"A Garden of Her Own": Toward a Wilful Politics of Hope in Shani Mootoo's *Out on Main Street*

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Born in ireland to Indian parents and raised in Trinidad, Shani Mootoo chose Canada as her homestead, thus positioning herself amongst those contemporary writers from multicultural and multi-ethnic backgrounds who do not only speak of these hybrid spaces but also engage in the task of bearing witness to those who have been silenced and erased from dominant history and culture. Indeed, by drawing upon her own hybrid identity as an Indo Caribbean Canadian lesbian woman, Mootoo's works evoke an urgent need for narratives of belonging, exploring a set of recurrent dichotomies related to identity categories and notions of place present throughout her fiction, either in the form of homeland (nation) or merely home as a communal space. Indeed, by articulating counter-histories, nostalgia, and recovery, Mootoo aligns herself with other postcolonial Canadian writers whose interest lies in "treatments of buried memory, witnessing, and recuperative healing" (Sugars and Ty 10). Likewise, as I have argued elsewhere, her fiction belongs to a cluster of works aimed at examining a politics of memory that acknowledges the ways in which subjugated groups have sought to shift or transform memory. Additionally, the complex interplay between female sexuality and being a diasporic Caribbean Canadian subject brings to the fore histories

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of exile and trauma that are reflective of "traditionally organized gender perspectives and the denial of homosexual or lesbian life" (Helff and Dalal 73). Whereas in *Cereus Blooms at Night* Mootoo forges the imaginary geographical island of Lantanacamara as a space to challenge colonial modes of oppression that affect marginalized individuals such as Mala and Tyler, in *Out on Main Street* the geographical location of Canada "offers a great freedom to evoke a more autonomous personal space which consciously departs from that of the family and the community to successfully imagined homosexual life worlds in general and lesbian love in particular" (74). As will be shown in the texts under analysis, the real and specific location of "Main Street" in the city of Vancouver offers Janet and her girlfriend a platform of freedom to exist outside the heteronormative order of national belonging. Yet, in the case of Vijai, the heterosexual protagonist of "A Garden of Her Own," the symbolic space of an unknown Francophone North-American city involves the reader in an act of imagination that resists the characters' abandoned dreams and hope as a sign of longing or nostalgia (Corr; Helff and Dalal).

My reception of Mootoo's texts comes from my understanding of queer affect theory not as an exclusive field of inquiry to delve into questions of anti-normative identities but, more specifically, from the recent queer turn toward its fundamental indefinability in the present and the unknowability of its future forms. Such a shift gives way to academic interest in questions of immediate political urgency and strategically forges practices and values that are always relational and therefore cannot be anticipated or foretold. Queer theory's commitment to the word's constant queering makes it a viable platform for political action and intervention in a present time, albeit endlessly open to a future horizon. The importance of mobility and queer relationality in the works of Mootoo inhabits a dynamic and open field of research from which to animate and enact other narratives of cultural identity that embraces notions such as relationality, re-engagement, assemblage, and life, "thanks particularly to queer of color, transnational, disability, and trans scholarship" (Chen 83). Such a relational theory is fully aligned with the positing of affects as an epistemological catalyst in search of other contingent realities, previously disavowed by textual and cultural discourses. In this vein, Mootoo's fiction follows the tradition of pioneering women of colour's writings such as *This Bridge Called My Back: Writings by Radical Women of Color,* edited by Cherríe Moraga and Gloria Anzaldúa in 1983, and Silvera Makeda's *Piece of my Heart: A Lesbian of Colour Anthology* that sought to identify and denounce the systemic violence exerted upon women of colour, poor women, lesbians, and work-

ers. More specifically, they claimed that being lesbians constituted the venue through which their oppression became more fiercely silenced, thus making them more prone to suffering poverty and social exclusion. Their anti-racist and anti-imperialist stance has also been a prevailing defining trait of queer theory, which from its activist genesis has aimed at rendering visibility to people of colour, working-class, HIV positive, and trans persons as an inclusive pattern of political comportment and aesthetic theorization. By claiming the establishment of a symbolic communion of women stripped of violence, hatred, and shame, these works interestingly dismantle the heteronormative structures of love and economics, providing a complementary theoretical framework of affects that underscores anti-racist and anti-homophobic alliances among women.

Out on Main Street is a collection of short stories dealing with a legacy of painful memories and violence at the heart of colonialism, racism, and lesbophobia. As such, it can be defined as an archive of feelings and emotions that overwhelm the lives of its female protagonists: depression, nostalgia, fear, repulsion, guilt, shame, self-destruction, and loss, to name but a few, are frequent psychological states that alienate women and make them more prone to being victims of violence. Some of the stories narrated here constitute pioneering texts that explicitly address lesbian sexuality, since four out of the nine stories depict lesbianism. The other stories focus on unsatisfied and discontented women in heterosexual relationships who suffer extreme psychological and physical violence. Despite embodying pain and ostracism, these women cogently put forward a hopeful space for transformation, from which to become wilful and resilient. As McCormack convincingly argues, such promising potential for change, inherent to Mootoo's politics of female struggle, may emerge from theoretical intersections such as queer and affect theory. In this article, I shall focus on two short stories, "A Garden of Her Own" and "Out on Main Street," as the most representative plots of Mootoo's wilful politics of hope. Rather than explore a rhetoric of traumatic affects like shame, guilt, and humiliation that repeatedly and belatedly appear throughout these narratives, I would like to call for a turn to queer affect as a renewed attempt to incorporate literary and cultural responses for ethical and political responsibility. By drawing on a cross-disciplinary stance, this article attempts to demonstrate that queer and affect theory is a valid tool for the theorization of global narratives of reparation, as it wilfully acknowledges non-pathological and affirming ways of understanding trauma and suffering.

Remarkably enough, this relational theory is fully aligned with the positing of (lesbian) affects as a platform of knowledge and experience from

which to enact our own desires and identity positions. In this respect, Kadji Amin offers "an *attachment genealogy* as a method of exposing, fragmenting, and reworking *queer*'s historical inheritances to enable *queer* to do different work in new contexts" (174). In Amin's view, it is urgent to ground queer in its affective histories that define it as well as to allow it "to do new kinds of work with different objects and archives in a range of historical, cultural, and geographic contexts. This may mean allowing *queer* to come not only to *mean* but also to *feel* differently than it does now" (185). Her *attachment genealogy*, then, has a double purpose: that of excavating queer's multiple pasts and that of thinking about "more historically distant times, racialized populations, and non-US contexts in general" (186). Similarly, according to Mel Chen, we need a queer politics of recognition, that is, a politics that seeks to undo normative patterns of affective kinship through the foregrounding of queer possibilities of intimacy: "queering is immanent to animate transgressions, violating proper intimacies, including between human and non-human things" (11). With these premises in mind, I employ "queer" as a relational category that encompasses diverse forms of affective ties, from lesbian sexuality in "Out of Main Street" to human-nonhuman assemblages in the case of "A Garden of Her Own."

The definitional turn of queer theorists to "the political utility of queer" was sensibly pondered by David Eng, J. Jack Halberstam, and José Esteban Muñoz in the 2005 publication "What's Queer about Queer Studies Now?" They insisted that "the political promise of the term resided specifically in its broad critique of multiple social antagonisms, including race, gender, class, nationality, and religion, in addition to sexuality" (1). Their work paved the way for emergent assumptions of queerness, challenging reductive forms of queer critique and moving away from an exclusive focus on sexuality. Not coincidentally, since then, we have witnessed a progressive evolution in its praxis, one that seeks to analyze not only converging axes of identity categories but also the condition of present-day global emergencies such as "debt, crisis, precarity, bare life, biopolitics, neoliberalism, and empire" (Wiegman 5). Such a shift toward more affective frameworks is also the result of the current dominance of postcritical and posthermeneutic forms of analysis in academia, best illustrated by the turn to new materialism and postanthropocentric theory. It is important to remark that before the "queer turn," the turn to affect was key in paving the way for the configuration of affective approaches to identity. When the turn to affect was introduced in the mid-1990s into cultural criticism and critical theory, "there was the accompanying celebration of border cultures, hyphenated identities, and queered subjectivities that yielded to the elaboration of

melancholy, a focus on trauma, and a worrying about memory that shifted remembering and forgetting to the body" (Gregg and Seigworth 219). A theory of affects, then, wilfully promised nonpathological and affirmative ways of understanding trauma and suffering. Since then, many critics working in queer studies have drawn their theoretical backgrounds and interests in affect theory: from Ann Cvetkovick's use of the productive possibilities of depression "as an entry point into a different kind of cultural studies" (13), to Heather Love's focus on negative affect, such as shame or melancholia, in order to ask questions "about how 'feeling backward' can offer affective resources for queer survival in the political present where forgetting has become the keynote of a progressivist historical consciousness" (23).

Such restorative and wilful move is necessary to re-envision literature as a political form of affection that permeates the past, the present, and the future, if only to be able to transform grief and pain and provide the possibility of solace. Concurrently, this article highlights the ways in which the protagonists' will, resilience, and hope can articulate more productive sites of existence. In order to pose negative feelings as a source of epistemological and political action, I draw on Sara Ahmed's notion of wilful subjects (*Willful Subjects*), which forcibly conveys a wilful politics of being and living in a world torn off by racial, gendered, and sexualized violence. While most female characters in *Out on Main Street* have accepted their condition as cultural bastards, thus underlining their status as non-white, non-straight, and non-human, their wilfulness also attests to their capacity to survive. By framing the structural openness of affects, I will emphasize their malleability and their ability to depathologize negative feelings. Julia Kristeva's conception of melancholia, acedia, and depression as essentially paradoxical highlights the inherent ambivalence of such conditions, for they may "reveal a number of psychic and cognitive frailties" and yet "be the imprint of a humankind that is surely not triumphant but subtle, ready to fight and be creative" (22). Similarly, in seeking to contrive a new topography of feelings in which shame, failure, melancholia, and depression can be rethought as a new affective politics, Ann Cvetkovick suggests that "the goal is to depathologize negative feelings so that they can be seen as a positive source for political action rather than its antithesis" (2). What is at stake here is how to transform those negative feelings and their wounded attachments into a politics of possibility and hope that challenges literary and cultural discourses of affective normalcy. Like the "turn to ethics," the focus on affects must be seen as an invigorating attempt to move beyond

purely discursive levels of understanding, thus displaying political, ethical, aesthetic, and pedagogic capacities to affect and be affected.

Resisting Vulnerability through Gardens

Echoing the title of Virginia Woolf's well-known feminist essay, Mootoo's "A Garden of Her Own" tells us the story of Vijai, a young Indian woman who has just moved to a francophone city in Canada with her husband. In contrast to other postcolonial writings that allege the city as a political and cultural trope to recover from past painful memories, especially for second and third generations of migrants, the reader soon learns that this unnamed city becomes an alienating prison for the female protagonist: "a north-facing balcony meant that no sunlight would enter there. […] There was no window, only a glass sliding door which might have let fresh air in and released second- or third-hand air and the kinds of odours that build phantoms in stuffy apartments" (11). As a migrant woman who cannot speak French, Vijai lives confined to the domestic sphere, cooking and waiting for an absent husband who always arrives late from work and disregards Vijai to the point of making "her arms and legs tingle weakly and her intestines fill up with beads of acid formed out of unease and fear" (12). The expected thrill of a new life in a new place in North America appears as a mere delusion, removed by the harsh reality of loneliness, frustration, and entrapment: "I used to think, if only I lived in North America! But here I am, in this place where exciting things are supposed to happen, in the midst of so much possibility, and for some reason my dreams seem even further away, just out of reach" (20). Such feelings are sharply different from the tenderness and care of Vijai's family when she remembers being with them "sitting down, eating together. Talking together. Conversations with no boundaries, no false politeness, no need to impress Mama or Papa" (14).

The story is told by two different voices: while a heterodiegetic narrator tells us about Vijai's past by means of a subsequent narration and analepses that help to contextualize her past life in a Caribbean country, the reader has access to Vijai's most distressful thoughts and feelings when she becomes the autodiegetic narrator. In striking contrast with respect to her bleak present, Vijai's memories of a blissful past are an illusion, a mere longing that propels her to preserve former experiences of a happier life. Her wilfulness to reunite with her family is simply delusive, as the city does not wipe away personal and cultural memories but, rather, reinforces them. Encapsulating nostalgic feelings of thinking about back home, the city is envisioned here as an archive of sorrowful stories for diasporic subjects:

> Sunlight. I miss the sunlight—yellow light and a sky ceiling miles high. Here the sky sits on my head, heavy grey with snow and freezing rain. […] And what about birds? There are hardly any birds here, only that raucous, aggressive old crow that behaves as if it owns the scraggly pine tree it sits in across the street. The street is so noisy! […] The streets here are so wide! I hold my breath as I walk across them, six lanes wide. And yet, I remember Mama telling us that fast walking, hurrying, was very unladylike. (12, 13, 18)

In addition to coldness, noise, and loneliness, the city also stands for the epitome of violence and danger, especially for women, as Vijai and her family "read about women who suddenly disappear and months later their corpses would be found, having been raped and dumped" (18). In shrill comparison with such urban hostility, the reader finds Vijai evoking images from her homeland that reveal freedom and joy in contemplating nature, such as when she recalls the birds flying slowly, gulping and panting, the coconut tree outside her bedroom or the "green-blue iridescent lizards clinging, upside down" (13).

Central to the nostalgia for the beloved homeland is the concept of the garden. Conceived of as a symbol for belonging, the garden, far from being an innocent space, "is filled with politics and ideology" (Soja 6). As an alternative spatial imaginary, the garden is often associated with rootedness and territoriality, unlike the urban ephemerality and lack of concern with identity. The garden suggests foundations and origins, thus bridging important connections between homeland and the diaspora. More broadly, gardens possess a history of belonging that is linked to a specific aesthetics of colonial identity: from the eighteenth-century artificially-created French Versailles gardens symbolizing balance, harmony, and astonishing symmetry, to those promoted in nineteenth-century England, aspiring to "no other art than that of softening Nature's harshness and copying her graceful touch" (Landry 70). Seeking to imitate the natural world, these gardens enacted a politics of male individual space that favoured the active role of the subject-perceiver over the female object-perceived. The garden as masculinity and coloniality is indeed queered and challenged in this story. Moreover, as Sarah Casteel points out, "the garden's associations with femininity and regeneration encourage a reconsideration of the gendering space and the spatial organization of foundationalist narratives" (14). In this short story, the garden is envisaged as a place for remembrance, providing a robust archive where Vijai's fond memories can be mentally stored. As she states, "but there are always flowers from the garden on the

table. Pink and yellow gerberas, ferns, ginger lilies. That was your happiness, eh Mama? The garden, eh? Thanks for showing that to me, Mama. He's never brought me any flowers. Not even a dandelion" (14). Remarkably enough, it is when Vijai decides to defy her own passivity and inaction that the garden becomes a site of recovery for her fragile identity. Torn between an exacerbated feeling of non-belonging: "I know now that I will never fully leave, nor will I ever truly be here" (18), and her urgent need to find a connection with life: "he doesn't have time for dreaming but I must dream or else I find it difficult to breathe" (19), Vijai finally resorts to a wilful politics of hope that enables her to dream of a better life.

For affect and queer theory, the notion of wilfulness stands out as a dissenting principle from which to create new alliances among literary criticism, cultural theory, and other intellectually enriched paradigms of productive thought. As I see it, the convergence of such interdisciplinary methodologies makes it possible to foresee a political subject that has recourse to thinking and imaging a new model for a future, which is yet to come but which allows for liberating modes of feeling and acting. Significantly, from an Ahmedian perspective, being a wilful subject implies having the freedom to deviate and "not to go with the flow" (11). Vijai's wilfulness endows her with the potential of achieving a psychological and affective development of care and resilience in the most hostile circumstances: being a submissive migrant woman in a foreign city, unloved and abused by her husband, alone and disappointed. Yet, Vijai rebels against her own fate and begins to walk out in the big city on her own, being proud of it: "well, this is the first birthday I've ever spent alone. But next time we speak on the phone I will be able to tell you that I went for a very long walk. Alone" (20). It is now that Vijai decides to go to a library and, instead of "taking down recipes for desserts," she picks up a magazine about "hiking and mountaineering, reading incomprehensible jargon about techniques for climbing" (21). Vijai's wilfulness and strength of determination also allow her to challenge her mother's docility and submissiveness toward her father, always already waiting for him, even though "sometimes he wouldn't come for days" (14). Rather than wait for her husband, "what Vijai really wanted to do was to go for the long drive up to a glacier in the nearby mountains" (22), thus leaving her lack of action aside and engaging in a self-rewarding circle of possibility and hope.

What is interesting in Vijai's will is that she seeks to elaborate on interwoven relationships between human and non-human entities that, far from enacting a strict pattern of feelings and emotions set exclusively within and among human beings, can also attest to other paradigms of

love and restorative care by means of attachments to nature, animals, and inanimate objects. Authors like Sedgwick (*Touching Feeling*), Ahmed (*The Cultural Politics of Emotion),* and Munt (*Queer Attachments*) have conspicuously remarked that an ethics of human affects must necessarily resort to other "queer attachments" as a mechanism that can serve to disavow pathological attachments to loss, extreme suffering, and trauma. More recently, from a new materialist perspective, Rosi Braidotti takes up Spinoza's boundary between "the portion of life—both organic and discursive—that has traditionally been reserved for *anthropos*, that is to say, bios, and the wider scope of animal and non-human life, also known as *zoe*" (*The Posthuman* 60). Braidotti's position accounts for practices that define the mattering of the world; that is, she envisages a radical continuum between nature and culture, a "nature-cultural and humanimal transversal bonding" ("Critical Posthumanities" 1), which stems from Spinoza's monistic ontology. Accordingly, critical posthumanism is engaged in the egalitarian ethics of defining subjectivity as intertwined by complex assemblages of human and non-human forces. This explains the urgency to theorize *zoe*, the non-human but vital force of life. Braidotti defines *zoe* as the core of posthuman ethics, embracing analyses of power that denounce social and economic forms of exclusion and dominations of all types (Spivak; Mbembe).

Stretching her previous theorizations on the female nomadic subject, Braidotti further elaborates on nomadic lines of transversal research; namely, "feminist, queer, migrant, poor, de-colonial, diasporic, diseased humanities" ("Critical Posthumanities" 19) that track new border crossings capable of providing solutions for real-life threats, such as environmental disasters, climatic migration, species extinction, poverty, neoliberal epistemic violence, and pandemic diseases. If a posthuman ethics involves the formation of new alliances among active minoritarian subjects, the plea for inclusion and sustainability must be defined by a horizontal conceptualization of the nature-culture continuum, one that aims at sustaining an "intra-action" politics (Barad, "Posthumanist Performativity"), accounting for non-human and human forms of agency as well as for other forms of intervention envisaged by transcorporeality, queer ecologies, and posthuman feminist ethics. Interestingly, such a relational motivation has also been endorsed by previous generations of feminists working in the fields of ecofeminism (Cuomo) and queer ecologies (Mortimer-Sandilands), for whom sexual politics is deeply influenced by environmental-spatial dimensions and rural and urban spaces in the promotion and configuration of sexual identities. Places and spaces do matter. Vijai's building of her own

garden may be read as a symbolic attempt to remake the home-space and transform it into a safe and affective place from which to construct "a more reciprocal and interactive relationship between human and environment than does the fetishized wilderness adventure that has been the domain of straight white men" (Stein 295).

Likewise, Mortimer-Sandilands analyzes the garden "as a metaphor for queer possibility" (351), creating a type of "holy queerness for the dispossessed whose history is written out of conservative natural heritages-natures" (350). Vijai's garden can be defined as queer, not only because she re-creates this space as a site of resistance against her melancholic fits but also because it holds "the possibility for memory's transformation into ethical and political environmental reflection" (354) that allow her to move on. In other words, the understanding of natural spaces and the interaction with them may help to frame these ecological practices as sites of resistance and exploration from which to theorize human/non-human relationships. The task of a posthuman ethics, then, seems to revolve around reparative feminist and queer theories of mutual interconnectedness in order to bring them to the fore and offer a thorough account of the symbiotic relation between self and other. In fact, the garden further allows us to think of compelling theoretical possibilities in which the main aim is "to do collaborative research, to be in touch, in ways that enable response-ability" (Barad, "On Touching" 208). According to Barad, "theorizing, a form of experimenting, is about being in touch. What keeps theories alive and lively is being responsible and responsive to the world's patterning and murmurings" (207). By entangling the intimacy of different epistemologies and theorizing the sensual metaphor of "touch," a more communitarian ethics and productive aesthetic spaces could be drawn since, as Barad asks herself, "is touching not by its very nature always already an involution, invitation, invisitation, wanted or unwanted, of the stranger within?" (207). As I see it, such generous and empathic formulations should stimulate the inclusion of queer affects and arguments from migration restrictions that do not reproduce isolating segregation. This archeology of emotions insists on Spinoza's contention that "no one has yet determined what the body can do" (quoted in Gregg and Seigworth 3), addressing the "not-yet" as a contingent site for intentionality and action. Aligned with this thought, Ahmed claims that "the subject that comes after, such as the guest, the migrant, or the stranger also signifies the not-yet-subject" (*The Promise of Happiness* 123) that is core for predicting "an energetic relationship to a future of possibility" (37). And so, Vijai

> went to the gardening section, and bought half a dozen packages of flower seeds, half a dozen packages of vegetable seeds, a bag of soil, fertilizer, a fork and spade, a purple plastic watering can, and a score of nursery trays. She brought it all home in a taxi. Enough to keep her busy and in his apartment for an entire Sunday. *She was becoming adept at finding ways to get what she wanted.* (22, emphasis added)

Vijai's behaviour must be seen as the germ for a new ethics of affects in which a more egalitarian relationship toward the non-human may bring about the full or partial recovery from negative feelings. It is when Vijai creates her own garden on the balcony that she watches a French station channel for the very first time and "begins to be able to repeat advertisements in French" (23). This is the promise of an expectant narrative that strives for the "might," a present and future-oriented hope that anticipates new epistemological and ontological positions and keeps open the possibility of the "not-yet." So, imagining an affective turn in literature not only implies forging a politics of empathy and hope but also rethinking assumptions about immigration, loneliness, and abandonment and about the need for humankind to take responsibility for such acts.

"Cultural Bastards. Dat is what we is": On Shame and Lesbian Identity

In his brilliant novel *Shame*, Salman Rushdie states that "shame is at the roots of violence" (116). Indeed, shame is a powerful and painful affect that may produce harmful effects for the human being, ranging from a strong desire for concealment, dissolution of the self, amnesia, or inability to speak. Unlike other affects like guilt or pride, shame attacks the global system of one's self-esteem, signaling a social and personal failure in front of the presence of another. Although shame is a universal human feeling that most people may experience occasionally, the effects of institutional violence, homophobia, and racism often contribute to fostering a more negative topography of affects and emotions. As Ahmed has argued, "such forms of discrimination can have negative effects, involving pain, anxiety, fear, depression and shame, all of which can restrict bodily and social mobility" (*Cultural Politics* 154). On the other hand, Judith Butler's concept of "precarious and ungrievable lives" appeals to the burden of starvation, underemployment, legal disenfranchisement, and exposure to violence and death as an account of lives inhabiting a threatening liminal space of subjectivity and epistemological unknowability. In a similar vein, in her critique of the sovereign subject, Wendy Brown alerts us to the "wounded

attachments" that those who have historically been denied sovereignty inhabit as a consequence of subordination and exclusion that comes out of histories of racism, sexism, and homophobia. Such ungrievable lives and wounded attachments, I would argue, create wounded subjects who threaten the epistemological and ontological boundaries of normalcy and humanity required by the status quo. Those injuries may produce, in turn, negative feelings like rage, aggression, and resentment. In Cvetkovick's words: "the goal is to depathologize negative feelings so that they can be seen as a positive source for political action rather than its antithesis" (2). What is at stake here is how to transform those negative feelings and their wounded yet melancholic attachments into a politics of possibility and hope that challenge academic and cultural discourses of racialization, heteronormativity, and affective normalcy. Drawing upon the work of Silvan Tomkins,[1] Jonathan Flatley argues that the transformation of affects entails that any "invisible, opaque, difficult, abstract and above all depressing reality may be transformed into one that is interesting, that solicits and rewards one's attention" (4).

Conceived of as a powerful deleterious emotion, shame can destroy the inner self and, yet, it can also foster a platform for rebirth and renewal. For Tomkins, shame becomes a mobilizing agent of the self that can produce a renewed identity. In "Out on Main Street," the ambivalence of shame is understood as a stigmatized and pathological affect that can produce violence when turned against oneself. Mootoo's story showcases an Indo-Trinidadian lesbian couple who feel as outsiders when they go to Main Street to eat Indian food in a restaurant. This urban space is described as hostile for butch lesbians, as it is overtly heterosexualized, for "everybody stop talking and was watching dem" (52), thus making them feel alienated within their own community. As Alicia Menéndez-Tarrazo points out, "Mootoo's story, however, explores the problematics of accepting and embracing one's identity as diasporic when faced with rejection from those encountered communities one would like to identify with" (103). Both the unnamed autodiegetic narrator and her girlfriend Janet have transgressed the boundaries of sexual and ethnic normalcy, being singled out for harassment and "marked by unwanted violence against their bodies in the name of a normative notion of the human, a normative notion of what the body of a human must be" (Butler 33). While their mixed blood heritage, vernacular language, and lesbian sexuality bolster the vulner-

1 All references to Tomkins's main work, *Affect Imagery Consciousness (1962–92)*, are quoted from the revised edition selected and edited by Sedgwick and Frank (1995).

ability of their bodies, impinging upon them as well, they chart a shameful sense of displacement and inferiority: "we is watered-down Indians—we ain't good grade A Indians. We skin brown […] Cultural bastards, Janet, cultural bastards. Dat is what we is" (45, 51).

Such a structural failure is further reinforced when the narrator doesn't even know the proper names to order the Indian "meethai, jilebi, sweetrice" (49) at the Kush Valley Sweets restaurant. Not coincidentally, many critical trends within queer studies have pointed out that the affect of shame is the foundational structure of minority groups. Shame is conceived of as a powerful spatial emotion, "effecting displacement and effacement in its subjects" (Munt 80) but also as a structure of feeling which may incorporate a productive account of personal, communal, and national identities. The potentiality of shame to be transformed into positive affects has been thoroughly theorized by Tomkins, who elaborated on a theory of affects based upon a distinction between drives and affects. Unlike the instrumentality of drives, for Tomkins affects are endowed with a greater structural freedom both in intensity and time. Or, to put it otherwise, while drives have a restricted freedom of time because they depend on the biological urgency to satisfy them, the affect system is provided with inhibitors and activators of other affects which may change their initial response. Such a contingency makes affects autotelic, that is, self-reinforcing rather than self-fulfilling, thus challenging the teleological relationship between an affect and its object. As he puts it:

> Any affect may have any "object." This is the basic source of complexity of human motivation and behaviour. […] Affects can be, and are, attached to things, people, ideas, sensations, activities, ambitions, institutions, and any number of other things, including other affects. Thus, one can be excited by anger, disgusted by shame or surprised by joy. (quoted in Sedgwick and Frank 54)

Interestingly, Tomkins focuses on shame as one of the most alienating and self-destructive affects that can also regulate feelings of "Interest-Excitement" and "Enjoyment-Joy" (153), which are the essential affects connected to our desires, hopes, dreams, and loves. In short, these are indispensable activators for positive affects linked to joy and life. According to Tomkins, "joy and excitement provide rewards which enable human beings to counteract fear, distress and shame" (57). In a similar vein, Butler vindicates the productive role of grief and vulnerability when it comes to making ourselves secure and human: "we cannot, however, will away this

vulnerability. We must attend to it, even abide by it" (29). The transformation of shame and vulnerability into a resource for ethics and politics must be envisaged as a queer turn to plenitude rather than depletion, to resilience rather than abandonment, to accretion rather than loss.

The transformation of shame and vulnerability into a resource for ethics and politics must be envisaged as a queer turn to plenitude.

Indeed, this is what happens in "Out on Main Street" where, despite the cultural and sexual violence that Western and dominant diasporic societies have imposed on the two lesbian protagonists, they are able to overcome their position as shameful objects and embody, instead, a hopeful politics of affects. This achievement is partly due to the use of humour and irony as subversive vehicles that contribute to turning shame into a psychic act of survival. This is the case when the female narrator is reluctant to go to Main Street with her girlfriend Janet because she is just too pretty to handle in public: "Yuh see, Janet pretty fuh so! And I don't like de way men does look at she […] because she has long hair loose and flying about like she is a walking-talking shampoo ad" (48). Not only does Janet—all dressed and made up—look like a "walking-talking shampoo ad" that catches every man's eyes and makes every woman jealous. Above all, "walking next to Janet, who so femme dat she redundant" makes the narrator "look like a gender dey forget to classify" (48). Such a depiction of binary lesbian genders, that is, the femme and the butch, is at the basis of a collective imagery in which the butch lesbian poses a threat to heteronormativity because of her queer masculinity while Janet, the femme stereotype, is called "dear" and "touched on her back" (55) by the waiter who "he crazy to mess with my woman, yes!" (56). While the narrator is well aware of the openly homophobic hostility and contained embarrassment in the restaurant, her presence as a butch lesbian paves the way for transgression. Moreover, her queer masculinity is just but another shameful stigma that is exacerbated when Sandy and Lise, two butch lesbian friends of the protagonists, enter the restaurant:

> Soon as dey enter de room yuh could see de brothers and de couple men customers […] dey eyes bulging with disgust. And de women in de room start shoo-shooing, and putting dey hand in front dey mouth to stop dey surprise, and false teeth, too, from falling out. Sandy and Lise spot us instantly and dey call out to us, shameless, loud and affectionate. (56)

Oscillating between empowerment and failure, the butch lesbian becomes vulnerable and susceptible to suffering homophobic shame as an affect that strikes the deepest sense of one's lesbian identity. This is so because, as a keystone affect, shame attacks the global system of

self-esteem and points to an individual and social failure of the person who suffers it involving painful self-scrutiny and feelings of worthlessness and powerlessness. Although the representation of both ethnic and sexual shame can be utterly destructive, Mootoo's "Out on Main Street" is imbued with a set of elements which attest to the double-edged condition of such homophobic shame: as a stigma, it represents the failure or absence of contact, indicating personal and social isolation: "I looking forward to de day I find out dat place inside me where I am nothing else but Trinidadian, whatever dad could turn out to be" (52). And yet, as previously pointed out, the devastating effects of shame can be neutralized by resetting affects such as joy, excitement, love, or humour. As the narrator remarks:

> But if I ain't walking like a strong-man monkey I doh exactly feel right and I always revert back to mih true colours. De men dem does look at me like if dey is exactly what I need a taste of to cure me good and proper. […] And de women dem embarrass fuh so to watch me in mih eye, like dey fraid I will jump up and try to kiss them, or make pass at them. Yuh know, sometimes I wonder if I ain't mad enough to do it just for a little bacchanal, nah! (48)

In this line, I would suggest that while this short story showcases a set of attachments to loss—the reiterated loss of whiteness, heterosexuality and Western middle-class values—it also establishes a negotiation between loss and recovery through temporal manifestations of self-empowerment. This racial and gender shame is neither pathological nor permanent, but, rather, as Raymond Williams would put it, it is "a structure of feeling" (quoted in Munt 15), an everyday feeling that is compelled to become a dynamic force of rebirth and renewal. The predominant role of shame over other affects in the formation of identity and its potential to alter pathological accounts of minority identities based on their race, sexuality, class, or nationality must be seen as meaningful clues possessing a contingent drive toward the healing and flourishing of traumatized individuals and communities. Likewise, Munt theorizes on the notion of shame as produced by the circulation of different emotions that can be easily attached to "envy, hate, contempt, apathy, painful self-absorption, humiliation, rage, mortification and disgust" (2). Furthermore, she considers shame as a mobilizing agent of the self and communities that "can also produce a reactive, new self that has a liberatory energy" (80). If the forms taken by shame are available for the work of metamorphosis and

transfiguration, a distinction can be drawn, then, between shame as a monolithic entity that prevents any productive effect of trauma and as a malleable affect that can be turned back against itself to re-create a new narrative of recovery. In this narrative such a reparative feeling stems from the connection and love between two women belonging to different ethnic, cultural, and religious backgrounds within the Canadian diaspora. Not only do these women transgress the ontological and epistemological boundaries of heteronormativity but also challenge dominant diasporic identities by means of a sheer and powerful endurance revealing their struggle for happiness and love.

There is always a relational vulnerability that constitutes us socially.

Conclusion

As thoroughly exposed in this article, the theoretical combination of queer affect theory and critical posthumanism has proven to be a strong critical paradigm from which to forge new horizons and ethical action in literature. The fact that so many of us resort to very different theorists and political realities of social subjects may reveal the ideological, aesthetic, and ethical dimensions interwoven by contingency, responsibility, and agency. This is the case of the female protagonists in Mootoo's *Out on Main Street*; their very definition as "people who get branded as 'others.' They are the sexualized, racialized, and naturalized others, who are reduced to less than human status of disposable bodies" (Braidotti, *The Posthuman* 15), giving us the opportunity to bring to self-consciousness the sociopolitical conditions of normativity. For Braidotti, the human norm stands for "normality, normalcy and normativity" (26) and her anti-humanist stance suggests a complex relational subject "framed by embodiment, sexuality, affectivity, empathy and desire as core qualities" (26).

Braidotti's approach resembles Kimberly Crenshaw's concept of "intersectionality," which fosters a methodological scheme to encompass the epistemological conditions of being a black and poor woman, questioning horizons of exclusion in the terrain of gender, race, class, and sexuality. Likewise, Butler has thoroughly examined the social and political exclusion of heightened vulnerable subjects and the conceptions of who is normatively human. The question that preoccupies her is "Who counts as human? Whose lives count as lives? And, finally, what makes for a grievable life?" (20). For Butler, we are all done and undone by each other; there is always a relational vulnerability that constitutes us socially. Yet, specific political conditions exacerbate such vulnerability, triggering violence, grief, loss, and other models of dispossession. The experience of otherness merges into an encounter with alterity in and through dif-

ferent narratives; however, such a condition opens up the possibility of action and transformation. Whereas Vijai, Janet, and the female narrator become dispossessed and disposable, led by racist, misogynist, and lesbophobic practices of discrimination and ontological mutilation, there is still room for self-transformation due to their affective and imaginative choices. Mootoo's fiction encourages us to imagine other people, other cultures, other societies and values, powerfully representing "*zoe* as the dynamic, self-organizing structure of life itself" that "stands for generative vitality" (Braidotti, *The Posthuman* 60). In the wake of a convoluted contemporary view of reality, the role of literature to bestow affects and hope upon readers should be endorsed deeply and responsibly.

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