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Angela Brüning is currently writing her doctoral thesis at the University of Stirling, Scotland. Her thesis has a strong interdisciplinary element, examining different conceptions of body language and the body in contemporary Anglophone and Francophone Caribbean literature. She recently published 'Langages non-verbaux: le corps et la communication dans deux romans de Shani Mootoo et de Julia Alvarez' in the conference proceedings of the 8<sup>th</sup> International Conference of the Association of Caribbean Women Writers and Scholars. Her article 'Body Talk: The Body as Language in Shani Mootoo's *Cereus Blooms at Night* and Julia Alvarez's *How the García Girls Lost Their Accents*' is forthcoming. Other academic interests centre on the use of magic realism in Patrick Chamoiseau's *Texaco* and Gabriel García Márquez's *One Hundred Years of Solitude*.

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### The Corporeal and the Sensual in two Novels by Shani Mootoo and Julia Alvarez

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#### Abstract

This article will address the relation between the corporeal, the sensual and forms of non-verbal communication as presented in *Cereus Blooms at Night* (Shani Mootoo, 1996) and *How the García Girls Lost Their Accents* (Julia Alvarez, 1991). The article explores to what extent the body is used as an alternative form of expression to verbal language.

The texts deal with attempts of resistance to aggression that is rooted in the colonial or the neocolonial era. Mootoo illustrates forms of physical, psychological and verbal violence and considers ways in which these legacies of colonialism are iterated by the locals. As presented in both texts the victim's attempt to escape and simultaneously oppose aggression leads to their social marginalisation. From their liminal position the characters on whom my reading centres create their own imaginative worlds in which they struggle to find a voice. *Anorexia nervosa* seems to offer Sandra García a means of distinguishing herself from her parents, who comply with aspects of the Dominican *macho* culture, and to build a shield against racial prejudices and neocolonial attitudes she encounters in New

York. Her eating disorder thus represents a bodily rather than verbal attempt of rebellion. Mala Ramchandin's abstention from speech highlights her withdrawal from the colonial society under which she has suffered, and it marks an overt refusal to co-operate with this society by adopting its language. Her babbling is reminiscent of Kristeva's concept of the *semiotic chora*. In contrast to the psychoanalytic notion, however, Mala's post-linguistic abstention from speech is a deliberate form of resistance.

As revealed in the novels, the protagonists' attempted escape from reality cannot offer any solution. Rather it leads to further isolation. While the protagonist in Mootoo's novel refuses to engage with society, Alvarez's character seeks to communicate with her surroundings through a 'language' which *anorexia nervosa* seems to offer her. Neither Mala Ramchandin's abstention from speech nor Sandra's form of body language present viable alternatives to verbal language. Rather than suggesting a solution to racism and an iteration of colonial violence, the forms of expression presented in the novels indicate the need for social change.

### **The Corporeal and the Sensual in two Novels by Shani Mootoo and Julia Alvarez**

#### **Angela Brüning**

In this article I address the relation between the corporeal, the sensual and forms of non-verbal communication as presented in the novels *Cereus Blooms at Night* (1996) written by Shani Mootoo and *How the García Girls Lost Their Accents* (1991) by Julia Alvarez.<sup>1</sup> My comparison is based on different bodily functions which I relate to eating disorders and language. Essentially I consider the extent to which the body is used as an alternative form of expression to verbal language. In Alvarez's novel, in particular, the focus is on constituent parts of the body rather than on the body as a single entity. Sandra García, one of the main characters in Alvarez's text, is presented as having a split identity, as she tries to separate body and mind during her anorexic period. This divide and the resulting domination of one of the body's constitutive parts over others cause an imbalance in Sandra's character. Mootoo, by contrast, emphasises the interrelation between the various facets of Mala Ramchandin's personality. Both characters try to escape the societies in which they live, and which are marked by colonialism in Mala's case and by neocolonial

tendencies in Alvarez's novel. They create their own language, which is a non-verbal form of expression based on the physical body. In their illustration of certain types of body language, both novels propose and interrogate alternatives to speech.

The fictional texts differ considerably from each other in their subject matter, settings and characters. While *How the García Girls Lost Their Accents* is a migrant text addressing the issue of xenophobia, which the Garcías experience in New York in the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, *Cereus Blooms at Night* is set on the fictional island called Lantanacalara, which resembles Trinidad during the era of colonialism.<sup>2</sup> Julia Alvarez's text refers explicitly to the political instability in the Dominican Republic under the Trujillo regime, which accounts for the García de la Torres' emigration to the United States. The novel's main focus rests, however, on the family's experiences as immigrants in the United States. Most current criticism on this text deals with issues of displacement, the loss of one's homeland, and the question of identity.<sup>3</sup> I do not intend to add yet another analysis of these frequently discussed themes of contemporary criticism. Instead, by concentrating on Sandra García's psychosomatic illness I wish to illuminate an aspect of Alvarez's novel that has rarely been addressed.

In my discussion of Shani Mootoo's *Cereus Blooms at Night*, I concentrate chiefly on the character of Mala Ramchandin. Mala is the daughter of Sarah and Chandin Ramchandin. Sarah leaves her husband when she becomes aware of her homosexuality. After her best friend from school, Lavinia Thoroughly, returns to Lantanacalara, the two women build up such a close relationship that Sarah eventually finds it impossible to continue being Chandin's wife and Lavinia's lover at the same time. She tells Lavinia that '[they] have no choice but to make a decision' (59), which is to continue their relationship and elope together. Chandin never overcomes his wife's departure or the fact that he has been married to a lesbian. He starts drinking, becomes violent and forces his children, and the older girl Mala in particular, to replace his wife. Not only must Mala or Pohpoh, as she is called as a child, maintain the household, but she is also forced to have sexual intercourse with her father.

In the novel different stages of Mala's development are illustrated, namely the sexually abused child, Pohpoh; then Mala as Ambrose E. Mohanty's lover; the adult who lives in isolation in the house on Hill Side; and finally Mala as an allegedly mad patient in Paradise Alms House. The connection between the different parts that constitute Mala's

character is emphasised by the co-existence of the physically and psychologically wounded Pohpoh and Ambrose's lover Mala, and memories of the past that strongly influence Mala's present life.

During her youth Mala tries to detach herself from the sexually abused part of herself, represented by Pohpoh, in order to be able to bear her father's aggression and to grow up like other adolescents. Her change of name from Pohpoh, as her father nicknames her, into Mala, her original name and the name she wants to be called by her lover, Ambrose E. Mohanty, is an expression of her attempt to separate herself from the violated body. Mala intends to keep both parts of her personality separate, precisely because the abused body named Pohpoh and the adolescent Mala exist side by side. In so doing she tries to have a 'normal' relationship with Ambrose E. Mohanty although she has to continue giving Chandin sexual satisfaction. Thus she involuntarily leads a double life during her adolescence.

After the traumatic incidents of sexual abuse and murder Mala retreats to a distinct form of 'language', which is reminiscent of Kristeva's notion of the semiotic *chora*. Kristeva defines this term and its particular usage within psychoanalysis as a provisional, uncertain and fluent form of expression that precedes and constitutes a basis for the Lacanian mirror stage. According to Kristeva, the *chora* is:

an essentially mobile and extremely provisional articulation constituted by movements and their ephemeral stases. We differentiate this uncertain and indeterminate *articulation* from a *disposition* that already depends on representation.<sup>4</sup>

Pre-linguistic babble and sign language mark a transition period in a child's development. Since the child has not yet reached the stage of speaking, it tries to express itself through sounds and gestures that it copies from other people. In the child's development the semiotic *chora* is a provisional form of articulation because it is only used until the child can communicate verbally. While Kristeva introduces the notion of the *chora* in the context of semiotics, I will transfer her concept to language in more general terms.

Kristeva bases her concept of the semiotic *chora* on certain aspects of Lacan's notion of the mirror stage. According to the psychoanalytic concept of the unconscious, self-recognition during the Lacanian mirror stage takes place at the age of six to eight months.<sup>5</sup>

After the figurative death of the child Pohpoh, Mala may be said to enter the Lacanian mirror stage a second time as an adolescent.<sup>6</sup> The dual relationship between self and other is characterised by the person's, or, in psychoanalytic theory, the child's 'consciousness collaps[ing] into its double without keeping distance from it' (Lemaire, 81). The subject's movement between identification with and rejection of the other can be applied to Mala's case.

Mala keeps her memories of her past alive. In her nostalgia, she feels she has to care for Pohpoh, who represents these memories. Mala refers to Pohpoh as if she was an individual in need of support, who coexisted with herself: 'She decided that if trouble was indeed on its way her first duty was to save and care for Pohpoh' (172). The child Pohpoh, whom Mala imagines she can protect, serves as a substitute for a human relationship in which she can give love and is cared for at the same time. Since her mother, Asha and Ambrose abandon her, she seeks consolation in looking after Pohpoh. Condé even goes as far as to call Pohpoh 'a fetish [Mala has made] of her own past' (Condé, 69). The older Mala grows, the more distant her childhood becomes, and the more comfortable Mala becomes with that part of her former self that Pohpoh represents, namely the wounded body:

Over the last few years Mala had grown fond of this particular Pohpoh. She had rather disliked her many years before when they were one and the same. But these days she wished that she and that Pohpoh could have been two separate people, that they could have been best friends, or even that she could have been the mother of Pohpoh or at least her older sister. She would certainly have lifted her up in her arms, held her, hugged her and protected her as well as Pohpoh had protected Asha [her sister] (173).

There seems to be a shifting between Mala's past and her present. This fluidity is typical of Mootoo's novel, which continually strives to disrupt boundaries.

The traumatised Mala cannot literally be compared to a child which implies that her adoption of a form of expression that is reminiscent of the semiotic *chora* does not mark a necessary transitional period in an adult's life. The main point I would like to make is that, through her murmuring and grunting, she creates her own unique form of articulation. Like a child's babble her sounds turn out to be almost incomprehensible to the other inhabitants of the town of Paradise, especially since Mala does not imitate human sounds and gestures but animal noises. I will elaborate on this aspect in my close reading of Mala's articulation below. It is crucial to bear in mind that, in contrast to the child, to

whom Kristeva's and Lacan's concepts refer, Mala has already acquired language yet most of the time chooses not to express herself verbally. She thus tries to defy the language of the colonisers of Lantanacamara that many locals have adopted. In so doing Mala deliberately distances herself from colonial influences on the island. She refuses to adopt British language and culture as well as its mimicry. She does not play into the colonisers' hands by using their expressions and at the same time criticises those Lantanacamarians such as her father or the doctors and nurses in Paradise Alms House, who colonise the island from within the local community. I will argue later in this article that the country's intellectual elite have based their norms on British ideals while simultaneously officially rejecting the import of English regulations to Lantanacamara. Mala opposes both forms of colonisation by refusing to engage verbally with the locals, creating her own language instead. Eventually she cannot, however, detach herself entirely from a society to whose concepts even her language is connected.

According to Kristeva the semiotic *chora* is already socio-historically inscribed and determined by what she calls 'natural' constraints. She explains that

[w]e emphasise the regulated aspect of the *chora*: its vocal and gestural organization is subject to what we shall call an objective *ordering* [*ordonnancement*], which is dictated by natural or socio-historical constraints such as the biological difference between the sexes or family structure (Kristeva, *Revolution in Poetic Language*, 26-27).<sup>7</sup>

Consequently the child, to whom Kristeva's psychoanalytic concept of the semiotic *chora* predominantly refers, is always already influenced by society.

Colonial Lantanacamarian society, which privileges men in relation to power, is an example of what Kristeva refers to as 'socio-historical constraints' that mark divisions between the sexes. The significance Kristeva attributes to family structure is also reflected in the novel. Mala's family is highly disrupted. The girl has grown up without her mother and with a father who has abused her. As a result of this condition the whole family is marginalised from Lantanacamarian society. Regarding language this means that Mala can orientate herself neither in relation to society nor to her disrupted family. Consequently she searches for a form of articulation that allows her to find her own voice. For Mala the sounds of nature seem to be an alternative to the language that is marked by social

constraints. Thus she chiefly bases her utterances on animal sounds rather than on human articulation.

Mala hardly ever speaks in full sentences, be it on her own premises or in the old people's home. When she lives on Hill Side she only talks to Otoh, whom she initially mistakes for his father and her former lover Ambrose. To a certain degree, Otoh, like Mala, is a marginalised character insofar as he is a transsexual. He was born a girl but 'flawless[ly]' transformed into a boy at an early age (110). His liminality can be seen as a bond between Mala and Otoh. After her transfer to the alms house in the town of Paradise, Mala refuses to speak to the nurses and doctors.<sup>8</sup> There, the transvestite Tyler, whom she eventually grows to trust, is the only person who can establish a friendly relationship with Mala, mainly on the basis of their shared liminal positionality.

In her isolation in the house on Hill Side Mala refrains more and more from linguistic utterance, which, to her, is too deeply anchored in social conventions. Images, in contrast, appear to lend themselves more easily to interpretations that do not represent 'mainstream' views. In Mala's transitional period between vocal communication and her focus on images and sounds, she realises that she cannot adequately express her emotions verbally because words appear too restricting: 'That verbalisation, she came to understand, was not the feeling itself but a name given to the feeling' (126). Rather than trying to put her emotions into words, she intuitively follows her bodily sensations. Words seem to disconnect Mala from the messages her environment sends out. By concentrating on imagery Mala feels she can convey her own views more authentically than if she referred to words the meaning of which is determined by society to a greater extent than that of visual elements. Thus Mala resorts to images and feelings:

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 verbalisations: a noun tentatively uttered in recognition, a descriptive word confirming a feeling or observation (126).

The fractures and cracks in Mala's thoughts seem to mirror the physical and psychological scars that result from her sexual abuse. As society's verbal language, with which Mala has expressed herself so far, is inscribed in her mind, so are the scars on the surface of and inside her body.

Interacting with her surroundings in the most basic form of human communication, namely in an adoption of the pre-Oedipal and pre-linguistic form of the semiotic *chora*, Mala no longer really belongs to society or culture. Although I would argue that Mala's character has changed considerably after the childhood trauma so that she may be regarded as figuratively reborn, it has to be pointed out that hers is a post-linguistic abstention from speech rather than pre-linguistic babble. If she wants to, Mala can still use verbal language, but in most cases she chooses not to. The child, by contrast, to whom Kristeva's concept of the semiotic *chora* refers, still has to learn how to speak. The main point of my argument is, however, that Mala chooses a form of non-verbal language reminiscent of the characteristics of the semiotic *chora*. Mala's reaction to colonial violence as expressed in physical aggression, psychological torture or the coloniser's language is a withdrawal from society and a refusal to adopt its language.

Mala's resistance to society's rules and constraints results in her being transferred to Paradise Alms House, which, in Foucauldian terms, can be seen as a place of discipline. In this nursing home Mala is forcefully excluded from society. She is castigated by this institution for her alleged madness. The nurse Tyler is explicitly requested to 'discipline' the residents of that alms house: 'You will always find troublesome residents but in the end, at their age, they are all like children. And when children misbehave, you have to discipline them' (13-14). Mala is compared to an immature child and consequently not allowed to follow her own beliefs but judged as obstinate and mad.

The alms house is run in accordance with local rather than imported regulations. Tyler, for instance, is reminded that his training in the Shivering Northern Wetlands, in Britain, does not grant him a superior position. The regulations set up in the nursing home can thus be interpreted as criticism of colonial influence in Lantanacamará. The rejection of a direct importation of regulations from England is a nationalistic response to British colonisation. It is significant that it is the local elite that warns Tyler against implementing foreign rules in the home for the elderly. Like Tyler most doctors and nurses will, however, have been trained in the metropole, the colonial centre of knowledge. This means that the alms house is run according to British regulations, which have been adopted by the Lantanacamarian leading class. Although the staff of Paradise Alms House do not admit that they are strongly influenced by their training in the metropole, they do, in fact, promote British ideas. They colonise the island from within in a way that is similar to Chandin's and

Ambrose's mimicry and implementation of 'standard' English. Chandin is presented as a victim of colonialism, who develops into a coloniser of his own people insofar as he adopts a very stylised version of British English and even iterates colonial violence within his own family. As these examples show, the legacy of colonialism is present in various aspects of daily life in Lantanacamara.

Paradise Alms House in *Cereus Blooms at Night* is reminiscent of places that separate the subject from society in order to resubmit him/her to social norms and laws.<sup>9</sup> The aim of such institutions is to turn the person that has transgressed socially determined boundaries such as those between sanity and madness or obedience of the law and delinquency into a docile body. As Foucault puts it, 'discipline produces subjected and practised bodies, "docile" bodies' (Foucault, 138).

Mala Ramchandin is considered insane by society for several reasons. She is said to have murdered her father, whose corpse she hides in the house. Moreover she is seen as mad because of the life she leads in isolation and because of her largely non-verbal language, which deters communication with her. Locking her up in a social institution of discipline controls and keeps her away from society. The nursing home, however, to which she is transferred, proves to be rather ineffective in inducing obedience. Mala rebels against the nurses and doctors and refuses to speak to them. She does not interact with the other patients either: 'They quickly lost interest in this new resident though; she was uncommunicative and seemed to live in a world that did not include them' (23). The nurse Tyler is the only person Mala comes to accept and talk to:

To everyone else, Miss Ramchandin appeared to have a limited vocabulary or at least to have become too simple-minded to do more than imitate. However, I knew for a fact she was able to speak and had volumes of tales and thoughts in her head. She rambled under her breath all day and all night, as long as she and I were alone (99).

I would argue that Tyler and Mala manage to communicate in the old people's home mainly because both characters question social norms and practices which results in their marginalisation. Tyler points out that one of the attributes he shares with Mala is that '[they] had found [their] own ways and fortified [them]selves against the rest of the world' (48).

It has to be pointed out that Mala is not merely a victim of the colonial society presented in the text. On the contrary, her refusal to engage with society, and her use of a non-verbal form of communication show that she holds an active role in the novel, undermining this very society. By assuming agency, she does not represent a Foucauldian body in the sense of a docile, passive, socially and historically inscribed body. Mala is creative insofar as she does not simply copy sounds and gestures of the society from which she is marginalised. She rather develops her own form of articulation based on sounds heard in nature and that she adapts to suit her own purposes. Mala's babble is not merely a result of her traumatic experiences but, more importantly, a means of expressing herself differently from the community of the town of Paradise. With her form of articulation she finds a voice that is heard only by other marginalised characters. It should be pointed out that most other characters finally abandon Mala, even those who can understand her (Condé, 68). That means that the novel does not suggest a proper healing of Mala. The violence Mala suffers, which can be seen as a legacy of colonialism, causes her mental disturbance and social isolation. She cannot recover from having been abused and abandoned as long as the society around her does not make an effort to change their attitudes towards liminal characters like Mala.

By trying to find a voice outside dominant discourses Mala seeks to resist society's constraints and prejudices. Mala does not primarily aim to interact with the other inhabitants of the town of Paradise. She seeks an alternative to the human community which she seems to find in the natural environment. For Mala, a type of body language that is based on movements and sounds in nature and that concentrates on visual elements rather than vocal expression seems to constitute a means of self-healing. Only in the natural surroundings of her house does Mala get a sense of integration and acceptance insofar as she interacts with the flora and fauna in her garden. Although the garden has not been cultivated for a long time and thus resembles wilderness to a certain degree, it is still a product of culture. Nevertheless Mala's surroundings on Hill Side are less culturally inscribed and biased than the corrupted town of Paradise.

It has to be emphasised, though, that Mala's retreat from society and her silence are self-harming and in the end do not suggest any real solution to the problems encountered by the colonial society of Lantanacamara. Chandin's iteration of colonial violence and the fact that Mala is abandoned by friends and family members results in her abstention from verbal language. Her resorting to non-verbal communication is an escape from reality. Her

non-verbal form of communication indicates the need for change rather than presenting a solution to problems arising from the colonisation of Lantana Camara or of the real country, Trinidad.

Marginalisation and the problematics of language are themes that are also examined in the second fictional text, *How the García Girls Lost Their Accents* (1991), in which Julia Alvarez depicts the life of the García de la Torre family between 1956 and 1989. In this autobiographically informed novel Alvarez illustrates a patriarchal family structure characteristic of many Hispanic communities as well as its impact on family members and women in particular. Reflecting her own experiences as a Dominican-American migrant, whose father was committed to the overthrow of the Trujillo regime, Alvarez demonstrates the difficulties the Garcías encounter after their escape from the violence and persecution under Trujillo's dictatorship in the late 1950s to the United States.<sup>10</sup> As dissidents to the dictatorship the Garcías can be regarded as political refugees.

Sandra, one of the girls, who is torn between her mother country and her new life in New York, becomes anorexic. She does not feel at home or understood in either country. Sandra cannot seriously talk to anybody so that for her *anorexia nervosa* seems to be the only effective way to interact with her surroundings, even though this turns out to be an illusion. The thinner and weaker Sandra grows, the more difficult it becomes for her to have a clear mind and the more she is caught in her own world of thoughts, which removes her from life around her. In addition, she is geographically distanced from society when she is hospitalised after her nervous 'breakdown'.

The attempt to move between the two cultures results in Sandra being torn between the values of her mother country and the lifestyle and ideas she is confronted with in New York. According to Mrs García this dilemma is expressed in Sandra's apparent striving after a Western beauty model on the one hand and the wish for a more Latino-like darker complexion on the other. As her mother affirms in her discussion with Dr. Tandleman, 'Sandi wanted to look like those twiggy models' (51). In Mrs García's interpretation this implies that Sandra has incorporated social perceptions and values she does not entirely feel comfortable with. The mother cannot understand that Sandra would like to be as dark as her sisters and thus obviously recognisable both as one of the four García girls and as being of Dominican origin: '[...] the family has light-colored blood, and that Sandi got it all. But imagine, spirit of contradiction, she wanted to be darker complected like her

sisters' (52). What Mrs García sees as contradiction can be interpreted in cultural terms as one side of the dichotomy between American and Dominican culture. The changes in Sandra's character, which are a result of her illness, engender her difficulty in opposing influences from outside which she does not want to embrace. This also means that she eventually cannot resist being taken to hospital where she is treated for *anorexia nervosa*.

It has to be emphasised that the reader learns about Sandra's illness only from Mrs García's account but that the daughter is not given a voice to report her own view on this issue. To a certain degree this imposed silence undermines the potential of anorexia to serve as an alternative form of communication. Sandra's messages are always mediated and tend to be misinterpreted as seems to be the case with reference to the issue of beauty. Mrs García's understanding that Sandra is striving after a particular Western beauty model is a highly superficial one. Aspects that are more significant for the girl are the issues of rebellion and of having something of her own to hold on to in her new and unfamiliar surroundings. For Sandra, anorexia also presents a potential escape from reality into a world of her own. With her flight from confronting the problems everyday life poses for her, she resembles Mala. Sandra tries to negotiate between her parents' expectations of her maintaining Dominican values such as the traditionally hierarchical family system and the apparent promises of a more independent life in New York by 'choosing' a third way, namely that of anorexia. In her delirium-like anorexic state she creates a world of her own that is reminiscent of the world of imagination into which Mala flees when she lives on Hill Side. With her loss of weight Sandra's perspective changes and she has distorted views both of herself and of her surroundings. Not only does she imagine that she gradually transforms into an ape, but she claims to literally see her hands in the shape of a monkey's hands (55).

Although anorexia seems to be the only way for Sandra to express herself, this form of communication should not be seen as an alternative to verbal language. It is self-harming and not suggested as a possible solution to socio-cultural constraints. Sandra's illness rather indicates the need for changes both in Dominican and American communities. Her form of body language is an attempt at communication, whereas Mala's babbling and her imitation of animal sounds primarily serves to distance herself from society. While Mala completely distances herself from society, Sandra tries to engage with other people in her own language. The main purpose of Mala's body language is not human communication but interaction with nature. Sandra, in contrast, tries to convey the problems she has as a

migrant with the help of the eating disorder. Her refusal to eat can be interpreted as an attempt to assume a position of her own, which responds to a great pressure to conform to both Dominican and American values. She is not fully accepted in American society, where she experiences racism, expressed by the family's neighbour. She also struggles at school to understand how the American system works. At the same time, however, she does not entirely identify with the Dominican way of life either. Thus, Sandra does not feel comfortable in either society and, by refusing to eat, indirectly tries to eliminate external influences from her body. By rejecting food Sandra exerts power over her body until she is too weak to assume agency over herself and is taken to hospital (53). While for Sandra anorexia seems to offer a way to express herself, her parents dismiss her eating disorder as madness that does not appear to have any deeper meaning. They do not understand the significance of their daughter's anorexia, which means that Sandra cannot successfully communicate through her illness. Both Sandra's and Mala's cases are examples of how resistance is a means of exercising agency and yet cannot exert its disruptive potential without being understood by someone from within 'mainstream' society. By being misunderstood Sandra is disarmed to a certain degree. She refuses to conform to social pressure but has to realise that she cannot dissociate herself from the 'mainstream' and critique dominant values without speaking the language of that part of society. By refusing to engage with society verbally, Mala attempts to pre-empt such a misinterpretation. Yet, her 'alternative' form of expression is not understood, either.

To a certain degree the aspect of self-discipline plays a role for Sandra. She hardly ever stops reading, even in hospital, and does not want to take any time to eat. Sandra tries to push her body to extremes, expecting it to work almost continuously without nourishment. All she is reported to do in hospital is read: 'Our daughter is in the hospital, too weak to do anything. All she does is read' (53) and 'Sandi was a toothpick. And that's not the least of it, she wouldn't put a book down, read, read, read. That's all she did' (54). Trying to maximise her mental activity and minimise the amount of food she eats, Sandra seems to construct a highly docile body. By reducing her life to the one activity of reading, she deliberately distinguishes herself from her surroundings, renders herself special.

More important than the aspect of Sandra's self-discipline is, however, the interpretation of anorexia as a means of rebellion. Sandra's reading can be seen as resistance to both Dominican and American societies. The author who seems to have greatest influence on her is Charles Darwin with his theory of evolution. Not only is his name on Sandra's

reading list (55), but she also refers to him in relation to the alleged changes that take place in her body. Based on Darwin, the anorexic girl constructs her own theory of the backward evolution of humankind into animals. Sandra affirms that 'soon she wouldn't be human' (54). 'She told us that she was being turned out of the human race. She was becoming a monkey' (ibid.). This idea evokes the concept of the hierarchy of races, which, in colonial discourse, has formed the basis for social Darwinism. Different levels of intelligence and 'civilisation' were used to justify colonisation and violent submission of allegedly 'inferior races' to the white coloniser. This form of past violence seems to be enacted on Sandra's body. She sees herself not as developing into a grown-up woman who assumes her position within American society but as turning into Man's evolutionary predecessor. Apparently the first bodily signs of such a transformation are already noticeable: 'Already the other organs inside her body were a monkey's. Only her brain was left, and she could feel it going' (ibid.). The bodily changes Sandra claims to feel illustrate her interpretation of Darwin's theory of evolution. As the colonisers had inflicted violence onto their subjects so does Sandra harm herself, arguing that she regresses into an inferior human being and even into an animal. She thus seems to embody discriminatory practices of social Darwinism, which that were imposed on her colonial counterparts.

In 'dehumanising' herself Sandra inscribes colonial and, with regards to racism she encounters in New York, neocolonial violence on her body. Sandra and her family are not treated as equal citizens in their own rights but marginalised as immigrants from a 'Third World' country. While they are confronted with hostility, they are simultaneously expected to adapt to an American life-style rather than keeping Dominican cultural practices and beliefs. For Sandra, in particular, this dialogue between the two cultures represents a challenge. Her emaciated body becomes a visible, tangible testament of racist persecution. Sandra embodies an allegedly 'inferior' because formerly colonised ethnicity that still suffers from injustice and marginalisation. She internalises racist prejudices and even goes beyond them, declaring herself not human. Sandra's impression that she is being transformed into a monkey reinforces the extreme view that the colonised are not human beings. In this sense Sandra's body evokes past memories of physical and psychological damage, precisely by manifesting the colonial legacy of violence on her body. She thus creates a sense of continuity between colonised societies in which the so-called 'inferior race' suffered from physical violence and contemporary US society, which is marked by a more subtle form of ethnic discrimination. By advocating Western ideals of beauty and hence physically adjusting to mainstream norms, Sandra's mother conceals the

(neo)colonial oppression. In the light of social Darwinism Sandra's anorexia is simultaneously a manifestation of past and continuing harm and a form of agency. In this sense, Sandra's attenuated body is not merely the result of following an extreme beauty model, a more mainstream interpretation of anorexia. On the contrary, Sandra uses her body to express the damage she suffers from racism and alienation.

Sandra's inversion of the theory of evolution can be interpreted as a questioning of social power relations. It may not be the most influential who will succeed but possibly those who are marginalised and able to see alternatives to mainstream beliefs. With her adaptation of scientific findings and literary claims she tries to establish an alternative to dominant discourses and cultural conventions.

The physical weakening of the body's inner organs that can be a result of anorexia is, in Sandra's case, interpreted as a form of 'dehumanisation'. In the context of her unsettledness, her 'being turned out of the human race' (ibid.) is a critique of the hostilities she encounters in the American society where she feels marginalised. At the same time she longs for acceptance and for a place within a community. The girl argues that she has to read as much as possible in order to be able to retain something from her life as a human being: 'If she read all the great books, maybe she'd remember something important from having been human' (ibid.). Sandra does not want to leave the human race, or in other words, she does not wish to be marginalised in New York and, due to her adoption of certain American values, in her mother country, too. As she notices her body gradually disintegrate, she does not, however, see a way of reintegrating into the human world. The only means to counter this expulsion appears to be to retain memories by reading. While Mala increasingly alienates herself from the community and associates herself with nature by inscribing herself into the landscape, Sandra focuses on culture in an attempt to retain some humanness. She does not want to be considered entirely inhuman and animal-like but rather find her own position in a humane and unprejudiced society. I suggest considering Sandra as a person who tries to defy constraints within both Dominican and American culture rather than simply disciplining her body and thus merely turning against herself. Like Mala she seeks to find an alternative to socially determined expectations and assume her own position in relation to 'mainstream' society.

I have based this textual analysis on different forms of non-verbal language and representations of corporeality in *Cereus Blooms at Night* and *How the García Girls Lost*

*Their Accents*. The protagonists I have concentrated on in both novels use ‘alternative’ forms of expression through which they reject the iteration of colonialism and neocolonialism. In relation to my argument that the body is largely socially constructed, it seems impossible to escape social categories completely. What has to be questioned, though, is the establishment of apparently impermeable boundaries between different categories.

Mala refuses to engage verbally with the society at the margin of which she lives, and she only opens herself to other socially stigmatised and marginalised characters like Tyler and Otoh. Sandra García questions the Dominican *macho* culture, which is translated in her family with regard to her father’s dominant role, and which seems to clash with concepts of personal freedom she is confronted with in New York. Simultaneously, she seeks to challenge xenophobia and marginalisation in North America that seem to iterate colonial violence. Sandra tries to negotiate between the different cultural influences and experiences by developing her own alternative, which turns out, however, to be self-harming. Her increasing physical weakness, which results in her hospitalisation, leads to greater dependence on the society that can be seen as one of the causes of her eating disorder. Although *anorexia nervosa* may in Sandra’s case be interpreted as a form of rebellion, it does not in the long term fulfil this aim. It does not constitute a viable alternative to verbal language nor to a partial adaptation to the society in which she lives. As Sandra finally has to realise it is impossible to stay entirely outside society. Her attempt to escape social regulations leads to closer confinement as becomes evident when the girl is ‘disciplined’ in the hospital. Rather than offering a solution anorexia signals a need for change. The illness itself, however, does not bring about any modifications in social structures and relationships.

In Mootoo’s novel Mala opposes the adoption of colonial discourse with her babble and her body language. She uses verbal language only in the presence of those characters who are also stigmatised by society. She thereby creates an alternative community, one qualified to communicate without vocal language. By refusing to engage verbally with the community of Paradise in Lantanacamara, by expressing herself in a way that resembles the semiotic *chora*, Mala refuses to engage with the society structured by colonialism presented in the novel. Like Sandra, Mala is eventually transferred to an institution of discipline and punishment. Hence neither woman is accorded her specific position from

which she seeks to oppose social norms dictated under colonialism and then exerted by the (neo)colonial society.

It has to be pointed out that neither form of non-verbal communication can replace verbal language, and that their subversive potential marginalises the rebellious characters rather than leading to change in society. The intimation of an alternative to dominant discourse is, however, equally important because the mere refusal to conform may already point out the ills of that particular society. Neither form of rebellion offers any solution, but they indicate the need for changes in the societies of Lantanacamara/Trinidad on the one hand and in the Dominican Republic and the United States on the other.

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<sup>1</sup> Shani Mootoo, *Cereus Blooms at Night* (London: Granta, 1996) and Julia Alvarez, *How the García Girls Lost Their Accents* (New York: Algonquin Books of Chapel Hill/Workman Publishing Company, Inc, 1991). All further citations of the texts refer to these editions and will be given in the main body of the text.

<sup>2</sup> In her article ‘The Flight from Certainty’ Mary Condé affirms that Lantanacamara is ‘a mythical version of Trinidad’ (Mary Condé, ‘The Flight from Certainty in Shani Mootoo’s *Cereus Blooms at Night*’ in *Flight from Certainty: The Dilemma of Identity and Exile*, ed. by Anne Luyat and Francine Tolron (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2001), 63-70 (64).)

<sup>3</sup> David T. Mitchell, ‘The Accent of “Loss”: Cultural Crossings as Context in Julia Alvarez’s *How the García Girls Lost Theirs Accents*’ in *Beyond the Binary: Reconstructing Cultural Identity in a Multicultural Context*, ed. and intro. by Timothy B. Powell (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers UP, 1999)

165-84; Joan M. Hoffman, ‘“She Wants to Be Called Yolanda Now”: Identity, Language, and the Third Sister in *How the García Girls Lost Theirs Accents*’, *The Bilingual Review/La Revista Bilingue*, 23: 1

(Jan - Apr 1998): 21-27; William Luis, ‘A Search for Identity in Julia Alvarez’s *How the García Girls Lost Theirs Accents*’, *Callaloo*, 23: 3 (Summer 2000): 839-49.

<sup>4</sup> Julia Kristeva, *Revolution in Poetic Language*, trans. by Margaret Waller and intro. by Léon S. Roudiez (New York: Columbia UP, 1984) 25. She explains further that the semiotic *chora* that usually characterises an early stage of a child’s development can only be compared to vocal or kinetic rhythm, in other words to gestures or sounds: ‘Neither model nor copy, the *chora* precedes and underlies figuration and thus specularization, and is analogous only to vocal or kinetic rhythm’ (Kristeva, *Revolution in Poetic Language*, 26).

<sup>5</sup> Anika Lemaire, *Jacques Lacan*, trans. by David Macey (London and New York: Routledge, 1977) 79. All further references are taken from this edition and are incorporated into the main text.

<sup>6</sup> In Lacan’s theorisation, this stage is characterised by the child’s first conscious confrontation with another person that eventually leads to the child’s self-recognition. It is the ‘first dual relationship between the child his like – another child, his own image reflected in the mirror, the mother herself or her substitutes [...]’ (Lemaire, 78). Rather than assuming ‘subjectivity’, the child becomes aware of his/ her previously fragmented body. Lemaire explains that ‘[a]ccording to Lacan, the most this relationship can do is to constitute a registration of the totality of a body previously lived as fragmented’ (ibid.).

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<sup>7</sup> I disagree with the unquestioned assumption that sexual differences are biological and hence natural. In my view this position runs the risk of essentialising biological differences between men and women regardless of race or physical impairment. It would, however, lead too far to discuss this argument here.

<sup>8</sup> According to Condé, the name of this town ‘suggests a defiance of human categories’ (Condé, 64).

<sup>9</sup> As Foucault explains in *Discipline and Punish*, the objective of punishment changed during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries from physical punishment in public display to moral disciplining under surveillance in special institutions. See Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: the Birth of the Prison*, trans. by Alan Sheridan (London: Penguin, 1977) and *The A-Z Guide to Modern Literary and Cultural Theorists*, ed. by Stuart Sim (London: Prentice Hall/Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1995) 137. Foucault argues further that ‘[d]iscipline sometimes requires *enclosure*, the specification of a place heterogeneous to all others and closed in upon itself’ (Foucault, 141; emphasis in original). All references to Foucault are based on this edition of *Discipline and Punish* and are stated in the main text.

<sup>10</sup> With reference to violence and upheaval Alvarez mentions prosecution under Trujillo’s dictatorship and his *Guardias* or the *SIM*, the Secret Police between 1956 and 1960 (Alvarez, 195-223, see esp. 201).

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