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Against the Oriental(ist) Current: Homosexuality and Empire in E.M. Forster's "The Other Boat"

Passage to more than India!...
Passage, immediate passage! the blood burns in my veins!
Away O soul! hoist instantly the anchor!...
And we will risk the ship, ourselves and all.
—Walt Whitman's "Passage to India"

E.M. FORSTER HAS BEEN TARGETED for his status as a member of the Empire's elite as often as he has been celebrated for his sensitive portrayal of India's reaction to colonial rule. The subtle degrees to which Forster participated in the pleasures of conquest while writing against imperialism is complicated by his privately lived marginalization as a homosexual. Nowhere does Forster oscillate more sharply between an Orientalist and anti-imperialist impulse than in those works in which the issue of homosexuality intersects questions of race and empire. In such works, Forster seems as critical of the divisiveness of colonial rule as he is stifled by the lingering pall of Victorian values at the turn of the twentieth century. Yet, Forster's own liberal humanist ideals seem stretched to the limits of the imagination in representations of interracial sexual unions which, even when allowed to run their natural course, invariably culminate in disconcerting scenes of domination, violence and brutality.

Forster's contradictions notwithstanding, his writing rarely fails to articulate the central role of sexual politics in the discourse of colonialism, at home and abroad. The inextricable relationship between sexuality and empire is vividly imagined in Forster's posthumously published collection, *The Life to Come and Other Stories* (1972).¹ In the following article, I will

¹ All citations of "The Other Boat" are from the 1987 Penguin Classics Edition of *The Life to Come and Other Stories*. See E.M. Forster, "The Other Boat," in *The Life to Come and Other Stories*, ed. Oliver Stallybrass (London: Penguin, 1975) 202–34.

focus on the story entitled “The Other Boat,” for it brings to view what is perhaps one of Forster’s most complex renderings of same-sex relations across the racial/colonial divide. Set during the tail-end of the nineteenth century, “The Other Boat” depicts the British colonial homosexual as both a participant in and transgressor of the enterprise of empire. Conversely, the subaltern homosexual is shown to be an active partner rather than a passive object of conquest, whose affections and insights challenge his British counterpart to transcend the material and psychological constraints of imperial ideology, without the attendant fears of political reprisal and racial compromise. The homosexual interracial act is thereby shown to sublimate colonial hegemony in its enactment of sexual and individual freedom under the potentially liberating influence of “the other.”

Walt Whitman’s urgent invocation to take “Passage to more than India!”² is as resonant in “The Other Boat” as it is in *A Passage to India* (1924). Begun shortly after Forster’s own first passage to India in 1912 and several years before the publication of his most famous novel, “The Other Boat” became “the subject of extensive intermittent tinkering”³ until 1958 when it was extended to its present form. The “intermittent tinkering” of which Stallybrass speaks is reflected in the five sections in which we find the story, the first of which was composed between 1912 and 1913, as the early pages of a novel that was never written. The first section was eventually published in *The Listener* (1948) and *The New York Times Book Review* (1949), some thirty years after its conception.⁴ The bulk of the story was crafted ten years later, although the narrator tells us that his story takes place “long long ago” when “little boys still went to their deaths stiffly,”⁵ under the service of Empire. Most significantly, it should be noted that “The Other Boat” was conceived during a particularly puritanical period in the history of the British Empire, only to be completed after the dissolution of the British Raj.

“The Other Boat” begins as a seemingly uneventful journey to England across the Suez Canal. The first section of the story introduces us to Lionel and his siblings, all of whom are playing with a curiously unattended non-European child, Moraes, to the abject disapproval of Lionel’s bigoted and austere mother, Mrs. March. The story resumes as another journey

² Walt Whitman, “Passage to India,” in *Leaves of Grass* (New York: Bantam, 1983) l. 466.

³ Oliver Stallybrass, “Introduction” to *The Life to Come and Other Stories* 13

⁴ See Norman Page’s *E.M. Forster’s Posthumous Fiction* (Victoria, BC: English Literary Studies, 1977) and Oliver Stallybrass’s “Introduction” to the *Life to Come* for a more detailed account of the revisions made on the fragments of “The Other Boat” as well as for an account of the story’s publication history.

⁵ “The Other Boat” 202.

across the Suez Canal some ten years later, when Moraes' financial clout in the shipping business secures Lionel—now a young British officer who is newly affianced to a “memsahib”—a passage back to India. Upon finding that he is to occupy the upper berth of Moraes' cabin, below deck, Lionel realizes that he has been cornered into sleeping (or at least rooming) with the other. Forster then devotes the greater part of his story to Lionel's sexual awakening in his homosexual affair with Moraes. Physically though not psychologically free of his mother's roving eye, Lionel is rent with guilt and cannot reconcile the goings-on below deck with the life to which he belongs above, as a “respectable” British officer. The schism between Lionel's private desires and public role in the service of Empire results in a murder-suicide: the colonial officer strangles his subaltern playmate in a fit of impassioned rage and then throws himself overboard.

On the one hand, such a fatalistic denouement may reflect Forster's inability to envision the transcendent homosexual identity he so desired, one in which both partners manage to escape a hetero-normative and racist colonial infrastructure. It is my contention, however, that the ill-fated encounter between the British colonial officer and the “Oriental” object of his desire may also hint at Forster's realistic reckoning with the post-colonial moment in which his story came to be completed. The significant period of time during which “The Other Boat” was revisited—a period of over forty years—affords the critic a rare opportunity to trace the author's response to inter-racial and homosexual relations along the shifting vectors of imperial history. Indeed, critics have usually failed to question the impact of anti-imperial resistance and Indian independence, in particular, on Forster's view of East-West relations.

In their introduction to *Queer Forster*, Robert K. Martin and George Piggford suggest that post-seventies criticism of Forster's posthumous publications led to revisionist readings which tended towards extremes⁶: Forster was at once faulted for indulging in a reductive view of heterosexual relationships while simultaneously championed, if not caricatured, as the heroic “gay” Forster. But “The Other Boat” disturbs any singular reading of Forster's personal commitment, or lack thereof, to gay rights. Nor does it easily lend itself to any final judgement on Forster's decision to keep the matter of his own sexual orientation private. The repeated patterns of self-censorship and cautious candour found throughout his published works

⁶ See the “Introduction” to Robert K. Martin and George Piggford's *Queer Forster*, ed. Robert K. Martin and George Piggford (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1997) 29–58. I would add that these revisionist readings parallel much post-colonial reevaluations of Forster's work in that they fall into contradictory camps between Forster's anti-imperialist and Orientalist stance.

and personal correspondence reveal that Forster consciously delineated his public and private persona. Yet he also crossed these lines in various ways, such as in his 1928 public defence of the openly gay subject matter in works by such contemporaries as Radclyffe Hall.⁷

As far as the stories in *The Life to Come* are concerned, Forster did not intend an audience for works which he considered “indecent writings” and “a wrong channel for [his] pen.”⁸ Despite the explicitly homosexual content of “The Other Boat,” the story has been charged with providing “a screen for its pornographic content.”⁹ Given the fact that Forster did not intend to make these stories public, it is difficult to concur with Tamera Dorland’s charge that the author employs a “stylistics of evasion” so as to avoid sexual explicitness. On the contrary, metaphor and indirection are central to the logic of interiority and politics of repression underpinning the thematics of “The Other Boat,” as these devices emphasize the social and psychological struggle in which the story’s principal characters are engaged. Part of this struggle is to find an adequate channel through which each party may articulate the pleasures and perils of a doubly transgressive relationship, be it as racial equals or homosexual partners.

The voyage on the Suez Canal is the *modus operandi* that makes the process of mutual discovery possible across the otherwise rigid borders of colonial rule. Forster’s use of the Suez Canal to chart the discursive nature of a journey between East and West is, of course, rife with political undercurrents. The aptly named ship, *S.S. Normania*, never touches dry land but remains floating within a liminal space in which physical distances are never bridged, and destinations are never reached. The process of discovery parallels the loftier project of Empire itself, a project that is typified in the opening ceremony of the Suez in 1869 when imperial aspirations were launched in a sea of optimistic hyperbole:

O Occident! O Orient! rapprochez, regardez, reconnaissez, saluez, étreignez-vous! Les deux extrémités du globe se rapprochent; en se rapprochant, elles se reconnaissent; en se reconnaissant, tous les hommes, enfants d’un seul et même Dieu, éprouvent le tressaillement joyeux de leur mutuelle fraternité!¹⁰

⁷ Forster defended the lesbian content of Radclyffe Hall’s *The Well of Loneliness*. He also contributed to a symposium on ‘The Censorship of Books’ in 1929, though Norman Page, among others, comments on the “apologetic tone,” of Forster’s defence of the explicitly homosexual or lesbian content in works by his contemporaries (*Forster’s Posthumous Fiction* 13).

⁸ E.M. Forster, quoted in Stallybrass, 14.

⁹ Tamera Dorland, “Contrary to the Prevailing Current’: Homoeroticism and the Voice of Maternal Law in ‘The Other Boat,’” *Queer Forster* 194.

¹⁰ (“O Occident! O Orient! Approach, look at, acknowledge, greet, embrace each other! The two extremes of the globe approach each another; on coming together, they acknowledge

Such self-ennobling aims notwithstanding, the Suez Canal undoubtedly represented a channel through which the colonies' abundant resources could be more efficiently plumbed. Edward Said notes, "Just as a land barrier could be transmuted into a liquid artery, so too the Orient was transubstantiated from resistant hostility into obliging and submissive partnership."¹¹ Indeed, in the image of a voyage across the Suez, it is difficult not to regard Forster's story as testament to the colonial enterprise. Upon closer analysis, however, on board the *S.S. Normania* it is not the Oriental but the British officer who is "transubstantiated from resistant hostility into obliging and submissive partnership," if only momentarily. In this sense, we might well resist a strictly Orientalist reading of the story, for it inhabits its own curiously floating hermeneutic and ontological space: it gives lie to the humanistic ideals underpinning the colonial enterprise by exposing its racially divisive ideological praxis. Hence, even as Mrs. March remains on deck to witness, in "the approach to Suez" the convergence of "two continents,"¹² she goes to great lengths to protect her children from the corrupting element of a foreign child. Yet it also leaves open the possibility for individual growth in the inter-subjective process of self-discovery that the bridging of racial and other distances affords.

As Said's own reconsideration of "Orientalism" as a fixed system of knowledge about the other attests, the British Empire filtered the Orient through a Western consciousness that was itself changing and complex. Western attitudes toward the Oriental had as much to do with the goings-on abroad as the goings-on at home. Thus, competing economic and political interests together with a changing cultural discourse necessarily resulted in the differing levels of stringency or laxity with which British practices, policies and attitudes were administered overseas. In this light, the setting of "The Other Boat" is not to be taken as a general statement about British imperialism, for those of Forster's work which pertain to India or the "Orient" capture and question the Empire's attitudes toward its colonies in historically specific terms.¹³

each other; in their mutual recognition as the children of the one, the only God, they rejoice in their shared brotherhood.) From a speech made at the benediction of the Suez Canal, 16 November 1869, by the Papal Envoy, Monseigneur Bauer; quoted in Edward Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Knopf, 1993) 91.

¹¹ Said, *Orientalism* 92.

¹² "The Other Boat" 204.

¹³ Note the contrast between Forster's more nuanced readings of imperial ideology with those of his contemporary Rudyard Kipling. In Kipling's *Kim*, for instance, the decidedly masculine endeavour of Empire is everywhere apparent; anti-colonial resistance is either unspeakable

It is important to contextualize Forster's depiction of the relationship between sexuality, race and the business of Empire within the particularly volatile and critical period of the late nineteenth century. The recent expansion of the British Empire, with the 1885 ratification of the Berlin Act, into the nether reaches of the "dark continent" resulted in a further tightening of administrative control and the increasing sedimentation of imperial ideology in the minds of British citizens at home and abroad.¹⁴ Earlier manifestations of anti-colonial resistance, such as the Indian Rebellion of 1857 and the Jamaica Morant Bay Rebellion of 1865, had already ensured a greater degree, if not more militant execution, of "social distance" between ruler and ruled.¹⁵ Moreover, on the domestic front, the surging Purity Campaign of the 1880s set new standards for sexual conduct. For instance, the 1885 Criminal Law Amendment Act "introduced a summary and effective procedure for action against brothels," as well as "clause XI, the 'Labouchere amendment', which made illegal all types of sexual activity between males."¹⁶ As Christopher Lane asserts:

One of Britain's first legislative interventions into its colonies' sexual practice, the Crewe Circular of 1909 was a key instance of this pressure. Although not mentioned in the circular, homosexuality was a sufficient preoccupation to influence public policy on sexuality.... Britain's press repeatedly implied a correlation between political domination and sexual self-mastery by assuming that the abandonment of sexual restraint would precipitate colonial insurrection. This threat helped to endorse the belief that sexual havoc was an immediate precursor to moral and political denigration.¹⁷ (158; 159)

The direct implication of the colonies in the dissemination of sexual prohibitions further suggests that there arose a calculated shift in the Empire's foreign policies concerning fraternization with "the ruled" in sexual as well as socio-political terms.

Mrs. March, the quintessential memsahib, thus embodies the moral and political norms of her era: she is a "clergyman's daughter and a soldier's wife who could not admit that Christianity had ever been Oriental."¹⁸ Focus-

or stifled by the "bard of Empire"; and the image of the colonies as a virtual playing field for the officers of Empire is exquisitely imagined in Kim's boyish, coming-of-age escapades.

¹⁴ See Patrick Brantlinger's *Rule of Darkness: British Literature and Imperialism, 1830-1914* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell UP, 1988).

¹⁵ Robert Hyam, *Empire and Sexuality: The British Experience* (Manchester: Manchester UP, 1990) 119.

¹⁶ Hyam, *Empire and Sexuality*, 65.

¹⁷ Christopher Lane, *The Ruling Passion: British Colonial Allegory and the Paradox of Homosexual Desire* (Durham, CA: Duke UP, 1995) 158; 159.

¹⁸ "The Other Boat" 205.

ing on the dialectic between Lionel and his mother, Tamera Dorland rightly considers Mrs. March the “voice of maternal law” to which Lionel’s sexually and racially transgressive behaviour stands as a counter-discourse: “In effect, ‘The Other Boat’ bears the long-standing legacy of Victorian vigilance over sexual normalization, namely that of bourgeois heterosexuality.”¹⁹ In contrast, Lionel can no longer look to his father for any sense of propriety, since the latter is rumoured to have “gone native.” Were he to follow his father’s example, therefore, he would be repeating a form of sexual liberty that had fallen into disfavour. Instead, being accountable to “the Mater’s” conscience, he is meant to project a reformed masculinity that holds “sexual restraint and ‘cleanness’”²⁰ as the order of the day.

The authoritarian memsahib is therefore left at the metaphorical imperial helm as a stabilizing element in a journey that initiates contact and convergence in the same gesture in which it legislates exclusion, segregation and other unsettling barriers set up to inhibit interracial intercourse and exchange. Consequently, Mrs. March’s psychological hold over her son is as fierce as her suspicion of his coloured playmate. Ironically, though, the extreme degree to which she intervenes in their relationship (both *in absentia* and in her stern presence) makes a greater statement about the precarious nature of British (self-)control in the colonial context than it does speak of the unrivalled centrality of Victorian moral rectitude therein. As the children play together, for example, Mrs. March remarks to a fellow passenger: “it doesn’t matter on a voyage home. However I would never allow it going to India.”²¹ Apart from its foreshadowing of Lionel and Moraes’ “grown up” encounter a decade hence, Mrs. March’s comment suggests that Moraes would prove a less threatening element in England where his subordinate position would render him a politically “impotent” subject. If she were to allow Moraes to fraternize with her children on the journey *to* India, however, there is no telling what mischief “they” might get up to—under the influence, of course, of a progressively less oversee-able environment. It is British conduct that must be held in check once distanced from the motherland, in other words, for it is British “resistance [which] weakened under the balmier sky” (214). Given the recent usurpation, by a Burmese native, of her own seemingly secure position abroad, Mrs. March’s comment thinly reveals the ineffectuality of Victorian laws and customs in the colonies themselves, further alluding perhaps to the perceived agency of the “Oriental subject.”

¹⁹ Dorland, “Contrary to the Prevailing Current,” 194.

²⁰ Hyam, *Empire and Sexuality*, 71.

²¹ “The Other Boat” 203.

Mrs. March's prohibitive attitudes are further indicative of the melding of pseudo-scientific theories of race with the Puritanism of late nineteenth century England. Of course, Social Darwinism and Eugenics came to drastically douse the flame of imperial desire for the racial "other." The criminalization of interracial sexual practices and non-heteronormative acts led to a new order of harshly felt conservatism and racial discrimination. It is not surprising, therefore, that our first introduction to Lionel and Moraes is in keeping with the racialist typologies of the era: Lionel is the "Nordic warrior" (210), Moraes the "silly idle useless unmanly little" boy (207). Subsequently, Lionel desires the racial and sexual object of his society's ridicule, a construction that Forster in turn seems to parody in the puerile connotations of the racist nickname that Lionel confers upon Moraes: Coconut, for "his blackish-greyish skin . . . and funny shaped head" (209).

When we encounter Lionel as a young adult, therefore, he is shown to epitomize a reformed British colonial identity, not only by Victorian standards of propriety but also those of gender and race:

He was what any rising young officer ought to be—clean-cut, athletic, good-looking without being conspicuous Success had not spoiled him, nor was he vain of his personal appearance, although he must have known that thick fairish hair, blue eyes, glowing cheeks and strong white teeth constitute . . . a combination irresistible to the fair sex. His hands were clumsier than the rest of him, but bespoke hard honest work, and the springy gleaming hairs on them suggested virility. (210)

Forster's portrait of the moral and physical virtues expected of a "clean-cut" British officer simultaneously calls attention to an incommensurate level of "virility" given that he wore a "mess uniform slightly too small for him, which accentuated his physique" (208). In his well-groomed though ironically "accentuated" appearance, Lionel is an admixture of clashing concepts of masculinity and English equanimity: that is, he is both a "rising young officer" as well as an *arousing* young officer; he is as irresistible to the "fair sex" as he is oblivious to it, in favour, that is, of the other (darker?) race/sex.

In contrast, Moraes is a composite of Oriental ambiguity, for he "belonged to no race" (210). Moraes embodies the geopolitical breadth of Western imperialism as well as its hybridization therein. As the narrator tells us, he "picked up" his education in London, "his financial beginnings in Amsterdam, one of [his] passports was Portuguese, the other Danish, and the half blood . . . Asiatic, unless a drop was negro" (218). As a curiously hybrid metonym for European Imperialism, Moraes' indeterminate identity, be it in terms of race or genealogy, further reflects the Empire's increasing

preoccupation with racial miscegenation.²² The Social Darwinists such as Benjamin Kidd who propounded the belief that culture was the product of a race's biologically determined characteristics, which could alternately result in the degeneration, if not extermination, of a people or the greatness of a nation,²³ further compounded the heightened racism underlying the imperial discourse of late nineteenth century England.

In a subversive gesture, however, Forster derails rather than affirms Lionel's confidence in racial purity, which is overtly articulated in the coda of white supremacy: "He was a hundred percent Aryan all right."²⁴ This is because Moraes' seeming indifference to matters of race seems to render irrelevant (or "impotent") Lionel's "hundred percent." Moreover, Moraes' direct challenge of Lionel's Aryan ancestry in the casual suggestion that the latter might have Burmese step-brothers and step-sisters simultaneously undercuts the latter's sense of moral and racial superiority. Having already been informed that Lionel's "colour prejudices were tribal rather than personal, and only worked when an observer was present," Lionel's racial posturing is ironized by the narrator's declaration, "the half-caste smiled as the warrior floundered" (211). Lionel flounders because of his conditioned reaction against racial mixing, which even *he* can recognize as a "colour prejudice" that is instinctive at best, baseless at worst. In other words, this is Moraes' victory over imperialist constructions of racial and, by extension, sexual purity.

In this sense, Forster could be said to identify, as Martin and Piggford state, "with other oppressions ... a political awareness of the need to envision a utopia of difference."²⁵ This is consistent with Forster's own dismissal of claims to racial purity in the imagined (racial) community of Europe. In his post-war piece entitled "Racial Exercise," he postulates:

People like to feel that they are all of a piece, and one of the ways of inducing that feeling is to tell them that they come of pure stock. That explains the ease with which the dictators are putting pseudo-science across But they have very cleverly hit on a weak spot in the human equipment—the desire to feel *a hundred per cent*, no matter what the percentage is in.²⁶

²² Robert Young, *Colonial Desire: Hybridity in Theory, Culture and Race* (London: Routledge, 1995) 16.

²³ See Benjamin Kidd's *Social Evolution* (London: MacMillan, 1898).

²⁴ "The Other Boat" 221.

²⁵ Martin and Piggford, "Introduction" 18.

²⁶ E.M. Forster, "Racial Exercise," in *Two Cheers for Democracy* (London: E Arnold, 1972) 31, emphasis added.

For Forster, the difference between eastern and western perceptions of racial ancestry is best defined in his statement that “they [Indians] did not make it a basis for political violence and cruelty; it takes the west to do that.”²⁷

Lionel’s sexual awakening is a symbolic assertion—in racial, cultural and ideological terms—of his individuality over his own “tribal” belief system. It is also an implicit identification with “the other” that overturns fixed notions of alterity. The explicitly transgressive nature of Lionel’s sexual orientation further compounds his displacement from “tribal” norms, such that he only begins to see beyond racist constructions—e.g., “dagoe,” “darkie” and “Cocoanut”—once he is, himself, relatively free of the Empire’s gaze. The moment Lionel penetrates his “coloured” berth-mate, then, his position as an objective “observer”—a position from which he is meant to dominate Moraes as the *object* of his desire—is displaced to that of a subjective participant in a *mutually enacted* desire. Lionel’s penetration of Moraes, and vice versa, raises the interrelated question: Who is subordinate/subject to whom in the enactment of a shared desire?

For his part, Moraes is shown to be both more self-aware and self-controlled than his British counterpart. Rather than living up to “the Mater’s” denigrating Orientalist stereotypes, Moraes is the worldly party with the benefit of experience at his disposal: “he knew by experience that ... too much adoration can develop a flaw in the jewel”²⁸ In the portrait of Moraes’ intellectual maturity, we see Forster in sympathy with those contemporaries such as Edward Carpenter who found that the West’s contact with the East extended “the conceptual abilities of British thought.”²⁹ Indeed, Moraes’ disarming effect on Lionel subtly brings to view the figures of Syed Ross

²⁷ Forster, “Racial Exercise” 31.

²⁸ Forster, “The Other Boat” 224.

²⁹ Gregory Bredbeck, “Queer Superstitions: Forster, Carpenter and the Illusion of Sexual Identity,” *Queer Forster* 31. Robert K. Martin and Gregory Bredbeck have noted Edward Carpenter’s considerable influence on Forster’s views on homosexuality. While Martin sees Carpenter as having offered Forster a “socialist” view of homosexuality, Bredbeck traces Carpenter’s understanding of Hinduism as it pertains to sexuality. Specifically, Bredbeck identifies Hinduism’s “epistemology of *permission*” (37) as central to Carpenter’s understanding of Hinduism’s views on sexuality. See also G.K. Das’s study “E.M. Forster and Hindu Mythology,” in *E.M. Forster: Centenary Revaluations*, ed. Judith Scherer Herz and Robert K. Martin (London: MacMillan Press, 1982) 244–56. Das comments on the positive influence of Hindu Mythology on E.M. Forster. It must be noted, however, that Das tends to exaggerate Forster’s enthrallment with Hinduism as a direct rejection of Christianity and Islam. This cannot be the case for a writer who was so directly influenced, both in terms of his growing sexual and cultural awareness, by the major Muslim figures in his life (namely, Syed Ross Masood and Mohammed el Adl).

Masood, a Muslim-Indian scholar and Forster's life-long friend, and the Maharajah of Dewas in whose court Forster worked and lived for several years. Forster first visited India in 1912. He then worked for the Red Cross in Alexandria, Egypt, during the years of the First World War. This is the period in which he befriended and fell in love with Mohammed el Adl, a young Egyptian tram conductor who died at a young age in 1922. In 1921, Forster took up a position as the Secretary to the Maharajah of Dewas, which provided his second, more extensive stay in India between 1921 and 1924. In the latter figure, Forster came to observe a spirit of generosity and sexual openness that is re-imagined in Moraes' lavish gift-giving and uninhibited sexuality, each of which makes Lionel wish "he could have given ... in return."³⁰

The pivotal role that Moraes is shown to play in terms of Lionel's emotional and intellectual awakening echoes Forster's intimate relationship with el Adl. In a letter to his confidante, Florence Barger, Forster described his relationship with el Adl in unequivocal terms: "It is certainly the most wonderful thing that's ever happened to me—has so outstripped my theories."³¹ Forster's relationship with el Adl, as well as his experience under the Maharajah's court, allowed him to openly engage in questions about sexual, moral and intellectual freedom.³² Like Lionel's relatively uninhibited discussions with Moraes, it is in the company of his Muslim lover, el Adl, that Forster was most able to allow his "private self" to "find expression."³³ Indeed, it is in his relationship with el Adl that Forster claims he feels "a grown up man"³⁴ and is made aware "how misleading generalisations are, whether racial or social."³⁵ We find a similar sense of intellectual liberty expressed in Lionel's progressively unobstructed consciousness when in the company of Moraes: "In England Lionel would have sheered off at once from such a subject, but since Gibraltar they had become so intimate and morally so relaxed that he had experienced nothing but friendly curiosity."³⁶

Irrespective of Forster's obvious jabs at imperial racial ideology and sexual ideology, however, in the Lionel-Moraes affair one does not find the

³⁰ "The Other Boat" 216.

³¹ Forster, *Selected Letters of E.M. Forster, 1879–1970, VI*, eds. Mary Lago and Peter Furbank (Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 1983) 287.

³² See Donald Watt's "Mohammed el Adl and A Passage to India," *Journal of Modern Literature* 10.2 (1983): 311–26, for a compelling consideration of the pivotal role el Adl plays in Forster's sexual and cultural awakening.

³³ Watt, "Mohammed el Adl" 326.

³⁴ E.M. Forster, quoted in Watt, 325.

³⁵ Forster, *Selected Letters, VI* 261.

³⁶ "The Other Boat" 217.

cautiously optimistic ending of Forster's earlier depictions of Indian-British relations³⁷ or, indeed, in his other treatments of homosexual relationships.³⁸ For while Forster's English homosexual characters in such novels as *Maurice* resolve the tension between "union and community"³⁹ across class lines, Lionel and Moraes appear as the antithesis to any such triumph across the racial divide. On the contrary, if the *S.S. Normania* is a microcosm of Empire, social and racial hierarchies are everywhere apparent, from the ship's segregated accommodations to the restricted mobility of its passengers and crew. Even as the more financially empowered of the two, Moraes is shown to occupy the "lower" berth of his cabin, both below Lionel and below deck. As such, Moraes harbours no false illusions about the nature of a relationship that must be carried out within the confines of a hegemonic colonial power structure. In Moraes' desire to be loved by Lionel, we also witness Fanon's understanding of the colonial project as having rendered the colonized trapped within the binary of self/other, since the colonized desires recognition from his/her oppressor even in the process of resistance.⁴⁰

What is less clear in Forster's text, however, is the questionable degree to which the individual occupies one or other polarity in the binaries of colonial rule. In "The Other Boat," both parties are subject to an unyielding power structure which suppresses free-ranging expressions of sexuality and selfhood: Lionel's individuality is curtailed by his conditioned conformity to imperial ideology, while Moraes' is relegated to the sub-status of a second class citizen under the same discursive practices which keep Lionel in check. Indeed, in their shared transgression below deck, Lionel and Moraes' relationship deconstructs the self/other binary, if only to the extent that both colonizer and colonized are shown to be trapped within it, albeit to relative degrees.⁴¹ Perhaps the most telling expression of this mutual containment

³⁷ For instance, in *A Passage to India*, Aziz and Fielding's reunion looks toward an enduring friendship. Similarly, a transcendental vision of inter-racial union is glimpsed in the title-story "The Life to Come" of his posthumously published collection.

³⁸ Robert K. Martin, "It Must Have Been the Umbrella: Forster's Queer Begetting," *Queer Forster* 255–73. In his consideration of the relatively happy ending of *Maurice*, Martin refers to this potential as Forster's "utopian vision."

³⁹ Martin, "It Must Have Been the Umbrella" 256.

⁴⁰ See Frantz Fanon's *Peau noire, masques blancs* (Paris: Editions de Seuil, 1952).

⁴¹ Homi Bhabha's model of "colonial hybridity" immediately comes to mind here. Bhabha's psychoanalytic revisioning of both Edward Said's *Orientalism* and Fanon's theories of the psychological consequences of colonization helps nuance the relations between East and West in its investment of a greater degree of agency on the part of the colonized. However, Bhabha overstates the case in downplaying the very real power structures which kept the colonized subordinate to colonial authority. Bhabha also tends to miss Fanon's insistence

is the fact that Lionel is ultimately unable to allow himself to feel a “grown up man” and dies “only a boy.”⁴²

In Forster’s text, individuals are shown to be as locked within a colonial system that keeps them tied to “the great blank country” (231), even as they are endeavouring to voyage beyond it. Indeed, the ambivalent power dynamics at play between Lionel and Moraes exerts its own stylistic pressures upon a realist narrative mode that cannot adequately cope with the psychological slippages which occur between characters whose identities are so unconsciously intertwined. In fact, Lionel and Moraes’ final interaction is so entangled a confrontation that their identities become as blurred as the line between pleasure and pain. At this critical juncture, Forster’s text yields to more experimental forms such that pronominal shifts from the objective “them” to the possessive “his” are symbolic of the shifting and inter-subjective nature of the racial/sexual power struggle: “The sweet act of vengeance followed, sweeter than ever for both of them, and as ecstasy hardened into agony his hands twisted the throat. Neither of them knew when the end came, and when he realized it he felt no sadness, no remorse” (233).

Lionel’s eventual extermination of Moraes can be seen as Forster’s own attempt to control sexual and racial impulses that are “contrary to the prevailing current” (234). The murder-suicide might also be seen as Forster’s revisioning of his earlier portrait of Fielding and Aziz’s potentially utopic reunion in *A Passage to India*. Forster’s utopian humanist vision may very well have changed if not collapsed in a post-colonial world. During the early decades of the post-colonial era, Forster would have witnessed both the possibility of more equitable relations between East and West, as well as nationalist discourses which reinforced anti-imperial sentiment abroad. Perhaps Lionel’s tragic termination of his relations with Moraes also signals the fundamentally flawed nature of a colonial enterprise which paradoxically seeks to bridge distances it does everything in its power to maintain.

Caught between two seemingly contradictory strands of social and political change, therefore, it is as if Forster’s characters cannot help but remain precariously ensnared within the paradox of “the Mater’s web,” for it is here that “they lay caught, *both of them*, and did not know it” (210, emphasis added). “The Other Boat” nonetheless offers a subtly open-ended denouement in the further shift of direction found in the closing image of

that effective anti-colonial resistance must be an active and, if necessary, violent uprising against the colonial system. See Homi Bhabha, “Signs Taken for Wonders,” in *Location of Culture* (New York: Routledge, 1994).

⁴² “The Other Boat” 234.

Moraes' body floating "contrary to the prevailing current," *back* to England. Moraes' reverse journey hints at the indelible impact his presence will continue to have on Victorian/British consciousness. Though Lionel and Moraes' violent demise necessarily signals the failure of sexual and racial union within the hegemonic and discursive currency of Empire, individual acts that dare go against the navigable currents of imperial ideology are nonetheless shown to rock the "the *other* boat" as surely as one's own.