

THREE | Cracks Filled with Images: Mental Disability, Trauma, and Crip Rhetoric in *Cereus Blooms at Night*

JENNIFER MARCHISOTTO

In *Disability Aesthetics* Tobin Siebers calls for an increased consideration of trauma in relation to disability, claiming it will enhance aesthetic representations of disability through an incorporation of “wounds,” and better situate disability within evolving global digital communities (102–3). Ultimately, Siebers declares the most important thing trauma studies can contribute to disability studies is the ability to “enlarge the concept of mental disability to include the psychic impairments, psychological injuries, and mental traumas provoked by modern life” (103). Using these claims as a starting point, this chapter focuses on the way trauma necessarily relies on mediation and the manipulation of temporality, or *crip time*. By extending crip time’s emphasis on flexibility to language, I develop a theory of *crip rhetoric*, in which language and narrative are fundamentally reshaped to accommodate histories of trauma and mental disability.

Siebers is primarily interested in how present or future representations of disability incorporate, either directly or indirectly, histories of trauma. In terms of temporality, he focuses on how traumatic pasts infect present and future aesthetic representations. Synthesizing Siebers’s work with recent developments in disability, trauma, and mad studies, I argue trauma surfaces in the present and makes disabled individuals vulnerable to normative expectations of language and temporality. I focus on *Cereus Blooms at Night* by Shani Mootoo to analyze how narratives are necessarily rearranged to accommodate histories of trauma that encour-

age more nuanced understandings of present disabled experience, and mentally disabled experience in particular. Through nonlinear narrative structure, and a reliance on the affective, or felt but inarticulate, transmission of knowledge, Mootoo's novel challenges the assumed authority of articulate language as the most precise, and therefore superior, form of communication. Through flexible rhetorical structures that rely on affect rather than words as such, Mootoo shows how incorporating the "wounds" identified by Siebers calls for a rethinking of what qualifies as language. *Cereus Blooms at Night* forces the past, present, and future together, exposing new ways in which aesthetic representations can incorporate past histories of trauma as essential to present disabled experience, bending time and determining one's ability to narrate that event in the future.

Complex Narrative Embodiment in *Cereus Blooms at Night*

Cereus Blooms at Night relies on mediated knowledge as both plot device and epistemological premise, reinventing the trope of a mad Caribbean woman through affective narrative structures.¹ I define *affective narrative structures* in terms of *animacy*. Mel Chen claims "animacy most generally refers to the grammatical effects of the sentience or liveness of nouns" (2). Chen argues that words, and objects, carry meaning through affect, which "potentially engages many bodies at once, rather than (only) being contained as an emotion within a single body" (11). These affective connections help build the narrative in *Cereus Blooms at Night*. Affect sticks to material bodies (e.g., humans, animals, plants, objects), creating networks of association that are carried across time. For example, throughout the novel Mala collects snail shells. Gradually it is revealed that as a young girl her mother's lover Lavinia taught her to do so, claiming that if Mala protected a snail while it lived, and preserved its home for its spirit, the snail will protect her and those she loves in return (Mootoo, 54). Mala later shares this with Ambrose, the childhood friend and lover she later reconnects with at the alms house. The two bond while collecting and saving snails from other boys looking to torture the snails (92). In what follows Mala and Ambrose have their first sexual encounter. Protecting snails is repeated as a shared and loving experience. When in the alms house, Tyler, Mala's queer male nurse and the novel's main narrator, notes her muttering words that come to refer to memories of her time with Ambrose: "One day, for example, she would go on and on about some gramophone or other, the next day about

spiders, then about peekoplats or snails” (102). Out of context, in the present moment, the words lack the meaning attached to them through memory. However, as Tyler (and the reader) piece together Mala’s history they find that the shells signify not only the thing itself, but Mala’s emotional history with them. The snail shells carry with them feelings of love and protection as well as loss, both Lavinia and Ambrose having left Mala in moments of need.² Histories of trauma and mental disability become recognizable as they are told through the simultaneous integration of past and present, maintained through networks of affective association. Interpreting the inarticulate information that sustains these reveals a history saturated in both individual and cultural trauma.³

Tyler openly manipulates Mala’s history in order to (hopefully) make it recognizable to a future audience—her sister Asha or someone who knows her, embracing his role as intermediary. In foregrounding this mediation and manipulation of temporality Mootoo calls attention to the ways trauma and mental disability call for what Margaret Price and others have termed *crip time*, which relies on flexibility.⁴ This flexibility has been applied to various timetables, for example, showing up to a meeting, attending class, and the expected time needed to complete a task, among others. Alison Kafer articulates the relationship between time and disabled bodyminds, claiming, “We can then understand the flexibility of crip time as being not only an accommodation to those who need ‘more’ time but also, and perhaps especially, a challenge to normative and normalizing expectations of pace and scheduling. Rather than bend disabled bodies and minds to meet the clock, crip time bends the clock to meet disabled bodies and minds” (*FQC*, 27). In the context of trauma, crip time bends the clock as memories of the past event(s) uncontrollably and often unexpectedly surface, forcibly interrupting the normative progression of time.⁵

Mala’s present experience of mental disability, because of her history of trauma, can only be understood through the manipulation of time, connecting smaller moments in the present to more significant histories. Framing crip time as “time travel,” Ellen Samuels explains, “Disability and illness have the power to extract us from linear, progressive time with its normative life stages and cast us into a wormhole of backward and forward acceleration, jerky stops and starts, tedious intervals and abrupt endings.” We see this acceleration throughout *Cereus Blooms at Night*, as memories of the past continually give meaning to present moments, the text shifting between temporalities based on the association of meaning rather than any linear progression of time. For example, when Tyler hears the elderly Mala singing a song, the narrative then shifts to an event

from her childhood when Mala plays a game set to the same song with other children but is then abandoned by Boyie and tormented by her peers who had tied up her sister (71–89). The incident shows the community's disdain for Mala while emphasizing her bond with Asha, both points helping to explain not just the origin of the song sung in the present, but Mala's relationship to Tyler, who has similarly been tormented and looked down upon for his sexuality. Mala's past exists alongside her present, her adult life only understood in relation to her childhood.

Readers first meet the protagonist, Mala Ramchandin, when she is sent to an alms house, unspeaking and presumably mad in her old age. Through flashbacks and memories we learn of her childhood and the violent and long-term abuse suffered at the hands of her father. After killing her father following a particularly violent attack of his, Mala withdraws from language and spends decades in isolation before she is taken to the alms house. Overall the novel is framed as a letter written by Tyler. Because Mala no longer uses words, Tyler must infer meaning based on his personal affective connection to Mala and the memories of those who knew her prior to her arrival. Tyler acknowledges his own influence on the narrative's fidelity from the outset but puts the story down on paper and sends it into the world in the hopes that Asha, Mala's younger sister who had escaped her father's abuse as a young girl, will recognize it. Tyler recounts Mala's history in a nonlinear structure, inferring meaning from her limited speech and translating the memories of people from her past. By foregrounding Tyler's fallibility as authority at the center of the novel, Mootoo positions readers as further interpreters of Mala's history, who must rely on linguistic animacy and affect rather than words themselves as sources of knowledge. The voices that make up the narrative intersect and overlap at different points throughout the novel, alongside the reader's experience as interlocutor, together allowing the narrative to be told.

While all fictional representations involve mediation, in cases where the narrative concerns *complex embodiment* and *situations of extreme precarity* straightforward narration is inadequate. As Gayatri Gopinath notes, "Mootoo's novel suggests the impossibility of viewing one particular trajectory to the exclusion of others" (185). Mala's history can only ever be heard and interpreted in relation to others—the other histories within the novel itself as well as other histories of mentally disabled Caribbean women. Siebers claims *complex embodiment* "theorizes the body and its representations as mutually transformative. Social representations obviously affect the experience of the body . . . but the body possesses the ability to determine its social representation as well, and some situations

exist where representation exerts no control over the life of the body” (*DT*, 25–26). This framework illuminates how Mala’s intersectional identities (as the female, mentally disabled, daughter of an Indian immigrant to Lantanacámara) shape Tyler’s narrative by determining their own affective and temporal representations.

Liam Kruger defines similar circumstances of intersecting oppressive forces as *situations of extreme precarity*: “multiple exclusions from the political or social sphere on such bases as race, nationality, class, and/or gender expression, among others” (133). Both Siebers and Kruger note the ways issues of social and political marginalization affect representation, but Kruger more specifically emphasizes the way the complexity of these intersections renders the individual increasingly vulnerable to dominant ideologies, which is essential for appreciating the different violences enacted on Mala. Mala was routinely sexually abused by her father at home. In the community more broadly she was discriminated against because of her race (the daughter of an Indian immigrant) and because of the rumors circulating about her family (rumors of her father’s abuse as well as the scandal of her mother running away with another woman). Siebers explains that in relation to theories of intersectional identity, complex embodiment may help navigate different “hierarchies of oppression” when “coming to an understanding of intersecting minority identities demands that one imagine social location not only as perspective but also complex embodiment” (*DT*, 29). Understanding intersectional identities, in Mala’s case but also more broadly, requires attention to the individual’s perspective as it exists in a physical, social environment. Complex embodiment and extreme precarity account for experiences in their variability as individuals navigate social ideologies and representations, contributing in varying ways to the violent oppression of different points of one’s intersectional identity. Mala’s intersectional identity and her traumatic past “determine [their] social representation” through flashbacks paired with present moments and by refusing to articulately re-present the details of her abuse. While this resistance to certainty encourages more nuanced understandings of her experience as a mentally disabled woman, it also lays bare the ways in which Mala’s identities make her vulnerable to social disqualification.

Illegible Intersections

Mootoo’s novel relies on illegibility and affectively communicated knowledge as a point of entry rather than a point of dismissal. Siebers claims,

“Trauma art poses a radical challenge to conventional models of aesthetic explanation. It is at once impersonal and painful—which means it both communicates between cultures and retains an affective power” (*DA*, 103). Trauma, because of its extreme unknowability, threatens normative conceptions of both self and community. Therefore, trauma art and literature, like trauma itself, cannot be easily assimilated into conventional modes of representation. Despite this challenge, it “retains an affective power,” communicating meaning through inarticulate forms of language.

Mootoo’s affective narrative structure allows readers to see these valences of identification in the context of Mala, differentiating her from other characters from literature whose madness has long been reduced to metaphor in line with David Mitchell and Sharon Snyder’s definition of *narrative prosthesis*.⁶ Focusing on one of Mala’s closest literary predecessors, Bertha Mason from *Jane Eyre*, Julia Miele Rodas, Elizabeth Donaldson, and David Bolt cite readings by Gayatri Spivak and Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar to point out, “The ‘madness’ of Bertha . . . has most frequently been seen as standing in for some other veiled or unspeakable condition” (3). Rodas, Donaldson, and Bolt explain that “even fictional interpretations of [*Jane Eyre*], like Jean Rhys’s groundbreaking *Wide Sargasso Sea*, seem to see Bertha’s disability as representing something else; in this instance, her ‘madness’ is reconstructed as the strangulating mask of sexist and imperialist power imposed by an insecure and jealous husband, rather than as an intrinsic quality of Bertha’s embodied experience” (3). Both critical and creative readings of Bertha’s mental disability understand her disability, in Mitchell and Snyder’s terms, as an “opportunistic metaphorical device” (47). Mootoo differentiates Mala by pushing her *complex embodiment* to the center of the narrative, refusing to let her be assimilated into any easy metaphoric comparison. Mootoo offers a collective retelling of Mala’s history that foregrounds the unknowability of specific detail as a starting point through which to imagine new forms of communication that would bear witness not just to Mala’s story, but to mad Caribbean women as they are constructed in fiction and in imperialistic figuring of an other. The particularities of Mala’s experience, her female, mad, and racial identities that overlap and contribute to her *complex embodiment*, are exceptionally unique. Where *Wide Sargasso Sea* attempts to renarrate Bertha’s history, claiming it as an identifiable narrative, *Cereus Blooms at Night* does not offer a contained or clear history. Rather, Mala’s past continually evolves, flexible because of Mootoo’s withholding of verified specific details.

Mootoo embraces the illegibility often associated with trauma and

mental disability as a starting point through which to reshape readers' understandings of what it means to inhabit more complex identities. Although this illegibility has often led to reductive readings or dismissal of either trauma or mental disability, Mootoo shows how it can be a space of exchange through which to develop new modes of communication. Catherine Prendergast reflects on the illegibility of mental disability, saying, "I've noticed that if I mention mental illness in the company of many [rhetoric, English literature, and cultural studies] colleagues, I become suddenly culturally unintelligible" (46). Here mental disability constitutes an erasure, the subject itself inciting incomprehension. However, incomprehension, when framed differently, becomes a point of access. Prendergast goes on to argue that "to be disabled mentally is to be disabled rhetorically" (57). Through diagnosis, as well as cultural histories of marginalization, the mentally disabled individual is denied a voice. Prendergast puts it frankly: "If people think you're crazy, they don't listen to you" (57). Prendergast ultimately poses two questions: "Does some kind of al/chemical transformation need to occur before the mentally ill can be heard? And in whom does it need to take place?" (57). She does not have an answer for these questions, and concludes on a note of uncertain possibility, wondering "how a rhetoric that renders mental illness irrelevant can contribute to healing" and "if there will ever be a rhetoric of mental disability that the mentally disabled themselves will have the greatest part in crafting" (58–59).

Rather than force mentally disabled histories to conform to traditionally accepted rhetorical forms, we must shift our understanding of what counts as rhetoric, of what is recognized as language, and therefore effective communication. Doing so pushes us toward what I have referred to as *crip rhetoric*, which allows for the absolute subjectivity of individual experience and permits meaning to shift according to the affective valences that connect that individual to surrounding bodyminds and communities.⁷ Crip rhetoric results from experiences that resist or even refuse articulate representation. Using Siebers's terms of complex embodiment, these experiences bend rhetoric to accommodate their own representation. In Mala's case, this refers to the way her narrative can only be shared in a particular moment as Tyler moves between past and present to tell her story. It also extends to the novel's reliance on affective forms of communication that remain inarticulate and therefore a-rhetorical. In the tradition of the social model, it is not the individual's responsibility to change, but rather the framework through which we read that individual's experience. Affect theory and trauma studies, both

of which deal with intangible forms of information and communication, provide a way of working through Mala's *complex embodiment*. Mootoo places the inarticulable wound of Mala's long-term abuse, and the consequent absence of definitive explanation, at the center of the narrative, representing Mala through the affective relationships she forms with humans, plants, animals, and objects amid and following her experience of trauma.

Trauma and Disability

Trauma and disability studies have long been at odds due to their divergent temporal orientations, and trauma studies' treatment of individual agency in relation to trauma. However, theorists have increasingly called for alliances between the two fields. Much of the tension between the fields is rooted in their rhetorical framing. Disability studies is often described in terms of gain and futurity—the possibilities of access, crip epistemology, independent living both now and the future. Trauma studies is primarily concerned with loss—of a loved one, an ideal, or a population.⁸ In *Unclaimed Experience*, Cathy Caruth defines trauma as “not locatable in the simple violent or original event in an individual's past, but rather in the way that its very unassimilated nature—the way it was precisely *not known* in the first instance—returns to haunt the survivor later on” (4). This phrasing, denying power or agency to the individual in favor of the unknowable event, emphasizes the inability of the individual to claim or maintain agency as a part of his or her own experience.

Trauma studies' focus on loss conflicts with disability studies' focus on futurity and independence. As noted at the start of this chapter, Siebers argues that exploring this connection further would improve disability studies' scope, particularly with regard to artistic engagement with experience. Siebers claims merging disability and trauma studies “will allow us to conceive of wounds as disability representations on a par with those typically considered in disability studies,” enhance our understandings of disabled bodies in contemporary global contexts, and improve our considerations of mental disabilities as part of the disabled experience (*DA*, 102–3). To Siebers, including a more central discussion of loss as part of disability studies can expand understandings of experience in relation to disabilities, and in particular improve conversations about the mental effects of disability. Siebers focuses on how wounds produce mental and physical experiences, disability in particular. Rather than focus on trauma as a loss located in the past, he focuses on trauma as

it affects the present and future—or, in other words, how it perpetually determines its own representation through crip rhetoric and other aesthetic forms.

To understand how trauma continues to affect the present, we must reconceptualize how meaning is communicated along nontraditional valences that indirectly influence aesthetic representations. Caruth claims “history, like trauma, is never simply one’s own . . . history is precisely the way we are implicated in each other’s traumas” (*UE*, 24). The effects of trauma cannot be contained within an individual body; its effects extend beyond that individual to wider sociopolitical contexts. Although we can recognize these effects, Caruth’s point that the traumatic event “was precisely *not known* in the first instance” makes understanding those effects an act of interpretation and approximation. By embracing this impossible certainty as essential to the nature of mental disability, and consequently narratives of mental disability, we can develop new forms of rhetorical analysis that consider inarticulate and articulate meaning alongside one another.

In her more recent work, Caruth describes “a new kind of listening” that would bear witness to traumatic experience while knowing that understandings of the event will always be uncertain. Caruth develops this concept through an analysis of *Death and the Maiden*, a play by Argentinian/Chilean writer Ariel Dorfman. *Death and the Maiden* is the story of Paulina, who, several years earlier, was tortured by the police during the Dirty War. *Death and the Maiden* is set in a country, “probably Chile,” and tells the story of Paulina, who several years earlier was tortured by the police during a period of violence similar to General Augusto Pinochet’s dictatorship in Chile (Dorfman). The action of the play surrounds a chance meeting Paulina and her husband have with a man named Roberto. Upon hearing Roberto’s voice, Paulina immediately identifies him as her former torturer, despite never having seen his face. The validity of Paulina’s identification is never confirmed. Throughout the play Paulina and her husband stage a trial for Roberto, forcing him to testify to his crimes against Paulina. The play itself, and the staging of Roberto’s testimony within the play, constitute performances of possible identification which Caruth argues constitutes “a new kind of listening” (*Literature*, 55). This “new kind of listening” is only made possible by the identification of Roberto through the recurrence of his voice, which occurs as part of an open system of identification that relies on affective, or felt, knowledge, as opposed to direct evidence. Mootoo similarly encourages this “new kind of listen-

ing” through foregrounding affect and pairing disparate temporalities. Tyler’s admitted fallibility and the indirect narrative style echoes the uncertainty of Paulina’s identification.⁹

Understanding the event of trauma while still presenting the original event as in some ways unattainable provides a starting point for moving forward despite uncertainty. By identifying him as her torturer, Paulina places herself in relation to her previously unclaimed experiences. Despite being vulnerable to error and contingent upon the coincidental events that brought Roberto to her door, Paulina’s identification allows her to relisten to her past. Whether or not Roberto is truly her torturer, Paulina’s encounter with him offers a new form of listening, not to what is definitively true, but to what is identified and performed as such. Ultimately, Caruth argues, the play brings up more questions than answers about Paulina’s experience (*Literature*, 72). Those questions are oriented toward a futurity and the possibility of “a new kind of listening.” Caruth claims, “For these stories of trauma cannot be limited to the catastrophes they name, and the theory of catastrophic history may ultimately be written in a language that already lingers, in these texts, after the end, in a time that comes to us from the other shore, from the other side of the disaster” (92). The language of disaster, of the traumatic event, exists in the present and in the future, in terms yet to be discovered. The traumatic event is no longer an event of the past never to be understood, but an event that can be rearticulated in the future, albeit neither straightforwardly nor predictably.

In the context of disability, mental disability in particular, this lack of certainty and predictability encourages more nuanced approaches to absolute subjectivity where the individual’s experience actively resists representation. Drawing on her own experiences of unexpected triggers, Alison Kafer uses contemporary debates around trigger warnings as a starting point to theorize strategies for new alliances between disability and trauma studies, similarly emphasizing the need for further consideration of the complex relationship between trauma and disability. Kafer points out that despite efforts to the contrary, we “cannot cleanly separate *being* disabled from *becoming* disabled” and that “attending to violence and trauma does not run counter to but is actually an essential part of critical theories of disability. Or, to put it differently, an acknowledgement of loss or a deep reckoning with the aftermath of trauma can co-exist with critical anti-ableist politics” (6). Kafer identifies the deeply embedded complexities of recognizing trauma within disability studies. The separation of *being* and *becoming* that Kafer points to is, in the inter-

est of antiableist representations of disability, a response to histories of representation that defined disability (physical or mental) as something to be feared or pitied, or both. As Kafer notes, by not acknowledging the event of *becoming* disabled, or persistent pain that might result from a disability, we censure part of the narrative surrounding disability. Moreover, using herself as an example, Kafer points out that triggers are often impossible to predict. Disabled spaces need to allow room for unexpected and uncontrollable triggers that surface in unforeseen ways.¹⁰

To read the *language of disaster*, the relationship between *being* and *becoming* disabled, one must consider the various registers of aesthetic representation that contribute to the moment which, as Siebers claims, “retains an affective power,” which is communicated through the experience of reading written and visual texts, among others. Siebers reflects on the nature of reading itself and what occurs through the process of engaging with different types of texts:

When no language is manifest [in visual artworks such as a painting], readers are obliged to invent one; otherwise, the translation between the “language” of reading and the “language” of the object does not take place, and the object remains unreadable. Perhaps the impulse to read an image is a measure of the desire to control it. Images too complex to be read refuse this control, and they challenge the authority of reading as a privileged activity because they demonstrate a surplus of meaning untranslatable into linguistic terms. (*DA*, 122)

The complexity that prevents some images from being read is not unique to any particular form of aesthetic expression. In the context of trauma, the event itself is marked by its untranslatability. Through the “surplus of meaning,” readers can engage with new possibilities, ideas previously beyond normative conceptions of what is possible. This surplus exists within the text itself as well as in the space between reader and text. In *Cereus Blooms at Night*, there is a surplus of untranslatable meaning in Mala’s history that shapes the narrative’s overall structure while triggering Mala to withdraw from articulate language for decades. The surplus of affect acts as a structural premise, interfering with the ability of the individual characters to communicate with one another and distances readers from definitive detail. Siebers goes on to claim, “Often, the excess of meaning is perceived as emotion, but there is no reason to deprecate it as unintellectual,” calling attention to conventional assumptions that emotion is lesser than reason (*DA*, 122). However, through

this emotional excess new meaning, and new strategies for producing meaning, can develop. Siebers echoes Caruth's call for a new kind of listening that attends to the unexpected and unpredictable ways two points affect one another. These associations are unidentifiable in the moment because their association relies on the space of excess meaning that has refused to be assimilated into linguistic terms.

Crippling Rhetoric in *Cereus Blooms at Night*

The novel's overall structure echoes Mala's withdrawal from language, and models the flexibility of crip time, whereby objects like the snail shells appear at different points in time, enhancing the narrative through their attached affective histories. In addition to the snail shells, we see this in the reappearance of cereus clippings throughout the novel. Like the shells, the plant is tied to memories of love and loss for Mala—in the moment just before when she and Asha would have escaped with their mother and Lavinia, Mala runs back into the house to retrieve her bag containing a cereus clipping, Asha follows, and they are both left behind with Chandin. The plant reappears throughout the novel, adding to the web of affective associations within the narrative while physically embodying a nonnormative experience of time—cereus plants rarely bloom, and when they do, they bloom at night while other flowers bloom by day. When Ambrose and Otoh first try to visit Mala, the day after she enters the alms house, they bring her a cereus clipping (21–22). Gardening soon becomes one of the first points of connection between Mala and Tyler. The plant reappears in the present moment and facilitates her connection to Tyler after spending decades in isolation. Mootoo shows how relationships to animate and inanimate objects together narrate histories that otherwise could not be spoken. Readers must develop a “new kind of listening” that attends to the web of affective associations imbued in the objects over time.

Mala's withdrawal from language in the decades following her father's death challenges expectations of speech, showing her developing new strategies of meaningful communication that prioritize feeling and affect over words themselves. Mootoo describes Mala's withdrawal from language as both freeing and confining. Lacking the ability to explain her traumatic experiences using articulate language, Mala embraces animalistic noises that more accurately represent her feelings. Through her rejection of language, Mala also rejects gendered conventions of home, creating a new space for herself that counters expectations of civil domes-

tic spaces. Gopinath argues that Mootoo employs a queer framework to counter colonially imposed “masculinist and heterosexual” standards of domesticity (169). Mala’s withdrawal from language is a profoundly personal response to trauma that occurs within an antidomestic space and challenges the broader cultural traumas of colonization. The surplus of affect noted by Siebers supersedes articulate language. In abandoning articulate *civilized* language, Mala loses contact with the world outside of her own yard. Her withdrawal hovers somewhere between intentional and unintentional, as if she, the words, and the images all possess some form of agency. The tone of the scene describing the undoing of language is emancipatory:

In the phase just before Mala stopped using words, lexically shaped thoughts would sprawl across her mind, fractured here and there. The cracks would be filled with images. Soon the inverse happened. A sentence would be constructed primarily of images punctuated by only one or two verbalizations: a noun tentatively uttered in recognition, a descriptive word confirming a feeling or observation. (126)

While the process by which visual images overtake structured language is introduced as one of agency (“Mala stopped”), in the end those images have taken control. The subject becomes the words and sentences. The narrative voice becomes more passive as the grammatical subjects construct themselves. Being *freed* from language precipitates further isolation from the world around her. In what follows, Mala moves more and more toward base, bodily experiences, finding language more and more unnecessary. As Mala increasingly conceptualizes her feelings and environment through images rather than words, the surplus of meaning identified by Siebers overwhelms articulate expression. Using Siebers’s terms, Mala’s traumatic history leads her to embrace the complexities of her past that “refuse the control” of articulate language, “challeng[ing] the authority of reading, [and traditional speech,] as a privileged activity” (*DA*, 122).

Mala’s withdrawal from language emphasizes the physical effects of trauma, describing the shift in language as an embodied experience. Mala’s inability to assimilate her experience using traditional language structures aligns with Caruth’s definition of trauma as traumatic precisely because it is indescribable. The wound of trauma does not lie just in the event itself but in the inability to assimilate that into everyday life. Readers are never given full access to Mala’s experience. Her response to

trauma is never described in detail, the novel itself echoing Mala's inability to integrate the events and their emotional effects as part of a continuous narrative. We see the effects of her feelings, but not the feelings themselves. The novel's description of Mala's withdrawal emphasizes language's inability to truly represent experience: "verbalization, she came to understand, was not the feeling itself but a name given to the feeling: *pretty*, an unnecessary translation of the delight she experienced seeing the soaring birds. Eventually Mala all but rid herself of words" (126). Mala sees language's deficiencies, with regards to both trauma and more positive experiences like that of seeing birds.

In releasing her ties to words and the rest of *civilized* society, Mala turns to more sensorial and bodily forms of expression. Although PTSD, and mental disabilities more broadly, have been figured as psychological experiences, they also have physical, material effects, involving Mala's body as a whole: "Many of her sounds were natural expansions and contractions of her body. She grunted when lifting something heavy. She dredged and expelled phlegm. She sighed melodiously. Cried and belched unabashedly. She coughed and sneezed and spat and wiped away mucus with no care for social graces. . . . She farted at will, for there was no one around to contradict her" (127). Mala's rejection of language and the mind-body hierarchy denounces "social graces," moving to more animalistic or *uncivilized* behaviors.¹¹ Her bodily instincts overwhelm polite, rational behavior, highlighting the physical effects of trauma. This is physically freeing for Mala, releasing her from restrictive standards of polite behavior, but simultaneously moves her further into the realm of irrationality, becoming physical evidence of her perceived mental incapacity.

Conclusion

When Tobin Siebers "insist[ed] that disability studies include trauma within its definition of disability," he emphasized the significance of not just present experiences of disability, but of past experiences as well (*DA*, 102). To understand Mala's current experience of mental disability, one must also understand her history of trauma. To continue developing the relationships between disability, trauma, and mad studies we must better attend to the ways *crip time* manifests, and extend *crip time*'s emphasis on flexibility to rhetoric. Similar to Kafer's claim that "*crip time* bends the clock to meet disabled bodies and minds," *crip* rhetoric bends articulate expression to meet disabled bodies and minds (*FQC*, 27). *Cereus*

Blooms at Night shows the flexibility of both time and language as necessary for making Mala's history communicable in a recognizable way. While mediation is inherent to all communication, Mootoo foregrounds it and shows it as not just inherent in, but foundational to, narratives of mental disability.

Within the novel, communication relies not only on the language of telling, but of the animacy communicated in the moment of telling. The novel orients the reader toward Mala's history by exposing her affective connection to the nonhuman objects surrounding her as sites of experience that carry with them histories of love, pain, and trauma. Mala's experiences are not merely located in the past but are physically kept close through her proximity to these objects. Looking back from the present moment Tyler claims the narrative is made possible through two positions: "one, a *shared queerness* with Miss Ramchandin, which gave rise to the other, my proximity to the very Ramchandin Nana herself had known of" (48; my emphasis). Tyler recognizes a shared experience of difference or queerness in Mala. Although this shared feeling indirectly allows them to communicate, Tyler's literal proximity to Mala is also necessary. The affective understanding is not self-sustaining; it requires physical presence to support it. In discussing the levels of communication that exist beyond the words themselves Mel Chen identifies that "the 'processing' of language . . . amounts to bringing a listener's unique conceptualization to bear, via 'blending,' on structures or parts of structures alerted by specific linguistic features" (52). Tyler's understanding of Mala's language is composited through her few words and animal-like sounds, as well as his physical proximity to "linguistic features," her mannerisms, facial expressions, and other affective signifiers of meaning. In creating an articulate narrative, Tyler joins the intangible and tangible, a process that will never represent Mala's history according to traditional definitions of fidelity, but which makes it recognizable to others, hopefully Asha, who shared parts of that history and can see themselves in it despite Tyler's influence on its presentation.

Cereus Blooms at Night illustrates the flexibility inherent in crip time and what I have identified as crip rhetoric through its emphasis on inarticulate and affective modes of communication. For Mala, the horror of her abuse falls outside articulate language. Readers access it indirectly, through mediated memories.¹² In her reading of Alain Resnais's film *Hiroshima mon amour*, Caruth argues that "seeing" and "listening from the site of trauma" is created through the spectator as mediator (*UE*, 56). The gap left in our comprehension is the point at which witnessing begins: "What we see and hear . . . resonates beyond what we can know and

understand; but it is in the event of this incomprehension and in our departure from sense and understanding that our own witnessing may indeed begin to take place" (56). *Cereus Blooms at Night* departs from sense and understanding in that it asks readers to accept the potential losses or misrepresentations of mediated information as central to the narrative's ability to be told. It is not told in spite of the risk of mediation, but because of it. While incomprehension lies at the center of traumatic histories, the surrounding impressions and possibilities are still productive. Caruth directly argues that history can be found in the incomprehensible remnants of trauma: "For these stories of trauma cannot be limited to the catastrophes they name, and the theory of catastrophic history may ultimately be written in a language that already lingers, in these texts, after the end, in a time that comes to us from the other shore, from the other side of the disaster" (*Literature*, 92). Tyler compiles Mala's narrative in a future encounter on "the other side of the disaster." He takes the lingering language of Mala's history and turns it into something new. The "shared queerness" Tyler feels with Mala creates an affective understanding that, while potentially flawed in its ability to represent history, lets him stick the different bits of story together. And, as the story is offered to the reader, and simultaneously sent into the world in the hopes that Asha will read it and return to her sister, Mala waits, keeping her story with her, "on visiting days [wearing] a garland of snail shells about her neck or a crown of wreaths that we wove with feathers and the wings of expired insects" (247).

Notes

1. I read the protagonist of *Cereus Blooms at Night*, Mala Ramchandin, as the literary descendent of Bertha Mason from *Jane Eyre* and *Wide Sargasso Sea*. *Jane Eyre*, *Wide Sargasso Sea*, and *Cereus Blooms at Night* were published in 1847, 1966, and 1996, respectively. In *Jane Eyre*, Bertha Mason is the mad wife of the protagonist's love interest, Edward Rochester, who has been locked in the attic and kept secret. She is depicted as bestial, an obstacle to the protagonists' happiness. Jean Rhys's novel is a direct adaptation of Bertha Mason and tells the life story of Antoinette Causeway (as Bertha is called in *Wide Sargasso Sea*) in Jamaica and Dominica leading up to the events of *Jane Eyre*. Bertha and Mala are both controlled by the violence of men, and both ultimately set fire to their homes. However, where Bertha perishes in the fire, Mala survives. Rhys offers Bertha a past, but Shani Mootoo allows Mala a future.

2. See Ahmed, "Happy Objects," for more on how objects accumulate affect over time to become sites of experience that can help individuals orient themselves toward the surrounding world.

3. In "Teaching with Trauma," Angela M. Carter "conceptualize[s] trauma as

a disabling active structure” and eloquently argues that “approaching trauma as an affective structure that may, or may not, be recognizable as a kind of neurodivergence” can “broaden our understanding of disability.” Carter’s structure for understanding the material effects of trauma on lived experience closely aligns with my reading of Mala in *Cereus*.

4. In *Mad at School*, Margaret Price notes the ways in which mental disability interrupts the normative timelines within the academy. She writes, “*Crip time*, a term from disability culture, refers to a flexible approach to normative time frames. . . . It is this notion of *flexibility*, (not just ‘extra’ time) that unites kairois and crip time” (Price, 62–63). Alison Kafer picks up Price’s emphasis on flexibility as part of her exploration of crip time in *Feminist, Queer, Crip*.

5. Daniel Morrison and Monica Casper describe the temporal possibilities of an alliance between disability and trauma studies, claiming, “While disability studies often posits disability as an acute, singular thing, static in time and place, critical trauma studies allows us to examine both pre- and post-wounding conditions and all points in between.” Affect helps us navigate these temporal connections by connecting bits of knowledge and mediating between subjectivities, which gives the story shape and makes it recognizable as a history.

6. David Mitchell and Sharon Snyder argue that authors have long invoked disability to represent a moral failing (for example, Captain Ahab of *Moby Dick* or the titular *Richard III*), or use it as a convenient plot point to create added interest for the audience (for example, *The Steadfast Tin Soldier*). Mitchell and Snyder see this pattern throughout literary history, claiming “while stories rely upon the potency of disability as a symbolic figure, they rarely take up disability as an experience of social or political dimensions” (48). Rather than engaging the material experience of disability, texts more often use disability to represent something else, contributing to long-standing stereotypes of disability.

7. The *bodymind*, a term originating in Western trauma studies and developed by Margaret Price in relationship to feminist disability studies, recognizes the mutually constitutive relationship between the body (the physical) and the mind (the nonphysical). As a term, *bodymind* encompasses both physical and nonphysical elements of experience: “According to this approach, because mental and physical processes not only affect each other but also give rise to each other—that is, because they tend to act as one, even though they are conventionally understood as two—it makes more sense to refer to them together, in a single term” (Price, “Bodymind,” 26g). Price highlights the tie between the physical and nonphysical, pointing out that a consideration of the biological experience must include mental experience.

8. For a longer discussion of the rhetorical conflicts between disability and trauma studies, see Berger, “Trauma without Disability, Disability without Trauma.”

9. The lack of certainty that structures *Cereus*’s narrative style is also embedded in the plot itself. When Mala’s house burns down, her father’s corpse is destroyed. While Mala is taken into custody, suspected of murder, the case is dismissed due to lack of evidence (7–8).

10. For further discussion of the relationship between trauma, disability, and trigger warnings, see Carter, “Teaching with Trauma.”

11. In “Three Women’s Texts” Gayatri Spivak argues that in *Wide Sargasso Sea* Jean Rhys renarrates Bertha’s abjection and in doing so retains her sanity and therefore her humanity. Spivak claims that while in *Jane Eyre* Bertha is shown to be animalistic and therefore less entitled to equal rights, *Wide Sargasso Sea* troubles this depiction by showing Bertha to be sane, and therefore human (249–50). However, while Rhys signals an important instance of indeterminacy, significantly challenging the ways political representation is tied to perceptions of animality and insanity, in *Cereus Mala* freely exhibits animalistic behaviors without the caveat of sanity. While *Wide Sargasso Sea* gives Bertha a history where *Jane Eyre* did not, the text as a whole relies on traditional masculinist binaries of sanity and madness, human and animal. Rhys troubles the dynamics of Bertha within *Jane Eyre*, but that unsettling does not account for larger issues of oppression and marginalization.

12. There are possible exceptions to this. Throughout the novel an unspecified narrator seems to take over, filling in details impossible for Tyler, Otoh, or Ambrose to know. This includes the scene describing Chandin raping Mala in graphic detail. The narrator and source of the information are unclear, still implying some form of mediation, but the visceral description of the event is such that it is more immediately affecting than other moments in the novel.

Works Cited

- Ahmed, Sara. “Happy Objects.” In *The Affect Theory Reader*, edited by Melissa Gregg and Gregory J. Seigworth, 29–51. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2010.
- Berger, James. “Trauma without Disability, Disability without Trauma: A Disciplinary Divide.” In “Trauma and Rhetoric,” special issue of *JAC* 24, no. 3 (2004): 563–82. [jstor.org/stable/20866643](https://www.jstor.org/stable/20866643)
- Brontë, Charlotte. *Jane Eyre*. 1847. New York: W. W. Norton, 2016.
- Carter, Angela M. “Teaching with Trauma: Trigger Warnings, Feminism, and Disability Pedagogy.” In “Interventions in Disability Studies Pedagogy,” special issue of *Disability Studies Quarterly* 35, no. 2 (2015). [Dsq-sds.org/issue/view/144](https://dsq-sds.org/issue/view/144)
- Caruth, Cathy. *Literature in the Ashes of History*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2013.
- Caruth, Cathy. *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996.
- Chen, Mel. *Animacies*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2012.
- Donaldson, Elizabeth J. “Corpus of a Madwoman: Towards a Feminist Disability Studies Theory of Embodiment and Mental Illness.” In *The Madwoman and the Blindman: Jane Eyre, Discourse, Disability*, edited by David Bolt, Julia Miele Rodas, and Elizabeth J. Donaldson, 11–31. Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 2012.
- Dorfman, Ariel. *Death and the Maiden*. 1991. New York: Penguin Books, 1994.
- Foucault, Michel. *History of Madness*. 1961. Edited by Jean Khalifa, translated by Jonathan Murphy and Jean Khalifa. New York: Routledge, 2009.

- Gopinath, Gayatri. "Nostalgia, Desire, Diaspora: *Funny Boy* and *Cereus Blooms at Night*." In *Impossible Desire: Queer Diasporas and South Asian Public Cultures*, 161–86. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2005.
- Hutcheon, Linda. *A Theory of Adaptation*. 2nd ed. New York: Routledge, 2006.
- Kafer, Alison. *Feminist, Queer, Crip*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2013.
- Kafer, Alison. "Un/Safe Disclosures: Scenes of Disability and Trauma." *Journal of Literary & Cultural Disability Studies* 10, no. 1 (2016): 1–20. muse.jhu.edu/article/611309
- Kruger, Liam. "Gestures of Belonging: Disability and Postcoloniality in Bessie Head's *A Question of Power*." In "Crippling Modernism," special issue of *Modern Fiction Studies* 65, no. 1 (2019): 132–51. doi:10.1353/mfs.2019.0006.
- Larson, Stephanie A. "'I Be Dawg': Intellectual Disability and the Animal Other in the Works of William Faulkner." *Disability Studies Quarterly* 34, no. 4 (2014). Dsq-sds.org/article/view/3999/3794
- Mitchell, David T., and Sharon L. Snyder. *Narrative Prosthesis: Disability and the Dependencies of Discourse*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2000.
- Mootoo, Shani. *Cereus Blooms at Night*. New York: Grove Press, 1996.
- Morrison, Daniel R., and Monica J. Casper. "Intersections of Disability Studies and Critical Trauma Studies: A Provocation." *Disability Studies Quarterly* 32, no. 2 (2012). Dsq-sds.org/article/view/3189/3073
- Prendergast, Catherine. "On the Rhetorics of Mental Disability." In *Embodied Rhetorics: Disability in Language and Culture*, edited by James C. Wilson and Cynthia Lewiecki-Wilson, 45–60. Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 2001.
- Price, Margaret. "The Bodymind Problem and the Possibilities of Pain." In "New Conversations in Feminist Disability Studies," special issue of *Hypatia* 30, no. 1 (2015): 268–84. doi.org/10.1111/hypa.12127
- Price, Margaret. *Mad at School: Rhetorics of Mental Disability and Academic Life*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2011.
- Rhys, Jean. *Wide Sargasso Sea*. 1966. New York: W. W. Norton, 1982.
- Rodas, Julia Miele, Elizabeth J. Donaldson, and David Bolt. "Introduction: The Madwoman and the Blindman." In *The Madwoman and the Blindman*: Jane Eyre, *Discourse, Disability*, edited by David Bolt, Julia Miele Rodas, and Elizabeth J. Donaldson, 1–9. Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 2012.
- Samuels, Ellen. "Six Ways of Looking at Crip Time." *Disability Studies Quarterly* 37, no. 2 (2017). Dsq-sds.org/article/view/5824/4684
- Showalter, Elaine. *The Female Malady: Women, Madness, and English Culture, 1830–1980*. New York: Penguin Books, 1985.
- Siebers, Tobin. *Disability Aesthetics*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2010.
- Siebers, Tobin. *Disability Theory*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2008.
- Spivak, Gayatri. "Three Women's Texts and a Critique of Imperialism." *Critical Inquiry* 12, no. 1 (1985): 243–61. jstor.org/stable/1343469
- Yergeau, Melanie. *Authoring Autism: On Rhetoric and Neurological Queerness*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2018.