Cultural Bastards: Caribbean-Canadian Humor in Shani Mootoo's *Out on Main Street*

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Abstract:
Wife battering and murdering, prostitution and suicide have long been hushed incidences that nevertheless have finally been addressed by some Indo-Caribbean writers, one of which is the Canada-based artist and writer Shani Mootoo. In her novels *Cereus Blooms at Night*, *He Drown She in the Sea,* and *Valmiki's Daughter*, her poetry collection *The Predicament of Or*, and her short story collection *Out on Main Street*, Mootoo picks up the culturally specific ways of inscribing a culture of violence and shame onto Indo-Caribbean female sexual identities in ways that Mehta has described as being "associated with a series of taboos and restrictions imposed by male-ordered strategies of confinement and inhibition" (192). Even while living in Canada, Mootoo exemplifies Mehta's claim that Indo-Caribbean women find it difficult to free themselves – and the works they produce – from the haunting national and diasporic legacies of repression and invisibility. A reading of Mootoo's work as an example of the interlacing of sexuality and diasporic Caribbean identity reveals that a reconfiguration of "home" in terms of optional exile does not erase one's innate ethics, but actually magnifies them, since diasporic communities like the Indo-Caribbean tend to maintain their "cultural identity through migrating notions of gender-role conformity" (Mehta 209).

> "Shut your arse up, before it have trouble between we in this street."
> (V. S. Naipaul, *Miguel Street*)

Silenced Female Sexuality in the Caribbean

1 Canada may pride herself for being one of the most multicultural and multiethnic societies existing today. Her inhabitants are known to express individual predilections with a freedom and enthusiasm unknown elsewhere. What may easily be overlooked, however, is the fact that many of these people come from cultural backgrounds that do not allow for such a freedom of expression and thus find it not that simple to overcome deeply ingrained restrictions and internalized inhibitions. This is especially valid for the realm of sexuality. It seems that metropolises like Toronto, Montreal and Vancouver are havens for sexually liberated life-styles, and yet this liberty does not apply to all people living in these places. Immigrants from Muslim or Catholic backgrounds with stricter traditional family values, for example, find it yet hard to adapt to such a way of living and thinking. And for different -- not necessarily religious -- reasons, Canadians of Caribbean descent often have difficulties throwing sets of habitual conventions overboard that still stem from their long history of colonization. Even today, strictly gendered norms of behavior make it especially for Caribbean women still difficult to choose on their own, where they want to live, what they want to work, and whom they want love.

2 What is even more surprising with the surge of gender and postcolonial studies in recent years is the acute lack of studies in sexuality on migrants of Caribbean descent. The reasons for this silence are multilayered, as might be expected. On the one hand, as Jenny Sharpe and Samantha Pinto point out, "[t]he study of sexuality in the Caribbean has historically been taboo, off-limits for scholarly research. Part of the forbidden nature of the subject has to do with a fear of reproducing the negative stereotyping of black hypersexuality that emerged from a history of slavery and colonialism" (247). On the other hand, "in the Caribbean a silence about the topic of sexuality also has to do with the Victorian attitudes that exist as a holdover from the region's colonial past" (247). These attitudes, largely due to British codes of sexual conduct, have prevented scholarship especially on female sexuality subsuming it within studies of kinship and family instead, while the topic of homosexuality has been ignored altogether as if such a "thing" did not even exist.

3 While slowly and very recently academics have approached the issues of Caribbean male sexuality in general and male homosexuality more specifically (see Chevannes, Reddock, Lewis, Murray, Padilla, La Fountain-Stokes), Caribbean women's sexuality still remains hardly interrogated. Interestingly, it is in the field of literary studies that female sexuality in the Caribbean has surfaced as scholarly topic.[3] The silence and the ensuing gap in information on female sexuality, and especially on lesbians and transsexuals, has according to Alison Donnell "created a no (wo)man's land" (214). The cause of this may be the fact that same-sex acts between women are criminalized in some territories (like Trinidad, Barbados, Antigua, and Dominica, although rarely enforced, see "ilga"), but more likely it is the general homophobia of the region that thwarts free expression of lesbian sexuality in both daily life and literature.

4 In her study on Indo-Caribbean women's sexuality, for example, Brinda Mehta addresses this silence head-on calling for a reconsideration of culturally sanctioned violence against women. Wife battering and murdering, prostitution and suicide have long been hushed incidences that nevertheless have finally been addressed by some Indo-Caribbean writers, one of which is the Canada-based artist and writer Shani Mootoo. In her novels *Cereus Blooms at Night*, *He Drown She in the Sea*, and *Valmiki's Daughter*, her poetry collection *The Predicament of Or*, and her short story collection *Out on Main Street* Mootoo picks up the culturally specific ways of inscribing a culture of violence and shame onto Indo-Caribbean female sexual identities in ways that Mehta has described as being "associated with a series of

[3] For studies of Indo-Caribbean literature see Puri, Mehta, and Francis. A more anthropological approach, focusing on sex work and consumer culture in the Caribbean, offer Kempadoo, Brennan, Curtis. On Jamaican dancehall culture and its inherent (homo)sexual and misogynist politics see Cooper.

taboos and restrictions imposed by male-ordered strategies of confinement and inhibition" (192). Even while living in Canada, Mootoo exemplifies Mehta's claim that Indo-Caribbean women find it difficult to free themselves – and the works they produce – from the haunting national and diasporic legacies of repression and invisibility. A reading of Mootoo's work as an example of the interlacing of sexuality and diasporic Caribbean identity reveals that a reconfiguration of "home" in terms of optional exile does not erase one's innate ethics, but actually magnifies them, since diasporic communities like the Indo-Caribbean tend to maintain their "cultural identity through migrating notions of gender-role conformity" (Mehta 209).

5 What makes her special is that Shani Mootoo is amongst those writers from multicultural and multiethnic backgrounds, who not only speak of these backgrounds, but also answer for highly diversified outlooks on contemporary Canadian culture. Born in Ireland and raised in Trinidad, Mootoo at the age of nineteen has chosen Canada as her homestead. In her works she distinctly draws upon her own hybrid identity to examine gender and race issues both in the Caribbean and in Canada. In *Out on Main Street*, partially written in Indo-Caribbean patois, she addresses various culture clashes: East Indian versus Indo-Caribbean, British versus Caribbean, Caribbean versus American, Caribbean versus Canadian, American versus Canadian, men versus women, straight versus gay as well as butch versus femme. Vancouver's "Main Street" hereby symbolically functions as focal point of this multicultural hodgepodge, questioning the valence of spatial belonging: Whose "main street" is this anymore?

6 Whereas most of the stories are written in Standard English employing the mode of bleak melancholy and acerbic sarcasm, in the title story a doubly different style was chosen: it is a humorous story told in full-blown creole. This story's mode of humor transforms the darker atmosphere of the other stories into a lighter prospective view on identity politics. My claim is that by choosing this particular, ethnically grounded mode of humor, Mootoo puts herself into another category of cultural negotiations in two distinct ways. Since, as has been claimed by critics, Canadian humor stands apart from American and British humor in its tendency towards duality due to Canada's special colonial history, Mootoo accordingly picks up adhering techniques like juxtapositions, ambiguity, puns, and incongruity, all rooted in the traditional experience of Canadian humor. However, since here the humorous mode is based on the particular experience of a Caribbean-Canadian lesbian narrator, this story especially aims at transgression and subversion by choosing humor as textual vehicle. Thus, Mootoo not only takes up this comic colonial literary tradition, she also takes part in re-shaping its

transnational agenda in terms of gender and sexuality.

Lesbian *Flâneur*ing and Cruising

7 Shani Mootoo's collection of short stories, *Out on Main Street* (1993), is one of the very few texts by a Caribbean writer addressing lesbian sexuality.[4] Four of the nine stories depict lesbianism in one way or another with two of them being situated in Canada.[5] These stories stand out in their direct approach of lesbian desire and lifestyle, because, as Alison Donnell (in a footnote) in her study on twentieth-century Caribbean literature remarks, it is important to point out that

> the more radical representations [of lesbian sexuality] have come from Indian-Caribbean writers and that this runs almost directly against the grain of cultural stereotyping through which we are not only encouraged to see Indian-Caribbean women as slower to come to writing, but also as more bound to traditional roles. (248)

The remainder of the stories depicts heterosexual relationships, mostly from the viewpoint of unsatisfied, discontent women who suffer in psychologically warping and sometimes even physically violent arrangements. All of these heterosexual relationships with selfish and hypocritical men seem unfulfilling for the female partner, and it is only within female-to-female relations that women find love. While I have to agree with Donnell that it is somewhat problematic to highlight the treasures of lesbian love "against this backdrop and its intimations of marital abuse, neglect and male violence" (217), I nevertheless find these other stories daring in their balancing the general values of women's emancipation and the culturally based hesitance of Caribbean women to gain access to these "women's rights."

8 The collection's title story "Out on Main Street" is a first-person narrative told by an unnamed Indo-Caribbean immigrant, who ruminates about her experience of going out on Vancouver's Main Street. While in the first part of the story she adds up a list of reasons for *not* going out, she then relates the events of what happens, when she does so after all. Her three main reasons for not going out are (firstly) her craving for sweets that "does give people like we a presupposition for untameable hip and thigh" (45), (secondly) her feeling of ethnic inferiority as a "watered-down Indian[]" (45) who doesn't even know the proper names to order the Indian "meethai and sweetrice," and as final reason, her girl-friend Janet is just too pretty to handle in public. Not only does Janet – all dressed- and made-up – look like "a

[4] For yet another example of a Caribbean-Canadian writer engaging in lesbian representation within a transnational setting see Dionne Brand's novel *In Another Place, Not Here* (1996).

[5] Besides "Out on Main Street," the other story depicting lesbian sexuality is the concluding piece "The Upside-downness of the World as it Unfolds." Since this story is written in Standard English and I am interested in the humorous strategy of patois, I will not include a discussion of this otherwise highly interesting ethnic culture-class story between an Indo-Caribbean lesbian woman and a white Canadian lesbian couple.

walking-talking shampoo ad" that catches every man's eyes and makes every woman jealous. Above all, "[w]alking next to Janet, who so femme dat she redundant" makes the narrator "look like a gender day forget to classify" (48). But since she herself never learned to make the food she wants, her sweet tooth wins after all, and "parading in front de mirror practicing a jiggly-wiggly kind a walk" (48), she prepares herself for the difficult task of going out on Main Street.

9 The second and larger part of the story then takes place in a restaurant called "Kush Valley Sweets," owned by six Indian brothers. In short, stage-like episodes the constantly shifting atmosphere within this place accounts for the instable gender and race relations on Main Street in general. From the start, the narrator gets upset because as expected Janet draws all attention, leaving herself with only a femme masquerade, an imitation to "figgle and wiggle in mih best imitation a some a dem gay fellas dat I see downtown Vancouver, de ones who more femme dan even Janet" (50). She then goes through the humiliating process of ordering the sweets. Even her rehearsing the names beforehand cannot prevent the waiters to make fun of her false Indian origins, letting her feel like an "Indian-in-skin-colour-only," a "cultural bastard[]" (51).

10 The atmosphere changes once again, when two "big burly fellas" stumble in, making a fool of their drunken selves, but also patronizing the Indian waiters. While this temporarily brings all female customers to sympathize with the waiters, their taking advantage of this compassion by touching and chatting up some of these customers immediately turns against them in another "hairpin turn" (55). The final twist occurs when two butch lesbians enter the shop and heartily embrace the narrator and Janet. Having been slighted by the waiter just moments earlier, which led to a jealous outburst against Janet, the narrator now gets more attention than she asked for: "Well, all cover get blown. If it was even remotely possible dat I wasn't noticeable before, now Janet and I were over-exposed. We could a easily suffer from hypothermia, specially since it suddenly get cold cold in dere" (57).

11 What seems at first a special occasion, a one-time experience of going out on Main Street, in the end feels much more like a condensed version of every outing there. The story's ending, a rhetorical question addressed to an anonymous female reader "So tell me, what you think 'bout dis nah, girl?" (57), leads to the assumption that this is what is bound to happen every time when (somebody like) the narrator goes "Out on Main Street." Who is this unnamed narrator after all? There are three distinct layers of personality that I want to point out: she is an Indo-Caribbean living in Canada and at odds with her tri-cultural background; she is a butch lesbian at odds with her looks, demeanor, and appetite; and finally and

somewhat contradictorily, she is a very funny, very astute observer and chronicler of her environment and her precarious position within.

12 The title "Out on Main Street" is, of course, a double entendre, for not only does it mean going out in the sense of social mingling, but also coming out or being out in the sexual sense of leaving the closet of heterosexual masquerade. As much as this double meaning would apply to all the collection's stories in some way, it has a special meaning here in its directly intertwining the two meanings. As the narrator makes clear, "[g]oing for an outing" takes mental preparation as well as corporeal rehearsal. Parading in front of the mirror to practice the right kind of walk means here trying to cover her own identity by taking on that of another, but knowing of the futile effect this will have: "But if I ain't walking like a strong-man monkey I doh exactly feel right and I always revert back to mih true colours" (48). The narrator thus tries to hide in the closet wondering, "if I ain't mad enough" to go through this failing routine for the sake of the "little bacchanal" of getting some sweets (48). She is well aware of the male – openly homophobic – hostility and the female – more contained – embarrassment she is about to encounter, once she steps outside.

13 Disregarding the pun on "true colours" for the moment and thus leaving the additional complication of the narrator's ethnicity aside, her public appearance as a butch lesbian already means a double transgression. Roaming the streets of Vancouver the way she does makes her a *flâneur* of sorts. The figure of the *flâneur* is one of Modernity and is traditionally associated with male agents like Charles Baudelaire and Walter Benjamin. Nedra Reynolds points out that "Baudelaire identified the *flaneur* in 1859–60 as a new kind of public person. A wandering spectator, an observer watching but not participating in the scenes of modern urban life, the *flaneur* was mobile and detached. Dressed to be seen, both spectacle and spectator, the *flaneur* has become an emblem of the public sphere, a product of changes in the physical landscape and forms of movement those changes made possible" (71). The *flâneur* chose newly arisen urban places of consumption like boulevards, cafés and arcades to engage in his strolling and gazing. These places were certainly not private, but not completely public either. Therefore, they were ideal for the voyeuristic pleasure of *flâneurie*, which in the case of Walter Benjamin's *Passagenwerk* (or *Arcades Project*, written between 1927 and 1940) could also take on a quasi-scientific quality. Mike Featherstone claims Benjamin's self-acclaimed "botanising on the asphalt" as reflecting the contradictions of urban modernity: "On the one hand, the *flaneur* is the idler or waster; on the other hand, he is the observer or detective, the suspicious person who is always looking, noting and classifying" (913).

14 In terms of gendered behavior, the *flâneur*'s sexualized penetration of the urban sphere and his detached and ironically objectified gaze may be considered masculine, whereas his writings, his sketches and tableaux, being the focal point of his gaze, are traditionally gendered feminine.[6] But there have also been female *flâneurs* like George Sand, Renée Vivien, and Djuna Barnes, which leads to the question whether the traditional notion that the *flâneur* roaming the streets untouched applies for women as well. Obviously, no is the answer here, since, as Jane Rendell notes, "the figure of the public woman […] represents the blurring of public and private boundaries, and the uncontrollable movement of women and female sexuality" (88). George Sand, for example, remained "untouched" as long as she was cross-dressed as a dandy, claiming "my clothes feared nothing […]. No one knew me, no one looked at me, no one found fault with me […]" (qtd. in Munt 116). This simulacrum of a *flâneur* may be, as Sally Munt argues, a "roving signifier" and as such "contribute to the unfixing of the supremacy of the heterosexual male gaze in urban spatial theory" (117). But one may also claim that woman can only be a *flâneur* as a transvestite and thus must rely on an "indeterminate sexuality, trapped in transliteration, caught in desire" (Munt 117).

15 The transgression of the female *flâneur* is her claim to spatial mobility. She may not be biologically male, but her gaze is considered to enact masculine visual privilege. Leaving her traditionally ascribed female-private space of domesticity to enter the male-public sphere turns the female *flâneur* into a figure of excess. This notion of woman as excess is even heightened when appropriated by the butch lesbian *flâneur*, because, as Munt points out, "[s]waggering down the street in her butch drag casting her roving eye left and right, the lesbian *flâneur* signifies a mobilised female sexuality *in control*, not out of control" (121). Breaking down clear distinctions between masculinity and femininity, the lesbian *flâneur* poses a threat to heteronormativity, "hence the jeering shout 'Is it a man or is it a woman?' is a cry of anxiety, as much as aggression" (Munt 121). On the one hand then, female *flâneur*ing is a liberating accomplishment; on the other hand, it lacks the protection of the home and can thus turn into encountering a gendered urban war zone. Oscillating between empowerment and failure, the lesbian *flâneur* becomes vulnerable and susceptible to instable place designations.

16 The constantly shifting atmosphere on Main Street and in the café of Mootoo's story is a sign of how place is always temporal and intersubjective. The alliance with another female customer against the sexualized demeanor of the waiters ("our buddiness against de fresh

[6] Elizabeth Wilson reads the figure of the flâneur in a much more ambiguous light stressing his marginality and insecurity: "the flâneur effaces himself, becomes passive, feminine. In the writing of fragmentary pieces, he makes of himself a blank page upon which the city writes itself. It is a feminine, placatory gesture" (110).

brothers" [57]) turns against her, when the narrator greets the newly entered butch couple, and a differently defined alliance ensues:

> Well, with Sandy and Lise is a dead giveaway dat dey not dressing fuh any man […]. Soon as dey enter de room yuh could see de brothers and de couple men customers dat had come in minutes before stare dem down from head to Birkenstocks, dey eyes bulging with disgust. And de women in de room start shoo-shooing, and putting dey hand in front dey mouth to stop dey surprise, and false teeth, too, from falling out. (56)

Whereas the narrator at times has still tried to masquerade her butch identity, this couple does not care for any straight performance and thus consequently un-covers the narrator's disguise in turn, leaving her "over-exposed" and once more vulnerable for aggression and discrimination. It is this vulnerability that distinguishes her most from the traditional *flâneur*, who engages in his surroundings only to the point of untouchable voyeurism, his own sexual desire being camouflaged by his intellectualized attitude. It is the cruiser, a modified and in terms of sexual involvement truly radicalized version of the *flâneur*, who not only is "touchable," but who desirously reaches out and touches on his own. As Helge Mooshammer affirms, contrary to the flâneur who is always "in" the street, but in his distanced, gazing invisibility is never "of" the street, the cruiser genuinely gets involved. The sexual excitement that comes along with the visual pleasure of roaming the streets culminates in the eroticization of the place involved. As such, cruising is a performative act generating multifarious spaces of desires (Mooshammer 105).

17 While Mootoo's narrator is not necessarily a cruiser in the sense that she is out to get sex in public, she nevertheless enters a public domain that becomes increasingly sexualized by her transgressively visible lesbian desire and behavior. Thus, it is not only the entrance of the butch couple that puts the narrator center-stage; it is above all the touching of bodies that lets the instable equilibrium of this place slide completely. Whereas before, touching women clearly was ascribed to male-hetero behavior and chastised as such, clear dichotomies are now overturned with women touching each other:

> Day leap over to us, eater to hug up and kiss like if dey hadn' seen us for years […]. I figure dat de display was a genuine happiness to be seen wit us in dat place. While we stand up dere chatting, Sandy insist on rubbing she hand up and down Janet back -- wit friendly intent, mind you, and same time Lise have she arm round Sandy waist. Well, all cover get blown. (56-57)

This precarious sliding of habitualized notions of proper public conduct points toward what Paul Virilio in *Speed & Politics* has described as the policing of public order being persistently undermined by uncontrollable agency of the people passing through the city. Thus, an urban space is not simply the sum of its population, but the constantly changing

fabrication of desirously roaming people producing that city (3). As such, *flâneur*ing and cruising engender a specific urban place with an excess of energy that renders the temporal and spacial arrangement of this place into a fluid entity. A café is not just a place to have tee and "sweetrice;" it may very well be the slippery floor of hazardous identity politics as Mootoo's story shows.

Canadian Humor Dressed in Caribbean Patois

18 Mootoo's story does not only deal with the gendered discourse of the dichotomy of private versus public, intimate versus social, woman versus man, and gay versus straight, but also with the question of nationhood and citizenship. Canadian philosopher Charles Taylor in his account on the tricky politics of recognition within a multicultural society speaks of "the impending breakup" (52) of Canada due to equal rights demands and to assertions of difference. While he plays out this scenario primarily as a conflict of English *versus* French Canada, the question of second-class citizenship also arises on very different planes within or alongside these larger political struggles for national identity. He nevertheless acknowledges that Canada is amongst those societies "becoming increasingly multicultural, while at the same time becoming more porous" (63). This porousness stemming from multinational migration leads to the awkward situation that there are "substantial numbers of people who are citizens and also belong to the culture that calls into question our philosophical boundaries. The challenge is to deal with their sense of marginalization without compromising our basic politic principles" (Taylor 63). The crude sentence "this is how we do things here" often pops up in the still ongoing imposition of some cultures on others, "and with the assumed superiority that powers this imposition" (Taylor 63). Resistance to such hegemonic cultural politics may gain marginalized groups political visibility, but at the cost of losing some credibility as well as having to give up a superior ethical argument along the way. As Taylor astutely points out: "Very few Quebec independentists […] can accept that what is mainly winning them their fight is a lack of recognition on the part of English Canada" (64).

19 Taylor rightly points out that a crucial field for negotiating notions of difference is education. The colonial situation has brought with it in our days a struggle to alter canons in order to include works of marginalized, formerly colonized cultures. In terms of liberal humanist education, moving away from reading works of mostly "dead white males" is done, however, not mainly with the goal to "enlighten" all students alike: "Enlarging and changing the curriculum is therefore essential not so much in the name of a broader culture for

everyone as in order to give due recognition to the hitherto excluded" (Taylor 65-66). But the inherent presumption of equal worth leads to yet another minefield of the politics of multiculturalism, since "[t]he peremptory demand for favorable judgments of worth is paradoxically – perhaps one should say tragically – homogenizing. For it implies that we already have the standards to make such judgments" (Taylor 71). Thus, including works of artists believed to be misrepresented for whatever reasons does not alter the fact of an underlying will to categorize. Taylor warns that "[b]y implicitly invoking our standards to judge all civilizations and cultures, the politics of difference can end up making everyone the same" (71).

20 Postcolonial writers like Shani Mootoo struggle with exactly a proposal like Taylor's to search for a "midway between the inauthentic and homogenizing demand for recognition of equal worth, on the one hand, and the self-immurement within ethnocentric standards, on the other" (72). A way to balance this is by employing a varied usage of language within their texts. In postcolonial linguistic theory this has been called code-switching or the application of what poet Edward Kamau Brathwaite has called "nation language." With its emphasis on orality, nation language "is based as much on sound as it is on song. That is to say, the noise that it makes is part of the meaning" (17), but also facial gestures or hand movements, all of which are lost in written language, of course. Thus, to accommodate English within their own cultural experience, Caribbean writers have often resorted to this notion of nation language that is based on dialect or creole spoken in a specific Caribbean country. While for Brathwaite the word "dialect" "carries very pejorative overtones" (13) that includes aesthetic downgrading, it must be conceded that as a linguistic term "dialect" does not carry such overtones. Nevertheless, Brathwaite insists on nation language being "an English which is not the standard, imported, educated English, but that of the submerged, surrealist experience and sensibility, which has always been there and which is now increasingly coming to the surface and influencing the perception of contemporary Caribbean people" (13).

21 What Brathwaite here means as extensions of world Englishes in a broader linguistic sense are creoles or patois. Contrary to pidgins, creoles are more locally based. Whereas a pidgin is more of a contact language, because it "comes into play primarily in the interaction between people who do not share the practical knowledge of a more established language" (Talib 124), creole is the first language or mother tongue of a group of people and therefore more stable and with a richer vocabulary of its own than a pidgin. As Ismael Talib points out, there are several reasons for using dialects of English, political and aesthetic. For example Michelle Cliff, yet another lesbian Caribbean-Canadian writer, in her essays states that she

uses English to resist its hegemony, and she mixes it with patois to disrupt and to "stretch" English to her resistant purposes. For her, this act of rebellion against "fluent" English is like "spitting in their cultural soup" (60) because it mixes up "the forms taught us by the oppressor, undermining his language and co-opting his style, and turning it to our purpose" (59). Lindsay Pentolfe Aegerter says of Cliff's strategy, that she "needs to unlearn the very hegemony of the King's English in order to approximate an 'authentic' vision of a precolonial, uncolonized, prior self" (901). As to aesthetic reasons for using creole, writers agree that it infuses a sense of realism into the work, be it, for example, to represent geographically specified urban speech or to indicate a lower level of literacy in other cases (Talib 140).

22 When we look back at Mootoo, only the title story of *Out on Main Street* is written in fully-fledged creole, whereas the other stories may or may not include elements of code-mixing or -switching to a certain extent, meaning the narrator or characters change from one language or dialect to another. Interestingly, two such linguistic shifts occur in the story "Out on Main Street" that point towards Mootoo's textual politics here. When the female Indian customers is felt up by one of the waiters, she complains in Standard English to the narrator:

> "Whoever does he think he is! Calling me dear and touching me like that! Why do these men always think that they have permission to touch whatever and wherever they want! And you can't make a fuss about it in public, because it is exactly what those people out there want to hear about so that they can say how sexist and uncivilized our culture is." (55)

And the narrator agrees, switching back to dialect "Yeah. I know. Yuh right!" (55). The customer's utterance actually is one of the longest direct speech sequences in the story, which makes it doubly stand out in terms of style and content. On the one hand, this female alliance bridges the gap between otherwise differing sexual predilections imminent in the situation at stake. On the other hand, if refers to the precarious balancing of gender and ethnic concerns: should she take the side of the Indian men against white society or rather against her Indian brothers in favor of feminist politics? For the woman's statement occurs right after the incident in the café that includes the second instance of code-switching in the story.

23 When two drunken white men enter the Indian café, one of them addresses the waiter asking, "Are you Sikh?" The waiter, who had spoken in strict patois with the narrator before, now retorts in standard English: "No, I think I am fine, thank you. But I am sorry if I look sick, Sir" (52-53). Using standard English here rhetorically enhances the deliberate slight, because by doing so he succeeds in making fun of the stupidly stereotyping white man. Importing this phrase in standard English makes it even more obvious that not only the whole story is written in creole, but also that this is a world symbolically turned upside-down. It is

the white man here, who is the intruder in the otherwise homogeneous cultural space of the café. And with the waiter taking on the language of the white man, he shows his cultural ability in code-switching as well as his superior sense of the situation at hand. The two white men, so much at ease at first, quickly sense their defeat in this particular place, and withdraw to their own safe world outside.

24 As much as the narrator herself feels insecure in this semi-public place, as watcher and chronicler she nevertheless captures the moment of inverse power relations both in form through code-switching and in content through the application of humor, both of which could be said to be techniques borrowed from the "enemy." The narrative voice clearly revels in her ability to relate to her nameless friend all that has been going on while out on Main Street. This narrative technique not only links her to an oral culture traditionally located in her home Caribbean. Her application of the postcolonial humorous posture ironically also ties her into the Canadian tradition of dualistic wit. As Gerald Noonan in his study on the specificity of Canadian humor provocatively claims, "Canada has become the place where British tradition meets contemporary American culture. […] The result for the Canadian is cultural schizophrenia" (912). Or put differently, as Marshall McLuhan once did, "Canada is the only country in the world that knows how to live without an identity" (qtd. in Dabydeen 236). This cultural feeling paves the specific way for Canadian writers to relieve the tension of not wanting to fall on either side – be it British or American: they make fun of themselves.

25 Due to Canada's particular historical development and geographical location, it is the cultural self-perception of duality that accounts for a difference even in perceiving stereotypes. Noonan argues that not only is this "presence of the 'other,' linguistically, culturally, […] a fact of life in virtually every section of the country" (913), is is also the basis of the distinct type of Canadian humor: duality. Whereas the imperialist, non-dualistic cultures of Britain and the US excel in a non-dualist kind of humor, the Canadian humorists, as Noonan suggests, generate a balanced duality, a way of dissolving in laughter the patterns of opposites inherent in Canadian culture. While the British humorist resorts to the more literal and fact-oriented mode, the American humorist with his leaning towards the more hyperbolic tall tale tends to exaggerate. But since humor prospers in security – cultural, political, or other –, Canada's traditional lack of such security prevents it from indulging "either in blind self-aggrandizing jollities, or in ill-humored self-rendering satire" (Noonan 913). One may, of course, disagree with such seemingly crude cultural distinctions, but R. E. Watters in his study on the work of Stephen Leacock nevertheless has also reminded us that

Canadian humor is harder to detect than British or American humor, because it grounds on the balancing quality of weighing contending forces:

> As a people bent on self-preservation, Canadians have had to forego two luxuries: that of forgetting themselves in gay abandon and that of losing their tempers in righteous wrath. Yet there is a kind of humor that combines full understanding of the contending forces with a wry recognition of one's ineffectiveness in controlling them – a humor in which one sees himself as others see him but without any admission that this outer man is a truer portrait than the inner – a humor based on the incongruity between the real and the ideal, in which the ideal is repeatedly thwarted by the real but never quite annihilated. Such humor is Canadian. (543)

Interestingly, a "disproportionate number" of Canadian comedy writers have moved to the forefront of US-American sit-com script-writers, which accounts for the assumption that "a duality of mind, not one-mindedness, […] is the more useful attribute in the presentation of humour for a pluralistic audience" (Noonan 917). Already Canadian literary critic Northrop Frye had claimed in his *Anatomy of Criticism* that "the theme of the comic is the integration of society" and involves "a catharsis of the […] comic emotions, which are sympathy and ridicule" (43). Shani Mootoo here is yet another example of how sympathy and ridicule come more easily the more one can masquerade as the "other." Whereas humor arguably has an "international language," it still relies on its own cultural distinctness, when transposed to the broad general. And whereas Canadian humor arguably grounds in duality, duality as an essential of universal comic language "will continue to require familiarity with the contours and mixed reality of the chosen homeground" (Noonan 918).

26 The extent of Mootoo's humorous story can only be grasped when realizing the homeground she has chosen to represent Canada's syncretistic reality. Cleary, this is a Canadian setting: it is Main Street in Vancouver. And clearly, these are Canadian characters accounting for the multicultural mixture of the nation's population. The humor stems from the failure to sustain the illusion of equality and "difference-blindness," another term Charles Taylor uses to describe a liberalism that purports to "offer a neutral ground on which people of all cultures can meet an coexist" (62). As much as the lesbian couple fails in trying to enact a straight performance, their effort in masking their Trinidadian identity in order to "pass" for "grade A Indians" (Mootoo 45) fails equally.

27 It is, however, the narrator's ability of laughing at herself, realizing the ridiculousness of her masquerades that links the awareness of her own multiple identifications with the structure of duality in Canadian humor. The narrator naively had assumed that to leave Trinidad and to migrate to Canada would enable her to "live without people shoo-shooing behind her back" (47). What she had not realized is that her newly acquired Canadian layer of

identity would bring to the forefront her already doubly layered identity as Indo-Caribbean. The Indian sweet shop on Vancouver's Main Street makes her acutely aware that she belongs nowhere. Not only is she being treated "like a gender dey forget to classify" (48), her tricontinental identity lets people treat her and Janet like "cultural bastards" (51). But as much as she craves "cultural authenticity" (Donnell 217) the way she craves sweets, she is bound to fail. Just like she knows the Indian delicacies by taste, but not by their proper name, she looks "forward to de day I find out dat place inside me where I am nothing else but Trinidadian" (52), albeit realizing by now that this day will never come.

28 With Vancouver's Main Street, Mootoo chooses Canada as a social setting that already is hyperbolic in its very lack of cultural authenticity. Making fun of herself in finding the true India only in Canada, in turn includes her again within this cultural hodgepodge and gives proof to the valence of Canadian humor as necessarily being multiculturally grounded:

> I used to think I was Hindu *par excellence* until I come up here and see real flesh and blood Indian from India. Up here, I learning 'bout all kind a custom and food and music and clothes dat we never see or hear 'bout in good ole Trinidad. Is de next best thing to going to India, in truth, oui! But Indian store clerk on Main Street doh have no patience with us, specially when we talking English to dem. Yuh ask dem a question in English and dey insist on giving de answer in Hindi or Punjabi or Urdu or Gujarati. How I suppose to know de difference even! And den dey look at yuh disdainful disdainful – like yuh disloyal, like yuh is a traitor. (47-48)

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