorge Perugorria'; Robert Ellis, 'The Gay Lifewriting of Reinaldo Arenas: Antes que Anochezca'; Abilio Estevez, 'Between Nightfall and Vengeance: Remembering Reinaldo Arenas'; Kate Mehuron, 'Queer Territories in the Americas: Reinaldo Arenas' Prose'.

WORKS CITED

Ahmad, Aijaz 1987, 'Jameson's Rhetoric of Otherness and the "National Allegory"', *Social Text*, 17, pp. 3–25.

- Alexander, M. Jacqui 1994, 'Not Just (Any) Body Can be a Citizen: The Politics of Law, Sexuality and Postcoloniality in Trinidad and Tobago and the Bahamas', *Feminist Review*, 48, pp. 5–23.
- Arenas, Reinaldo 1998, *Antes que Anochezca*, Tusquets, Barcelona.
- Bejel, Emilio 1996 'Antes que anochezca: Autobiografía de Un disidente cubano homosexual', *Hispanamérica*, 25.74, pp. 29–45.
- Birringer, Johannes 1995, 'Homosexuality and the Revolution: An Interview with Jorge Perugorria', *Cineaste: America's Leading Magazine on the Art and Politics of the Cinema*, 21.1–2, pp. 21–22.
- Condé, Mary 2001, 'The Flight from Certainty in *Shani Mootoo's Cereus Blooms at Night*', in *The Flight from Certainty: The Dilemma of Identity and Exile*, ed. Anne Luyat and Francine Tolron, Rodopi, Amsterdam.
- Cruz-Malavé, Arnaldo 1996, 'What a Tangled Web: Masculinity, Abjection, and the Foundations of Puerto Rican Literature in the United States', *Difference*, 8.1, pp. 132–51.
- Ellis, Robert Richmond 1995, 'The Gay Lifewriting of Reinaldo Arenas: Antes que anochezca', *A/B: Auto/Biography Studies*, 10, pp. 126–44.
- Estevez, Abilio 1994, 'Between Nightfall and Vengeance: Remembering Reinaldo Arenas', *Michigan Quarterly Review*, 33.4, pp. 859–67.
- Fanon, Frantz 1995, *Peau noire, masques blancs*, Éditions du Seuil, Paris.
- Ferguson, Moira 1994, *Jamaica Kincaid: Where the Land Meets the Body*, UP of Virginia, Charlottesville.
- Gopinath, Gayatri 1998, *Queer Diasporas: Gender, Sexuality and Migration in Contemporary South Asian Literature and Cultural Production*, Columbia University, Dissertation Abstracts International, 59.7, 2513. Ann Arbor, MI.
- Jameson, Fredric 1987, 'A Brief Response', *Social Text*, 17, pp. 26–28.
- 1996, 'On Literary and Cultural Import-Substitution in the Third World: The Case of the Testimonio', *The Real Thing: Testimonial Discourse and Latin America*, ed. Georg Gugelberger, Duke UP, Durham.
- 1999, *Postmodernism or The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*, Duke UP, Durham.
- 1986, 'Third-World Literature in the Era of Multinational Capitalism', *Social Text*, 15, pp. 65–88.
- Kincaid, Jamaica 1997, *Annie John*, Noonday, New York.
- 1991, *Lucy*, Plume, New York.
- Kristeva, Julia 1982, *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*, trans. Leon Roudiez, Columbia UP, New York.
- MacDonald-Smythe, Antonia 2001, *Making Homes in the West/Indies: Constructions of Subjectivity in the Writings of Michelle Cliff and Jamaica Kincaid*, Garland, New York.
- McDowell, Edwin 1998, 'Gay Cruises' *New York Times*, 5.4. May 10, p. 3.
- Manalansan, Martin 1995, 'In the Shadows of Stonewall: Examining Gay Transnational Politics and the Diasporic Dilemma', *GLQ*, 2.4, pp. 425–38.

- Mehuron, Kate 1994, 'Queer Territories in the Americas: Reinaldo Arenas' Prose', *Prose Studies*, 17.1, pp. 39–63.
- Mootoo, Shani 1996, *Cereus Blooms at Night*, Grove, New York.
- Sedgwick, Eve Kosofsky 1985, *Between Men: English Literature and Male Homosocial Desire*, Columbia, New York.
- 1990, *Epistemology of the Closet*, U of California P, Berkeley.
- Simmons, Diane 1994, *Jamaica Kincaid*, Twayne, New York.
- Singer, Bennett 1993, *Growing up Gay: A Literary Anthology*, New Press, New York.
- Smyth, Heather 1999, 'Sexual Citizenship and Caribbean-Canadian Fiction: Dionne Brand's *In Another Place, Not Here* and Shani Mootoo's *Cereus Blooms at Night*', *ARIEL*, 30, pp. 141–60.
- Strongman, Roberto 2003, *Allegorical I/Lands: Personal and National Development in Caribbean Autobiographical Writing*, University of California, San Diego, Dissertation Abstracts Database, UMI 3090454, Ann Arbor, MI.
- White, Edmund 1982, *A Boy's Own Story*, E.P., Dutton, New York.
- Wilson, Lucy 1998, 'The Novel of Relational Autonomy: West Indian Women Writers and the Evolution of a Genre', *Orality, Literacy and the Fictive Imagination: African and Diasporan Literatures*, ed. Tom Spencer, Troy, Bedford.