

On “Moving Forward” Toward the Un/familiar An Interview with Shani Mootoo

Mariam Pirbhai

Volume 40, Number 1, 2015

URI: https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/sc140_1art12

[See table of contents](#)

Publisher(s)

The University of New Brunswick

ISSN

0380-6995 (print)

1718-7850 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

Cite this article

Pirbhai, M. (2015). On “Moving Forward” Toward the Un/familiar: An Interview with Shani Mootoo. *Studies in Canadian Literature / Études en littérature canadienne*, 40(1), 227–241.

On “Moving Forward” Toward the Un/familiar: An Interview with Shani Mootoo

MARIAM PIRBHAI

SHANI MOOTOO IS A NOVELIST, POET, visual artist, and videographer. She was born in Dublin, Ireland, in 1957; her parents returned to their natal Trinidad when she was a mere three months of age. Mootoo lived in San Fernando, one of the larger cities on Trinidad’s southwestern coast, before she immigrated to Canada in 1981. She directed numerous short films between 1989 and 2000, including *English Lessons* (1989) and *Her Sweetness Lingers* (1998). Her visual art has been exhibited worldwide, including shows at the New York Museum of Modern Art in 1994 and 1995, and is housed in several collections, including Canada’s National Gallery.

Mootoo’s literary career began with the publication of a short story collection, *Out on Main Street* (Press Gang, 1992), after which she published a volume of poetry, *Predicament of Or* (Raincoast/Polestar, 2002), and four novels. Her first novel, *Cereus Blooms at Night* (Press Gang, 1996; republished by McClelland and Stewart, 2005), was longlisted for the Man Booker prize and shortlisted for Canada’s Giller Prize. *He Drown She in the Sea* (Grove Atlantic, 2005) was longlisted for the International Dublin IMPAC Literary Award, and *Valmiki’s Daughter* (House of Anansi Press, 2008) was longlisted for the Giller Prize. Her most recent novel, *Moving Forward Sideways Like a Crab* (Doubleday, 2014), was also longlisted for the Giller Prize and was a finalist, in the category of “Transgender Fiction,” for the 27th Annual Lambda Literary Awards.¹

The following interview was conducted in January 2015, while Mootoo had just begun her appointment as the University of Toronto’s Writer in Residence.



Mariam Pirbhai: Shani, your trajectory as a writer has been unique, insofar as you have spoken about the Vancouver-based publisher Press Gang, which published your first short story collection *Out on Main Street* and debut novel *Cereus Blooms at Night*, soliciting your work at a time when you were not thinking about a writing career. How would you describe the evolution of your writing career since that initial push, by Press Gang, to publish your work?

Shani Mootoo: When Barbara Keuhn of Press Gang asked me to consider writing “something” for them, I protested, saying that I was a visual artist, not a writer. Of course, I saw in their persistence an opportunity to try my hand at another medium, and to have the small glory of a book published with my name on the cover. I decided to give it a shot, never intending to do more than this, just that once. I hadn’t anticipated how much I would enjoy it and certainly didn’t expect that it would become my main avenue of creativity. One thing that hasn’t changed over the twenty-two years since then and the course of six published books is my basic, fundamental approach to the writing of a book. I believe I still think like an artist in terms of approach. That is, I always want to discover something new, not only in terms of knowledge or understanding of a topic or topics, or about the nature of story-telling, but in terms of the construction of a work — structure, style, point of view — and always there is a question about *raison d’être*: why this story, why tell this story, of what value is it, etc.

What has changed is my confidence in writing. I used to present my work — i.e., drafts, the final manuscript, etc. — to the publisher with a question mark in my eyes. Is this OK? Is it any good? Now I still present it like a child, but with a grin and a “look, look what I did this time!” confidence. I work with a publisher now who encourages me to write until I have said what I want to say, to write until I get it right. I know she will reign me in if necessary, but it’s been quite the opposite, so far. This gives me time and space to develop, not just a story, but the smaller ideas in the story. Such permission gives me confidence. I don’t think publishing is in a place now where this sort of play and allowance for discoveries is encouraged. And perhaps with my next book there’ll be fewer permissions. I don’t know. As I develop as a writer, the industry too is developing, but we are traveling in opposite directions; we are not in sync with each other.

MP: Thinking of discoveries and new directions, I have noted that while your first novel, *Cereus Blooms at Night*, is set in a mythical island named Lantanacalara, your subsequent novels immerse the reader more explicitly in your native Trinidad. For example, *Valmiki's Daughter* invites the reader, from its opening pages, into the inner sanctum of two Indo-Trinidadian families in the city of San Fernando, where you spent your childhood and young adulthood. Could you comment on this shift in the creative process, from the surreal and impressionist to the intimately circumscribed landscapes and communities of contemporary Trinidad?

SM: As a visual artist my work was experimental enough that it drew to itself an alternative audience. These people were often like-minded, sympathetic to an art that was not entirely art for art's sake, but used its medium to talk of contemporary issues. It walked a line between activism and art that was about and for itself. It was not the kind of work that people "back home" or that people who lived here in Canada but were from Trinidad would go to see. I would eventually meet Trinidadians who inhabited my art world, but they were, like me, in a sort of self-exile, dealing with subjects our families would not have approved of.

When my first book came out, the short story collection *Out on Main Street*, I was utterly shocked at how far away from me that book traveled. Remember I had not gone in search of a writing career. Publishing came to me, and I knew nothing about it, hadn't thought about the reach of book distribution. I was mortified that I had exposed myself, my thoughts, my ideas, which, having been expressed now in words rather than in paint, could not be denied. But I was trapped. I found that I was greatly enamoured of writing. There was this, and then one more thing: one of the main reasons I loved making art was that it was a place where I could search hard for small truths, where I could try and pry open the mysteries of life as I saw them. If I were going to write seriously, I would need to be able to carry on these same projects in words, in stories, in books. Books that would eventually reach my family in Trinidad. That would be read by Trinidadians who knew my family. The family was well-known. My father used to be a prominent politician. His daughter would be seen to be writing about things that, back there, people didn't like hearing about.

The story of my first novel centered on sexual abuse. It is a subject that gets a lot of attention now in Trinidad, but back then, those two words could not even be spoken out loud. I also wanted in that book to introduce queer characters, by way of saying that in the future I will likely write more about alternative lifestyles. *Cereus* was a way of introducing myself. I felt that if I wanted to court an audience instead of alienate it, I should not set the story in Trinidad, regardless of how badly I wanted to use the opportunity to paint that place that I loved, and still do love, in words. By the time I came to write *Valmiki's Daughter*, more than ten years later, I felt angry with Trinidad for not taking care of its citizens who lived alternative lifestyles. I was angry with Trinidad as a country of laws, rules, norms, expectations, and with Trinidadians. Of course there were little safe corners that queer people could exist in, but who wants to live in a corner? And there were people who didn't discriminate, but these people were a tiny minority. I decided that the time for protecting, courting, cajoling, was long past. I wanted people to see their neighbourhoods, to see their city, and to see themselves.

MP: It is no small achievement, then, that your novels have been widely read, both here and abroad, not only for their ground-breaking articulations of queer identities, but also for daring to tackle subjects otherwise considered unspeakable or unnameable. But there is always an underlying spirit of empathy and compassion in the way you approach these subjects, even toward those who may be the object of critique. This leads me to the poetic phrase, a “shared queerness,” in *Cereus Blooms at Night*, which has stayed with me since my earliest reading of your first novel. I have come to appreciate this phrase as a kind of philosophical axiom, which I have referred to elsewhere as an “ethics of interrelation” between the people and ecology of Lantanacamara.² Could you describe what this phrase means to you?

SM: I don't remember using the phrase. It was a long time ago. But when I consider it now, I think, “Yes! But . . .” The “yes” part has to do with something simple: a necessary complicity (say, for political, for security reasons), a way of creating community/chosen family, a willing, almost joyful recognition of oneself in the other. Of course the shared aspect can also be thought of as having been *forced* upon the queered (one can, as you know, queer oneself, or one can be made queer by a dominant outside that set itself up as the standard). When I play out

this line of thinking, the idea of this queerness being shared begins to fracture and seem like a partial fiction, and that brings me to the “but” part. But . . . I think queerness worn like a cloak, or like armour, or proudly as a badge, takes on the role of an identity. It declares, and is a way to own, one’s terrifying difference. It can become a habit, if not turn into something like a layer of skin. For some, it can become a prison of its own. This brings up the problem that is heralded by my “but.” It is a problem that I recognized early on in the days of my involvement in race politics, and in lesbian and gay politics: we came together as one, in order to stand up against an oppressor. (Not so incidentally, the *unified front* that we became faced an oppressor that itself also had to, despite its own interior differences, work as one.) It didn’t in the long run mean that when we turned away from the oppressor and looked at the group we had become that we saw what we liked. There were people of colour who didn’t like the lesbian part of me. There were white gays and lesbians to whom I was invisible. There were lesbians and gay men of colour who were actively suspicious of each other because of the recognition in each other’s mannerisms of the politics of race and class privileges specific to the places we left when we ran away to Canada. Even if someone said, I like this part of you, but not that part, one can’t divide up one’s self for their sakes, or for the sake of a pretend shared community, no matter how lonely one is, without going insane. But that is old news. In terms of that phrase, a shared queerness, I think it is possible for the habit to mean that even when queers get together with no one else around, the individual queer needs to assert their queerness as singular and unique — different from the other queers in the room, and therefore special. Doesn’t everyone want to be special? Habitual queerness, even celebrated queerness, I think can evolve into something more personalized — a benign eccentricity, often in the form of a kind of flamboyance. This might be an exhibition of one’s liberation from the expectations of normalcy, a statement of liberation from the prison of the group, liberation from the prison of one’s internalized fears, but I wonder if it isn’t yet another way of setting oneself up to court further trouble on the outside. A shared queerness might work to offer a sense of false security; what if that sense of security renders us even more vulnerable when we’re on the outside of our specialized groups? I guess I am answering your question from the point of view of one who has seen good changes in attitudes to difference, both within and outside

of groups where an ethics of interrelation might exist, but who still sees evidence, *within the groups*, of a failure of those very ethics.

MP: Picking up on your point about “liberation” from particular habitations or encodings of identity, be they self-generated or imposed, I wonder how you feel about the fact that your novels have also been largely theorized from this critical vantage point — that is, by way of your designation, by much of the academic community, as a “queer writer.” Could you speak to this designation and its particular currency or constraints for the writer and writing communities?

SM: Once my work is published, I’ve come to realize, what happens to it is largely out of my control. To a certain extent, I can discuss with my publisher how I’d like them to position me and the book. Other than that, I have no say. It is something that I’ve learned to live with. As I write, I can play to outside perceptions and designations, or I can counter them, or I can try to stay away from the voices of critics and from responding strategies. I learned this with my first book, *Out on Main Street*. It came as a shock to me that so many communities thought I was writing for them — intentionally writing for them. It was that time when we were in fact beginning to see the published works of minority/marginalized writers, and readers were thrilled, were eager to see stories that reminded them of “themselves,” of their worlds. That was wonderful. But with that, I found that I was also being claimed by several groups — by South Asians, women in general, South Asian women, Trinidadian women, lesbians, lesbians of colour, South Asian lesbians, Trinidadian lesbians of South Asian descent. It was claustrophobic, and I did feel torn apart, as if I were beginning to lose some sort of wholeness, however imagined. When I wrote *Cereus Blooms at Night*, I have to admit, I did employ strategies that tried to say, I don’t want to be owned by anyone, or by any group. I wanted to burrow deep into myself and find my own truths. I had a sense that if I tried to be honest, good, open, and appeal to the humanist I hoped existed in me, that I would still speak to all of these people and to more than these. I’d speak, too, to the very people who wouldn’t otherwise have wanted much to do with me and my kind. In other words, I wanted to try and communicate with those who weren’t as yet converted. This is what I’ve continued to do. It forces me to think deeply and long, and to try and find the angles and words that would flesh out ideas, for myself,

and also to communicate them to the most unlikely. Maybe I succeed, maybe I don't in terms of the latter. It pleases me greatly that my work is read in the university. But I can't let this bonus influence me.

MP: While I can appreciate the writer striving to maintain a healthy distance from “the voices of critics,” I wonder if you could also speak to other kinds of costs to the writer and the reading public when a particular work or a particular aspect of one's *oeuvre* dominates the terms of reception? For instance, at least in the Canadian academy, *Cereus Blooms at Night* is the novel that continues to receive the most critical attention as part of a minority or “queer” canon, at the expense, it would seem, of your later works. What are the critical deficits that might accrue from such forms of canonization?

SM: I hope you realize you're opening, for me, a can of worms! The release of *Cereus Blooms at Night*, my first novel, nineteen years ago, coincided with a new awareness in many walks of life, including the university, of writers and artists of colour, gays and lesbians. Many of us had been working for a long time, but suddenly we were brought out of our ghettos. Our work got taken up and devoured by a mainstream whose eyes seemed suddenly to have opened to our presence. The work seemed to be ground-breaking at the time, but I think it was, really, *audiences* — including, again, the university crowd — who were the ones breaking ground by being receptive to these culture producers and to the subject of our work, which inevitably dealt with issues of identity. This receptivity paved the way for me, for one, to be able to hone my craft and create more work. It is, in good part, what the activism prior to twenty years ago was about. Access. Visibility. The right to the opportunity to try, and perhaps to succeed, or, having had that opportunity, to fail honestly. It appeared to me then that I was being brought out into the light. But twenty years on I feel that I have been stuck in another ghetto, one created in the universities. What I mean is, save for the works that came out of that hot, politically charged period in the nineties, save, that is, for those novels that were doubtlessly good works, if not always great works, and that are already on course lists, there is not much new work being added to the canon, either by those same queer writers or by new ones. It happened that many of us who got taken up had just written our first novels, and, equally important, we were being published by presses that had not had a history of publish-

ing people from these particular marginalized groups and therefore had not carried such subject matter before. One can't help but wonder if the "queerness" that is mandatory for inclusion in the present-day canon is imagined only to be authentic in first works that came out of a time when queerness had political currency and became topical? Is queer writing that is worth paying attention to a thing of the past? Wouldn't it be interesting to see how those very issues are being dealt with today by those same writers? We're currently writing in the context of a time and place where a great deal has changed regarding issues of identity and at the same time when much has remained the same. I think it is short-sighted not to go to those very authors who were thought to be breaking ground, to see what we have all been doing. Another first novel, *The Edible Woman*, which created quite a stir, comes to mind now. But that book's author is not relegated to the ghetto of feminism and is recognized for other works besides that first. When I look at the rest of her body of work, I learn even more about *The Edible Woman*, about its author and her time. Why have the more recent works of so many of us who continue to write and to win prizes and garner nominations and critical acclaim not been brought into the canon? Is it that I, for instance, have not written anything of worth since that first novel? The reviews, nominations, invitations, and interest in further work from publishers suggest otherwise. I think *Moving Forward Sideways Like a Crab* is as advanced for its time as *Cereus Blooms at Night* was for its, and is also, I think, a much more mature book in every way. But will it be picked up at universities? It's too soon to know, of course. Or are newer professors still riding the coattails of the ones who originally brought race and queerness to the canon? I don't know the constraints faculty must deal with in creating course lists, of course, so I pose these questions out of ignorance. But I'm really wondering if, in maintaining a canon put together some twenty years ago, might there not be a mindless kind of ghettoization, and by extension, a kind of unmeant racism at work, here, too? If we are not to remain tokens (albeit grateful tokens), might it not be better if those of us who got named "queer" or who were raced because of our first books came to be seen as "real" writers because of our body of work, some of which might be explicitly "queer" and others not?

MP: This is a fitting moment, then, to turn our attention to your latest novel, *Moving Forward Sideways Like a Crab*, which not only bears

a kind of prescience but also advances your craft through its unique formal structure and experimentation in voice — that is, as a retrospective first-person account by a straight white (Canadian) male, Jonathan, who is in search of a lost (Trinidadian) parent Sid Mahale (his lesbian mother’s former partner), only to find that Sid has undergone a gender transformation, through reassignment surgery, in her later years. Indeed, the reader encounters Jonathan in the throes of mourning a “version” of a parent that no longer appears to exist, while also coming to terms with the actual death of Sid (Sydney), through what is essentially a writerly act. How did you arrive at the characters of Jonathan and Sid/Sydney? What is it about their story that compelled you forward (and perhaps sideways)?

SM: Once the final manuscript of *Valmiki’s Daughter* had been sent off to the publisher, I took a trip to Trinidad. At a dinner there I was seated next to V.S. Naipaul. He challenged me to write what I didn’t know, rather than what I knew. It’s quite the opposite of what even I thought a writer “should” do. But I was intrigued. I took the challenge to mean that I should step outside of my comfort zone. It was a loose interpretation, but it led me to attempting to write snow. I love the Trinidad landscape and feel that when I write it, I am writing a love letter to that place. Although I have lived in Canada for about thirty years, however, I have not been able to find my own language for the landscape here, or for the weather. I decided to try and find my own interpretation of snow and cold, in words. I began writing a snowstorm in which a person was walking. I didn’t know who the person was, the gender of the person, or why they were in a snowstorm. If I knew anything it was that the person was likely from the Caribbean. This would allow me to “see” the snow, to feel the cold, to try and find words for it, in ways that someone who had been here all their life might not have access to, if only because they took the weather for granted.

During the writing of this, a sort of exercise that I was engaged in for weeks, somewhat aimlessly, I found myself one evening at a birthday party for a man who had once been a woman. Even if you looked closely at this man, you wouldn’t have been able to easily spot that he had not always been male. Many of the people at the party were transgendered. After the party was well under way, a young man, the son of the birthday man, in his early twenties, arrived. He called the birthday man “Mom.” It was disconcerting. His insistence, given the occasion,

seemed obnoxious. But over the course of the evening I came to see that the young man was quite distressed and wasn't able to accept that his mother now lived as a man. I was quite taken by this. I suddenly knew that my snow walker was a woman on her way to a gender clinic to have reassignment surgery and that she would have a son. I wanted to see, by working it out in a story, what a relationship like theirs might look like. In the course of inventing the story it came to me that this son would have the task of not only understanding the parent's choices but of explaining them. The idea of explaining them would involve having to engage his capacity for compassion.

MP: It is fascinating to hear about the way in which writing “what you don't know” — writing “the unfamiliar” — can open you up to new kinds of connections that might become the basis for an image, a character, a novel. It is also curious that you describe the exercise or challenge of writing the Canadian landscape through the eyes of a Caribbean émigré, because my next question pertains precisely to this aspect of your *oeuvre*. Specifically, I find myself drawn to what I perceive to be a captivating motif in each of your fictional works: namely, that of gardens and gardening.³ Indeed, as early as your short stories in *Out on Main Street*, gardens, as an evocative spatial poetics, and gardening, as a figurative and literal activity, are prominent motifs in your fiction. In *Cereus Blooms at Night*, Mala's survival from a lifetime of trauma is indelibly interconnected to her “unmanacled” garden⁴; in *He Drown She in the Sea*, the protagonist Harry is a professional landscaper in British Columbia working on a “water-garden” project; and even in *Valmiki's Daughter* and *Moving Forward Sideways Like a Crab*, beautifully manicured gardens serve as a backdrop for the various intimacies of the cultural elite. I quote from one such passage in *Moving Forward Sideways Like a Crab*: “The garden has grown thicker and older, more lush. . . . The bougainvillea I remembered as a small shrub growing out of a pot now trailed over the pool's back fence and was covered along the top with indigo flowers. Hibiscus, datura, ferns, ornamental grasses, dracaenas and heliconias known as sexy pink, were all perfect, like specimens from a botanical garden” (100). A few paragraphs later, this tropical garden is evoked as a counterpoint to the Caribbean émigré's Toronto apartment: “Everything within the gates of this property . . . [is] more mine than all the birds in Toronto, than the snakes and

turtles at Leslie Street Spit, the orange-and-black butterflies bobbing about my second floor balcony in early fall will ever, *can* ever be” (101). Can you comment on this aspect of your writing? How has living across (imaginatively and physically) two such distinctive environments as the Caribbean and Canada further complicated or enhanced your view of the garden/ing, as activity, as object, or as metaphor? Can writers or artists take some direction from gardens, gardeners, or gardening?

SM: It’s a beautiful line of questioning. And somehow it flatters me. I hadn’t noticed this to be a sort of “theme” until you pointed it out. I don’t know how to answer it yet. What I can say is, in the last three years I’ve had, for the first time in Canada, the opportunity to have a garden, an outdoor garden, with shrubs and trees, flowers, and a vegetable garden. There are birdhouses and feeders in the yard, and I could watch the birds come and go for hours. I’m terrified of snakes, but lately I stay still and quiet; I don’t bolt away when our paths cross. I’m still not interested in becoming too intimate with them, but I am surprised, and pleased with my curiosity. The first year I was terrified to walk off the mowed grass, but I’ve come to realize that they, too, are wary and don’t want trouble. I do have a great love for nature, but, oddly, I also am timid. As I write this, and think about your comments and questions, I think I can say that if it weren’t for this background — nature, and even the sky, the idea of a universe — to my life, perhaps to life in general, I wouldn’t make art, or write, or think about things beyond how my moment-to-moment survival might be affected by them.

MP: In keeping with the particular kinds of threads or motifs in your *oeuvre*, I wonder if you could comment on the “Indian” aspect of Indo-Caribbean identity, which is often fraught with tension and contradiction therein. For instance, in your short story “Sushila’s Bhakti,” a young artist contends with her over-identification in Canada as an “Indian” to the exclusion of her Caribbean identity. In *Valmiki’s Daughter*, Nayan, a wealthy cacao plantation owner, laments that to Indians from India “we [Indo-Caribbeans] don’t exist . . . ; even they, who share our ancestors, dismiss us” (307). Yet, your own view of identity is, perhaps like Sushila’s epiphany, fluid and inclusive. I wonder if you could comment on whether living in Canada, a kind of “third space” where diasporic South Asians (often twice- or multiply removed

from the Indian subcontinent) converge and collide, has impacted your relationship to or view of the Subcontinent in new and interesting ways.

SM: The story “Sushila’s Bhakti,” twenty-something years later, is still relevant. When I was a youngster in Trinidad, the attitude of Indians towards Blacks, and Blacks towards Indians, was appalling. I witnessed the blossoming of the Black Power movement and was influenced by the politics of the time. I wanted to shed my Indian-ness and to forge a Trinidadian identity that I imagined as taking on and merging the best of all the cultures that were part of Trinidad history. It wasn’t until I came to Canada as a university student that the Indian — not race, but as connected to the Subcontinent — aspect of my identity returned to taunt me. It was the first time that I met Indians from India. I kept wanting to ask them to tell me something, but I wasn’t sure what it was that I wanted them to tell me. I would listen to them wide-eyed, as if they were the “real thing”; they were who my grandparents wanted me to be like.

On a holiday back home, I was introduced to some new friends of my parents, the Indian High Commissioner, along with his wife and mother. It turned out that the wife’s brother was at the same university in Canada as I. My family was invited to their home for dinner, so that they could introduce me to the brother. It was wonderfully congenial, with the High Commissioner teaching me to make *puris* in the kitchen as his huge staff watched with amusement and concern. When I returned to Canada I got in touch with the brother, and we became close friends for the rest of my university years. He introduced me to a young Indian man who was of their world — the world of diplomats and Indian royalty — who, on our second meeting, told me jokingly at a dinner party at my house that I, and people like me, were “bastardized Indians.” That was the end of my fascination with India and “real Indians.” Yet, in Canada in those days, save for Indians from India and Caribbean people, everyone else saw an Indian from India when they saw me. I began to identify as South Asian if only to fit in a box for the sake of politics. It was a necessary box, until the fact of people like myself being from the Caribbean was recognized. Then, I found myself having to say again and again, “No, not Jamaica. Trinidad.” It was just this nest of ignorance that had to be confronted; it seemed inevitable and interminable.

Nowadays, I don’t think of the Subcontinent as having much to do

with me and my present-day concerns. I visited India in 2007, and while I was fascinated by the history and architecture, it really was a foreign place. I shared skin colour, hair, body build with many Indians, and it was interesting to be in a foreign country where the locals looked exactly like me, yet we spoke different languages and carried our bodies differently. It was immensely clear that they did not regard me as one of them, or vice versa, and that I was an outsider. It was terribly interesting, for I felt the same sort of tourist's fascination for Indians as I have felt for Mexicans in Mexico, for Italians in Italy, and no personal connection. I know Trinidadian Indians who very much identify with India in all its aspects. But perhaps, living here, in Canada, and communicating with Trinidad from here, is enough for me.

I'd like to add, too, that it was here, in Canada, that another very important aspect of myself was able to flourish. That is my sexuality. To freely love in the ways one wants to, to openly love whom one wants, is the foundation, at least for me, of being human. I, along with others, have had to fight here in Canada for this right, and we still have to. But I couldn't live so openly and safely in Trinidad. My living as an artist/writer in Canada is meagre, but it is possible. There is funding, dwindling, yes, but there are granting institutions, etc., for artists that make it possible to pursue one's intellectual work here. There isn't even a publisher in Trinidad. My queer work is published by a mainstream publisher here in Canada. Yes, Canada has influenced, has nurtured my sense of identity. We can, and have to, fight "Canada" because it is full of bigotries and prejudices, but it is a place where we have been able to wrestle for and gain rights also.

Because I was born in Ireland (where, incidentally, I lived for only the first three months of my life), I lost my Trinidadian citizenship when I became a Canadian. If citizenship is in one's heart and not on a piece of paper, then I am Trinidadian and Canadian. Culturally? I think we should all strive to shed our ancestral cultures, and forge, instead, cultures with a living, present-day existence (considering the mix of racial, religious, sexual identities, etc., in our countries) and an altruistic humanism at its core.

MP: Again, I can't help but recall your evocative phrase, a "shared queerness," and the various ways in which you spoke of it earlier, as a "necessary complicity," a "joyful recognition of oneself in the other" and, perhaps, a "forced" condition or false consciousness, which impris-

ons as much as it liberates. Perhaps this is as good a moment as any, then, to bring the conversation back to the future, so to speak, in terms of your own creative process. In other words, may I ask what's next? Is there a new kind of challenge, aesthetic or other, that you are poised to explore?

SM: I am working on a new novel, and I have begun painting and working with photography again. In terms of the novel, all I'm comfortable saying right now is that I am trying to write "away" from what I know well. The characters, landscape, story-line are all new for me. I'm finding myself stretching in ways I'd not done before. It's very interesting, for a short while, but very difficult to sustain that level of shining a weak light in pitch darkness. Then suddenly I have thirty new pages, and I see that it's possible! In terms of painting, I'm trying to bring to the process of painting something of what I know from writing where one uses words to flesh out an idea until it is as clear as you can make it. I'm trying to find in the act of painting, in the application of paint, "things" akin to plot structure — which is not at all about composition, as one might think — and things akin to character development, to voice, to arc. One can almost achieve a sort of *pentimento* in writing. Is it possible to suggest a *denouement* — something that is, in essence, time-based — in painting? Is it even important to arrive at answers? The journey sure is wonderful, though.

NOTES

¹ This biography is derived from my encyclopedia entry on Shani Mootoo in the *Blackwell Encyclopedia of Postcolonial Studies*.

² In the essay "An 'Ethnos' of Difference, a Praxis of Inclusion: The Ethics of Global Citizenship in Shani Mootoo's *Cereus Blooms at Night*," I refer to Mootoo's image of "shared queerness" as an aspect of a wider poetics of ethical interrelation, between the self and other, the human and ecological, the heteronormative and non-heteronormative, and the local and global.

³ In "South Asian Canadian 'Geographies of Voice,'" I discuss the garden motif as it appears in Rohinton Mistry's *Tales from Firozsha Baag* and Shani Mootoo's *He Drown She in the Sea*. Other critics have provided illuminating ecocritical readings of the "garden" trope in Mootoo's fiction. See, in particular, Isabel Hoving's "Moving the Caribbean Landscape."

⁴ I use the term "unmanacled" here as an allusion to the spirit in which Tyler, in *Cereus Blooms at Night*, recognizes Mala's intrinsically accepting and humanist impulse: "She was not one to manacle nature, and I sensed that she was permitting mine its freedom" (77).

WORKS CITED

- Hoving, Isabel. "Moving the Caribbean Landscape: *Cereus Blooms at Night* as a Re-Imagination of the Caribbean Environment." *Caribbean Literature and the Environment: Between Nature and Culture*. Ed. Elizabeth M. Deloughery, Renee K. Gosson, and George B. Handley. Charlottesville: U of Virginia P, 2005. 154-68. Print.
- Mootoo, Shani. *Cereus Blooms at Night*. 1996. Toronto: McClelland, 2005. Print.
- . *He Drown She in the Sea*. New York: Grove Atlantic, 2005. Print.
- . *Moving Forward Sideways Like a Crab*. Toronto: Doubleday, 2014. Print.
- . *Valmiki's Daughter*. Toronto: Anansi, 2008. Print.
- . "Sushila's Bhakti." *Out on Main Street*. Vancouver: Press Gang, 1992. 58-67. Print.
- Pirbhai, Mariam. "Shani Mootoo." *Blackwell Encyclopedia of Postcolonial Studies*. Ed. Sangeeta Ray and Henry Schwarz. New York: Wiley-Blackwell, Forthcoming. Print.
- . "An 'Ethnos' of Difference, a Praxis of Inclusion: The Ethics of Global Citizenship in Shani Mootoo's *Cereus Blooms at Night*." *Asian-Canadian Writing Beyond Autoethnography*. Ed. Eleanor Ty and Christl Verduyn. Waterloo: Wilfrid Laurier UP, 2008. 247-65. Print.
- . "South Asian Canadian 'Geographies of Voice': Flagging New Critical Mappings." *The Oxford Handbook of Canadian Literature*. Ed. Cynthia Sugars. New York: Oxford UP, 2015. 583-601. Print.