

The Carcerality of Domestic Space and Counter-domestic Resistance

An Exploration of Domestic Violence and Child Sexual Abuse in *The Bluest Eye* and *Cereus*

Blooms at Night

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ER&M 291/AMST 438: Caribbean Diasporic Literature

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December 20th, 2023

Introduction

In 1970 American novelist Toni Morrison published *The Bluest Eye*. The story is set in Ohio in 1941, and follows the character of Pecola Breedlove — a black girl whose life is marked by anti-blackness and sexual abuse by her father, Cholly. The story is narrated by one of Pecola's childhood friends, Claudia MacTeer, who recounts the domestic abuse and internalized racism rampant in the Breedlove home. A newer story that parallels Morrison's is Shani Mootoo's 1996 book, *Cereus Blooms at Night*. This story takes place around the early 20th century in the fictional country of Lantanacamara, likely based on Mootoo's country of origin, Trinidad. The central character is Mala Ramachandin, a girl of Indian descent who experiences years of forced domestic labor and sexual abuse by her father, Chandin. Her story is told in the present day from the perspective of Tyler, a nurse assigned to her at the Paradise Alms House. Tyler is a black queer man who develops kinship with Mala throughout the book. Although Mala faces the same conditions of incestuous rape as Pecola, Mootoo's story ends with a community of support enveloping Mala, whereas Morrison's ends with Pecola in desolate isolation.

In these stories, domestic space is the site of two girl's forced labor and sexual abuse. By combining Lisa Lowe's concept of "intimacy", Friedrich Hegel's concept of "property", and sociologist Dominic Pasura's "competing meanings of childhood", we can understand domestic space as a tool for heteropatriarchal violence. However, each manifestation of that violence also has the potential to produce a counter-domestic project that rejects forced labor and abuse. The counter-domestic space can be exemplified by producing artwork to reclaim domestic space or cultivating kinship that rejects racial capitalism and heteropatriarchy. By putting *Cereus Blooms at Night* in conversation with *The Bluest Eye*, we can analyze the impact of the carcerality of

domestic space on girls of color, while citing the emergence of counter-domestic projects of resistance.

The Violence of Domestic Space: Colonialism, Fallacies of Intimacy, and Carcerality

To understand the violence of domestic space we must first understand domestic space as a colonial product. Lisa Lowe illustrates this in her book, *The Intimacies of Four Continents*. Lowe argues that the Caribbean colonial context produced distinctions between “the intimate private sphere and the public sphere”, as well as the difference between the “feminine home” and the “masculine world of work.”¹ She outlines how colonial powers established a heteropatriarchal social structure. One in which the home was private and synonymous with femininity. Whereas the outside space — the city, the plantation, and the port, were sites for labor, synonymous with masculinity.

However, this structure was never upheld. It was never applicable to colonized women of color since they were forced to work inside and outside of domestic space. In addition, the violence that colonized women faced violated all spatial distinctions. From home invasions to family separation and sexual abuse — colonized women were never afforded intimacy nor privacy, regardless of context. That being said, the violence committed toward colonized women also facilitated the fallacy of colonial bourgeois domesticity. The colonial bourgeoisie only conceptualized heteropatriarchal privacy and intimacy *because* of the wealth they accumulated through slavery, genocide, and indentured servitude. As a result, their concepts of privacy and intimacy were never the truth. Their homes were actually spaces of patriarchal abuse, forced labor, adulterous rape, and manifestations of public sociopolitical issues. Ultimately Lowe shows us how violence in domestic space emerges as a cyclical process. First through the violence that

¹ Lowe, Lisa. *The Intimacies of Four Continents*. Duke University Press, 2015, p. 195

violates colonized women, and then through the fallacy of bourgeois intimacy. Moving beyond Lowe, the violence of domestic space is also reflected in Hegel's idea of personhood.

The modern idea of personhood is exemplified in Hegel's, *The Philosophy of Right*.² Hegel theorizes modern personhood as an amalgamation of property, family, civil society, and the state.³ He outlines steps of "possession" to achieve personhood. First, the individual must have possession of himself (through education, reason, and logic). This step only applies to white men, eliminating anyone else's chances to be viewed as a person. Then the man must possess property. To Hegel, someone is only granted personhood through property. At the time property was not only land but a man's family (his wife and children), colonized people, and enslaved people. Without this property Hegel says that man will be dominated "...by nature."⁴ Essentially, man is defined by his domination over property. Thus, without sustained domination, man will lose his autonomy.

Furthermore, there are strict guidelines for the maintenance of property. Hegel's vision of family states that a woman must understand her "sphere... is essentially marriage."⁵ Here he outlines that a man's personhood only functions when a woman is relegated to the home. Therefore, if a woman transgresses the domestic space, she threatens a man's entire self-concept. As a result, the domestic becomes carceral — a space where women are trapped and forced to labor. In addition, Hegel emphasizes how the enforcement of this carceral domestic space becomes a tool to measure the success of a state. According to him, a state is only stable and thriving when it enforces a clear "social order" with a successful carceral domestic structure.⁶ However, if the domestic space does not abide by these rules then the man and woman involved

² Hegel, G. W. F. (1991). *Hegel: Elements of the Philosophy of Right*. (H. B. Nisbet, Trans., A. W. Wood, Ed.). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press

³ IBID, p. 53

⁴ IBID, p. 162

⁵ IBID, p. 143

⁶ IBID, p. 203

are “immoral” and the state is subsequently in crisis. Consequently, the enforcement of a carceral domestic space is crucial for the prosperity of a state. Forced labor and abuse against women are the primary tools to maintain that structure — and men must be violent enforcers to be granted modern personhood. Now having established the domestic space as a site of colonial violence, the fallacy of bourgeois intimacy, and carcerality, it is imperative to look at the most vulnerable people in this space: children.

The Domestic Dehumanization of Children: Colonialism and Child Sexual Abuse

The 2012 study titled, “Competing Meanings of Childhood and the Social Construction of Child Sexual Abuse in the Caribbean” explores the factors that influence our understanding of children. The study, led by sociologist Dominic Pasura, was undertaken in six Caribbean countries: Anguilla, Barbados, Dominica, Grenada, Montserrat, and St Kitts & Nevis, where researchers used personal interviews, community surveys, and group discussions to collect their data. This article does not intend to make generalizations about Caribbean attitudes towards children, rather it highlights trends across data, and it can help us understand how domestic violence against children manifests in former colonies.

The article first contextualizes the present-day treatment of Caribbean children as a byproduct of Western colonialism. The idea that children “lack adult power and capacity” directly reflects Hegel’s idea of self possession.⁷ Since children are not viewed as possessing reason, logic, or education, they are not viewed as whole people. This leads to a plethora of issues for children, in particular the justification of their abuse. This is best exemplified by the data collected about child sexual abuse (CSA). Adult participants were asked to identify the

⁷ Pasura, Dominic, et al. “Competing Meanings of Childhood and the Social Construction of Child Sexual Abuse in the Caribbean.” *Childhood*, vol. 20, no. 2, 2012, p. 201

occurrence of child sexual abuse across different written scenarios, and a handful of them were unwilling to classify the situations as CSA. One of the primary reasons was the adultification of girls of color. For example, many older men did not view teenage girls who engaged in sexual commerce as victims of CSA because they are “mature” and “know what they want.”⁸

Additionally, some participants stated that a pregnant girl or one who menstruates is no longer a child. The adultification of girls is linked to the perpetuation of CSA, and the ideology behind it is strikingly similar to that of Hegel.

Under Hegel’s conception of an autonomous man — defined in part by his possession of a family, and Hegel’s conception of a woman — defined by her proper place in the home, the young girl is doubly oppressed. She is first possessed by her father and then she is relegated to the carceral domestic space. Therefore, when a young girl is sexually abused or forced into sexual commerce, she is the one vilified because she has transgressed two social norms. She has evaded the possession of her patriarch and has transgressed the proper place of a woman. Therefore she is no longer seen as a child and is shamed as a woman. This has a host of material and psychological effects on the child while the culpable adults face minimal accountability.

It is crucial to reiterate that the normalization of CSA is not unique to Caribbean countries or former colonies. In fact, many of the stakeholders involved in the study are Caribbean groups that organize to fight against CSA. The inclusion of this study simply serves to elucidate the link between children (especially young girls) and the violence of domestic space. With this theoretical groundwork — from Lowe, to Hegel, to this study — we can turn to the violence of domestic space in *Cereus Blooms at Night* and *The Bluest Eye*.

⁸ Pasura, Dominic, “Competing meanings of childhood and the social construction of child sexual abuse in the Caribbean.” p. 208

The Possessive Patriarch: Marginalized Manhood and Shame

In both stories, the violence of domestic space first presents itself through the fathers, Chandin and Cholly. From the first mention of Chandin's biological Indian parents, it is clear to readers that he has already internalized racism and shame about his home. As Reverend Thoroughly drives up to the home to adopt him, Chandin is said to be "embarrassed" of how his house and mother smells of "coals and charred eggplant and sweat."⁹ Even the invisible aspects of domestic space, like smell, are markers of class and ethnicity that reflect Chandin's colonized status. Chandin is immediately shown to abhor his domestic space and detest his cultural traditions. Once he is adopted by Reverend Thoroughly, Chandin idolizes the Thoroughly home. He describes the home as a beautiful place with "scented breezes from undulating fields of sugar cane..."¹⁰ The mention of sugar cane fields reminds readers of the violence and exploitation that allowed the Thoroughlys to acquire their wealth. The domestic comforts of the Thoroughly home are soon superseded by the violence of white supremacy. Chandin faces numerous instances of racism and internalizes this through unrelenting shame and self-hatred. His self-loathing is inescapable since the violence of white supremacy is embedded in his domestic space.

For Cholly Breedlove on the other hand, the violence of domestic space is presented through the lack of a stable home, the danger of racist violence, and the rejection of his father. Cholly's infancy is marked by his parent's abandonment. He is later placed in the care of his aunt, but his childhood is still marred by horrific racist abuse around his home. For much of Cholly's life, domestic space is unstable and unable to protect him from violence. After his aunt's death, Cholly is forced to leave his hometown and look for his father. Throughout that journey, he does not have stable housing and is isolated from any kind of community.¹¹ He is

⁹ Mootoo, Shani. *Cereus Blooms at Night*, p. 27

¹⁰ IBID, p. 32

¹¹ Morrison, Toni, *The Bluest Eye*. Spark Pub, 2002, p. 152

continuously ridiculed on his journey and after finally arriving at his destination, is turned away by his father. The internalized shame resulting from these early periods of rejection, violence, and isolation reverberate throughout the story.

These two mentions of marginalized men who face the violence of domestic space are not intended to justify the incestuous rape enacted by them. Rather this serves to highlight how the Hegelian concept of man and domestic space perpetuates abuse.

Carceral Domesticity in *Cereus Blooms at Night* and *The Bluest Eye*

As the books shift to focus on the girls, Mala and Pecola, readers encounter domestic spaces with heightened violence, such as forced labor and rape. By the time Mala's mother and sister have run away from the home, Mala is left alone with her father and he controls her with double the patriarchal violence, both treating her as his child and as his wife. This manifests in violent physical and sexual abuse if she does not complete the housework he expects.¹² The dynamic epitomizes the cycle of carceral domesticity. Mala cannot escape her home due to the abuse and she is forced to work for fear of more abuse. The intensity of abuse is revealed when Chandin asks her why she didn't wash his clothes and she responds "Today is Wednesday... I wash clothes Tuesday and Friday."¹³ Her forced labor is all-consuming to the point that she has memorized a schedule. Additionally, Mala is acutely aware of the connection between her father's violence and incomplete domestic work. Thus when she suspects that Chandin has witnessed Ambrose, her boyfriend, leaving the house she immediately "[takes] up a cloth and [wipes] the counter."¹⁴ However, her commitment to domestic labor does not shield her from violence because the Hegelian idea of carceral domesticity begets that violence. It does not

¹² Mootoo, Shani. *Cereus Blooms at Night*, p. 207

¹³ IBID, p. 204

¹⁴ IBID, p. 221

matter how much labor she performs, Chandin still believes that he has a right to abuse her because he views her as property.

This dynamic is reflected in *The Bluest Eye* through Cholly's violent rape of Pecola. Morrison does not emphasize Pecola's forced labor in the same way, although there are mentions of the intense housework that "brown girls from Mobile and Aiken" perform.¹⁵ However, the scene of Pecola's rape is one in which she's doing housework, specifically washing the dishes. This is worth noting because Morrison lets us into Cholly's internal monologue and he asks, "Why did she have to look so whipped? She was a child—unburdened—why wasn't she happy? The clear statement of her misery was an accusation."¹⁶ Although Cholly himself has experienced the violence of a patriarchal white supremacist society, he is unwilling to identify its impact on Pecola. The fact that he is confused at her assumed unhappiness completely ignores the fact that she is only eleven years old and has already experienced violent misogynoir. Yet these experiences are not of importance to Cholly because he is threatened by her very existence. He cites her misery as an "accusation" or a threat to his role as a father and then he rapes her — exerting sexual violence as a way to reestablish control. Both of these books reveal that the Hegelian man produces a domestic space that begets violence. The incestuous rape that occurs in these stories harkens back to the results of Pasura's work. When young girls are viewed as transgressing heteropatriarchal structures, they are blamed and often further abused. Furthermore, when rape happens within a family, all of the stigma is placed on the young girls because "their" transgression reflects the family's instability. However, in both of these books and in real life, women and girls resist this oppression, often through the production of counter-domestic space.

¹⁵ Morrison, Toni, *The Bluest Eye*, p. 83

¹⁶ IBID, p. 161

Counter-domestic Space: Nature and Imitation

The counter-domestic space refers to a site that resists colonial heteropatriarchal domesticity. This term was used by historian Jeffrey Lovannone in his article, “The Mad Woman in the Garden: Decolonizing Domesticity in Shani Mootoo’s *Cereus Blooms at Night*”. He closely examines how the Paradise Alms House becomes a “productive, affirming, and queer-disabled site of kinship.”¹⁷ Not only do Mala and Tyler transform the Alms House into a queer counter-domestic space, they also cultivate it without force. Although Mala initially faces restriction and aggression when she arrives at the Alms House, Tyler’s care for her gives her the space to be free. When Mala decides to pile furniture in front of her window every night, Tyler lets her and he also deconstructs it in the morning so she doesn’t get in trouble and can continue her routine.¹⁸ Not only does Tyler let her pursue what she wants, he builds alongside her. Later, with the help of Otoh and Ambrose, they plant the cereus flower in the Alms House garden. In that act lies the core of counter-domestic resistance, the communal cultivation of something that is not forced, but cherished. The community that Mala builds is key to her healing but she also shows signs of counter-domestic resistance within her home, in the years after her father’s death. During that time she lets plants and insects enter the home, and nature overruns certain parts of the house. She does not sleep indoors and she enjoys the smell of rotting wood.¹⁹ She also builds a furniture wall to separate the rest of the house from her father’s corpse. Although all of this may seem like neglect of the home, Mootoo frames it as a peaceful harmony with nature. Through Lovannone’s framework she is engaging in the counter-domestic, because she is prioritizing a space that affirms her love for nature above her devotion to heteropatriarchal

¹⁷ Lovannone, Jeffrey J. “The Mad Woman in the Garden: Decolonizing Domesticity in Shani Mootoo’s *Cereus Blooms at Night*.” *Disabling Domesticity*, 2016, pp. 281

¹⁸ Mootoo, Shani. *Cereus Blooms at Night*, p. 77

¹⁹ IBID, p. 130

norms. Furthermore, this is a decolonial act, one that directly goes against Hegel's idea that the woman must remain inside the home and one that challenges the idea of property itself. Mala blurs the lines between her and the outer world in an act of protection and healing.

In *The Bluest Eye*, this counter domestic project is not the same, mainly because readers are not given a look inside Pecola's mind after she is raped. Instead, Claudia describes seeing her rummaging through trash, and imitating the behavior of a bird, saying that she is, "among all the waste and beauty of the world".²⁰ Moreover Claudia notes that Pecola and her mother move away from their neighborhood, choosing a more isolated space in the town. In this situation, Pecola engages in non-normative behavior because she is often outside, imitating the behavior of nature while being comfortable with decomposition. However, her attempt at a counter-domestic project falls flat because she is isolated and unable to find a community that embraces her non-normative expression. Instead she is surrounded by people who shun and judge her. Both Morrison and Mootoo point to the counter-domestic in different ways. Morrison, in particular, reminds us that it cannot be achieved in isolation. If every community member remains complicit in the face of the violence of domestic space then the counter-domestic project cannot be carried out. That being said, the counter-domestic project is not necessarily confined by geography and can traverse through artistic mediums.

Counter-domestic Space: Art and Multiplicity

Shani Mootoo's recent photography is a prime example of the multiplicity of the counter-domestic project. Mootoo recently returned to her childhood home in Trinidad to capture what she describes as "portraits of life." She took a handful of portraits showing the interior of the home, but one piece in particular speaks to the counter-domestic project. The photograph

²⁰ Morrison, Toni, *The Bluest Eye*, p. 205

titled “Shelter ⅛” captures her garden and backyard through an iron gate and a sliding glass door.²¹ Additionally, on the left side of the image lies a single unpotted plant, seemingly emerging from a crack in the ground. It is unclear exactly how the plant was able to grow inside the home, but it stands tall soaking up the sun through the glass door. Here Mootoo reminds us that growth and resistance to domestic space can be cultivated in unexpected places. The plant also highlights the spirit of community within the home. No one decided to cut it down, instead the family allowed it to flourish in its non-normative form.

Conclusion

Ultimately, the domestic space outlined in Hegel’s theory of property and personhood begets violence. From its structure of domination and abuse to its fallacies of intimacy and privacy, Hegel’s theory engenders oppression. Morrison and Mootoo showcase the violence of carceral domesticity through literature, while Pasura provides scientific examples revealing the consequences of normalized abuse. However, by identifying counter-domestic practices in literature and art, we also see how Hegel’s idea of domesticity never fully quells resistance. In order to support this resistance and reimagine domestic space free of violence, the counter-domestic must be vocally defended. Without a community in support of the counter-domestic project, people affected by the violence of domestic space will only be isolated and further harmed. When we collectively resist Hegelian ideas of domestic space, we prevent further abuse and we make room for healing.

²¹ Appendix, Image 1

Appendix



Image 1. “Shelter 1/8”, Shani Mootoo, 2022

Description: “This image of a garden taken through a sliding glass door framed by a charming wrought iron grate is from the artist’s childhood home in Trinidad. This is one in a series of photographs Mootoo called the ‘History Revisited Series’—colourful, uncurated, rich in detail and steeped in memories that capture a moment in time—the history of the generations laid one on top of the other, each layer creating a pentimento of stories.”

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