"So Far No Other": Alterity in Forster's "The Other Boat"

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Abstract

Posthumously published in the collection *The Life to Come and Other Stories* (1972), the story "The Other Boat" (began in 1913 and completed in 1957–8) has long been considered "a worthy finale to Forster's fiction" (Stallybrass 1987, xvii). This essay explores the foregrounding of alterity in "The Other Boat" within the context of imperialist politics. The significant use of the term "other" in the story problematizes hierarchies and interrogates binaries of inclusion/exclusion. Highlighting alterity, "The Other Boat" engages with the colonizer/colonized dichotomy in ways suggestive of postcolonial conceptualizations of otherness. Thus, the story explores ideologies predicated upon what Edward Said in *Orientalism* (1978) terms the Orient's "foreignness" and illustrates the conditions which preserve the Orient's "permanent estrangement from the West" (Said 1978, 244).

Keywords: E.M. Forster, "The Other Boat," alterity, other(ness), orientalism

> Here is our place and we have *so far no other* and only we can guard each other. The door shut, the door unshut, is nothing, and is the same. (Forster 1972, 189; emphasis added)

Posthumously published in 1972 in the collection *The Life to Come and Other Stories*, "The Other Boat" is considered, according to Oliver Stallybrass, "a worthy finale to Forster's fiction" (1987, xvii). This thirty-page story, which Norman Page considers "perhaps the finest short story [Forster] ever wrote" (1987, 15), centres on an interracial same-sex relationship. Following P.N. Furbank's categorisation of Forster's "homosexual stories" into "facetious" and "serious" ones, Stallybrass places "The Other Boat" in a group of "serious homosexual stories" (1987, xv) which show Forster "at the height of his powers" (1987, xvi).[1]

According to Stallybrass, the first section of the story, the section which takes place on the boat and the title specifies as "other," was "probably" written "around 1913"; in 1948 this section was published in the *Listener* with the title "Cocoanut & Co: Entrance to an Unwritten Novel" (1987, xvii). The publication of this section as well as Forster's return to the story and its completion in 1957–8 suggest Forster's approval of the material and his continued interest in exploring the paradoxes of, what Stallybrass terms, "an East-West encounter" (1987, xvi). In the story, which unfolds in five parts, this encounter of an Englishman with otherness develops during two voyages on two different ships. Initially, the main characters meet on "the other boat" travelling from India to England; ten years later they are both on a passage to India. As neither of the characters, the representatives of East and West respectively, reaches India, the passage remains incomplete.

In "The Other Boat," as in *A Passage to India* (1924), Forster engages with the colonizer/colonized dichotomy in ways suggestive of postcolonial conceptualizations of otherness as described by Edward Said. "The Other Boat" explores ideologies predicated upon what Said in *Orientalism* (1978) terms the Orient's "foreignness," illustrating the conditions which preserve the Orient's "permanent estrangement from the West" (244). This essay explores the foregrounding of alterity in "The Other Boat" within the context of imperialist politics. The significant use of the term "other" in the story problematizes hierarchies and interrogates binaries of inclusion/exclusion.

Critical attention to "The Other Boat" in the decades since its publication has included references to the colonial theme which foregrounds alterity explicitly.

[1] In their discussions of the story some critics consider it "grim" (Land 1990, 230) as well as inferior when compared to "the culmination of Forster's art in *A Passage to India*" (Rosecrance 1982, 183) although they find some similarity between *A Passage* and "The Other Boat" as regards the characters of Aziz and Cocoanut.

Considered "a novelist for whom the encounter with otherness is primary" (Goodlad 2006, 325), Forster in his work "pays homage to the redemptive possibilities inherent in the love of the totally other" (Levine 1984, 87) and "certainly recognizes Orientalist tropes" (Morey 2007, 270). Yet, as Jeremy Tambling argues, Forster's "liberalism" may have kept the author from "seeing fully the structures of oppression – class, race and gender-based – that he was part of" (1995, 11).

Most scholars approach "The Other Boat" psychoanalytically (such as the Jungian reading by James Malek 1977) and focus on homoeroticism in the context of colonial narratives (explored in detail by Christopher Lane in his publications in 1995, 1997, and 2007, on "Fosterian sexuality"). The "internalization of the English antipathy to homosexuality" is also the view Paul Peppis takes in discussing the "ambivalences" in Forster's "national allegories" (2007, 58). Similarly, Dominic Head, who notes the othering of Cocoanut as "emblematic of colonial hypocrisy," considers the theme to be the "repression of homosexuality" (2007, 88). Tamera Dorland's Lacanian reading focuses on the repression of sexuality and the oppressiveness of "Maternal Law" (1997, 214). Dorland highlights the significance of the colonialist context, arguing that the story "proves" to be a "hybridization of Forster's narrative of homosexuality in *Maurice* and his focus on issues of Anglo-Indian sexuality and Oriental seductiveness in *A Passage to India*" (1997, 216).

Like *A Passage to India*, which in Benita Parry's view is "a text which disrupts its own conventional forms and dissects its own informing ideology" (1995, 136), "The Other Boat" is a text which juxtaposes ideological positions through the exploration of binaries. While Robert Aldrich considers that the posthumously published stories which explore interracial relationships "represent indictments of ideologies that dominated Britain during [Forster's] life" (2003, 325), the text of "The Other Boat" resists such certainty. Aldrich notes that these stories "form Forster's strongest statements of support for personal sexual emancipation and his strongest denunciation of imperialism" (2003, 325); yet, efforts to determine whether the foregrounding of alterity in "The Other Boat" valorises or critiques imperialist discourse result in conflicting evidence. As other critical views on *A Passage to India* suggest, Forster's fiction not only allows "gaps in representation for 'otherness' to show through" (Malik 1997, 223) but also "invites the exoticizing and fetishizing of otherness" (Goodlad 2006, 325). Christopher Lane concludes in *The Ruling Passion* (1995) that the "colonial narratives" of interracial relationships substitute "hostility for desire" (174) and foreground "sexual and racial ambivalence" (175).

The first section of the story takes place "on that other boat" (Forster 1972, 173, 181).[2] The principal characters, a military Captain, Lionel March, and Cocoanut Moraes, nicknamed "Lion" and "Monkey" respectively, meet first as children during the time of the British Empire on board of an unnamed vessel travelling from the colonies to the imperial centre. The omniscient narrator self-consciously employs colonial stereotypes, specifying that March represents the "Ruling Race" (169; caps in the text)[3] and Moraes the "half-caste" (183). The remaining four sections of the story occur ten years later during a voyage towards Bombay when March and Moraes are young adults. Using free indirect discourse to represent Lionel's "prejudices" (174) as well as his memories of the "faraway boat" (189) where "things had actually started" (181), the third-person narrative shifts perspectives to represent varying viewpoints but maintains an ironic distance as well; the omniscient voice records and questions normative ideologies, highlighting otherness but also employing orientalist tropes.

Throughout the text Cocoanut, and the first boat, are identified as "other" several times (178, 181, 186, 188). Cocoanut is the "other one, the deep one" (178), who represents alterity and who pleads in favour of "our place" (189). The many cultural differences between these two representatives of East and West are carefully laid out in the story from the start: as their revealing nicknames, Lion and Monkey, suggest, they differ greatly in temperament, beliefs and behaviour due to their diverse social backgrounds, nationalities and racial identities. They are linked only through desire for each other. Unable to accept his own otherness, Lionel adheres to normative views of sexual orientation but also to colonial hierarchies of power in relation to constructions of race, ethnicity, class and gender. Following such norms and power structures, March views his lover as other; he considers that being with Moraes exposes him to a constant risk.

During the first voyage, the one from India to England, Lionel's mother, identified only as Mrs March, reluctantly consents to allowing her five children to play with Cocoanut. Who is Cocoanut and who is he travelling with? Who are his parents? What is his actual name since Cocoanut is a nickname relating to his "peculiar shaped head" (171)? He is a stranger who originates from a mixed ethnic background as indicated by Captain

[2] All references to the story "The Other Boat" relate to the text in the collection *The Life to Come and Other Stories* (1972), edited by Oliver Stallybrass, pages 166–97. Subsequent in-text references include only page numbers in parentheses.

[3] For details on Forster's use of the term "member of the Ruling Race" in reference to himself in his correspondence with Syed Ross Massood, see Aldrich (2003).

Armstrong's racist reference to the boy as having a "touch of the tar-brush" (167). The existence of Cocoanut on a boat travelling towards England produces aporia on a semantic and a cultural level; the facts of his origin are never clarified. When asked about the boy's identity, Mrs March responds "I don't know"; she is only aware that Cocoanut is someone "always hanging on" to her children (167). While Mrs March views her son as a lion, the emblem of the nation which controls the empire, she considers this unknown other as a monkey "hanging on" to and from the imperial tree. Mrs March only tolerates his "hanging on" because for her family this is the "voyage home" (167). For Lionel's mother Cocoanut is a "silly idle useless unmanly little boy" (170).

As "a clergyman's daughter and a soldier's wife" (169), Mrs March is the voice of normative ideologies: the mother is shown to be the medium of indoctrination. Her conviction that no "good thing can come out of the Levant" (169) represents established views within the colonial context. Like his siblings, Lionel has internalized such discriminatory views; however, he also likes to "play at soldiers" with Cocoanut as he is the only one who "falls down when he is killed" (166). Within the colonial setting, even as a child, Lionel longs for and is appalled by otherness. When Lionel insists "*I* want him" and Cocoanut responds teasingly "I am beesy" (166), the desire/denial binary, which already regulates this divided colonial world and determines the children's games, foreshadows the future: their reunion as adults and their relationship as lovers appears prescribed in orientalist terms.

In the story's first section Cocoanut indirectly makes himself the leader of the group, determining the games the March children play on "the other boat." The March children seem less curious about their mixed-race playmate, absorbed as they are in unwittingly following his lead. Cocoanut is not only of mysterious origin and theatrical in his passionate engagement with games; he is also imaginative as he invents the "'m'm m'm m'm m'm'," enigmatic beings which hide in the ship's bow and for which there is no "name" (166–7). While the dark-skinned boy is not bothered by the absence of a linguistic sign or of a visible presence verifying the existence of the "'m'm m'm m'm m'm'," the white children insist on proof and rationality: Western logic demands that to acknowledge even the existence of the unknown, it must be viewed and named.

As a representative of the Orient, Cocoanut appears undisturbed by the inability to "name" the "'m'm m'm m'm m'm'"; in this Cocoanut resembles Aziz in *A Passage to India* who is not bothered by the echo in the Marabar Caves. The "'m'm m'm m'm m'm'" are never explained so they function similarly to the echo which responds to every linguistic signifier with the same meaningless boom. Both "'m'm m'm m'm m'm'" and boom are

manifestations which the texts suggest taunt Western reason but are of no concern for the Oriental others. Cocoanut and the "'m'm m'm m'm'," like the Marabar Caves and India, signify the otherness of an Oriental world the incomprehensibility of which, Said considers in *Culture and Imperialism*, "cannot in fact be represented" (1993, 200).

While the narrative situates the March children in a recognisable social milieu, Cocoanut is presented as elusive as the "'m'm m'm m'm'." Yet for the March children the presence of Cocoanut also validates the presence of the "'m'm m'm m'm'." The linguistic indeterminacy of the unknowable "m'm m'm m'm'" is significant; in the text they become a sign identified with Cocoanut and therefore with alterity. By connecting Cocoanut with the 'm'm m'm m'm' as well as with the 'other', the text invites the reader to unite within this character the signs of incomprehensibility, unknowability and alterity. As a symbol of the Orient, Cocoanut is both unnameable and 'm'm m'm m'm'-other; he is metaphorically both m-other and son, both origin and creation of the Orient.[4]

Cocoanut's disruptive presence as other in the story's first section foreshadows the challenges which emerge when the boys meet again as young men and become lovers in the following four sections of "The Other Boat." The imperialist discourse employed to turn the characters into stereotypes is also challenged when Moraes, the colonial subject, is presented in the following sections as more successful financially, more sophisticated and emotionally aware than March, the representative of the Empire.

After the initial encounter narrated in the first section, the rest of the story occurs ten years later during a voyage towards Bombay on board the steamship *Normannia*. The name seems to allude not only to the norms of sexuality and masculinity which dictate Lionel's behaviour but also to the imperialist state, Britannia, which Lionel serves as an officer. With hindsight, Lionel considers the first boat, which, like the 'm'm m'm m'm', remains unnamed, as "that other boat" (173, 181), the "faraway boat" (189) where "things had actually started" (181).

In these four sections the narrative again presents both major characters through orientalist tropes: Lionel, the "Nordic warrior," is presented as "irresistible" (172), a "Goth" (178), or "Viking" (180); Cocoanut, who "belonged to no race," is "subtle" (174). He is the "other one, the deep one" (178), who seduces and fulfils stereotypical expectations. In "The Other Boat" ideologies of control are present even in the secluded

[4] For McClintock the Orient is "feminized in a number of ways: as mother, evil seducer, licentious aberration, life-giver" (1995, 124). McClintock also notes how "sexuality as a trope for other power relations was certainly an abiding aspect of imperial power" (1995, 14).

space of a cabin on a boat. Thus, March becomes identified with Britannia, Cocoanut with the Orient.

Lionel finds the colonial subject, in typical orientalist mode, both seductive and repulsive. Cocoanut is presented as transcending but also as inhabiting the stereotypes that the text and the context impose on this character: in section four he is presented as amoral, shady in his financial affairs, buying silences through bribes. Cocoanut also remains elusive linguistically as he utters "incomprehensible words" (179) and acts in inexplicable ways which Lionel terms "'m'm m'm m'm'" as they remind him of "oddities on the other boat" (180). Eventually, Cocoanut reveals he possesses two passports, one Portuguese and the other Danish, with conflicting information so the text makes it "impossible" to fix his age, nationality, or even his name (181).

During their reunion, Lionel experiences the conflict at the centre of colonial politics. Cocoanut spoils him with gifts in a reversal of the power dynamics: Lionel realizes that his "pyjamas" are "a sultan's gift" (179). Lionel enjoys the attention: "It was presents all the time. [...] His gambling debts were settled [...] and if he needed anything [...] something or other appeared" (179). Although Cocoanut is partly placed in a position of control and influence as financier and seducer, the story maintains normative cultural order while foregrounding orientalist traits for both colonizer and colonial subject.

Adopting colonial hierarchies of nationhood, Lionel insists on using ethnic slurs, like "wog" and "dago," which allow him to maintain control over the relationship despite his insistence that "his colour-prejudices were tribal rather than personal" (174). Below deck and within the enclosed space of the cabin, Lionel engages in a passionate sexual relationship with the 'm'm m'm m'm-other; while on deck Lionel maintains his allegiance to the "Ruling Race" as prescribed by his mother. For Lionel, Mrs March is "the Mater," a Victorian form of address that suggests social class but also denotes veneration and authority: she sets the limits, "always objecting to something or other" (176). Cocoanut is the 'm'm m'm m'm'-other, the "something or other" to which the Mater objects, but also the one who offers Lionel "the whole world" (178). Experiencing simultaneously sexual desire for Cocoanut and the impulse to desert him, he is "caught" (174) in a "web spun" by his mother who "understood nothing and controlled everything" (193).[5]

[5] For a discussion of Mrs March "as an indirect arbiter of imperialist and British propriety," see Dorland (1995). Whether the text conflates Lionel's desire for Cocoanut with Oedipal desire or whether Lionel's same-sex desire is a rejection of his overbearing mother are considerations worth exploring further but fall beyond the remit of this essay.

Forster uses free indirect discourse to represent Lionel's "prejudices" (174) but also allows glimpses into the wishes of Cocoanut who understands normative thinking but also pleads in favour of "our place" (189). Cocoanut responds to Lionel's fears of discovery, when the latter realizes the cabin door was left unlocked during their lovemaking, with a plea for companionship and togetherness: "only we can guard each other," he argues; then the "door shut, the door unshut, is nothing, and is the same" (189). Unlike the Lion, the emblematic English soldier who "expected either repentance or terror" to accompany any act of transgression (176), the oriental Monkey insists that "only [they] can guard each other" (189). Using "guard," a military term, to request protection and insist that their allegiance should be to "each other," Cocoanut defends "our place," making a country out of the ship's cabin. Such guarding for Lionel is unpatriotic: defending the cabin requires betraying the motherland. Ultimately, Lionel adheres to normative views of sexual orientation but also to colonial hierarchies of power in relation to constructions of race, ethnicity, class and gender.

Lionel is unable to accept his own desires even if he is "fonder" of Cocoanut than he "know[s] how to say" (187). While in the course of the relationship Lionel finds he cannot choose between the "folk to whom he belonged" (192) and the "kid" he wishes his kind would "leave alone" (194), March is also unwilling to "think how he had yielded" to "their foolish relationship" (193). If, like his father, he "went native" (183), Lionel is convinced "he would become nobody and nothing" outside the hierarchies and conventions of his national identity and social class (192). Thus, the possibility of "each-other"-ness for the principal characters is negated since otherness is rejected.

As a committed servant of the empire, Lionel cannot deny the dominant ideology; he is unable to embrace alterity. Seeking to regain control over the colonial subject, Lionel decides that "the whole thing has been a bit of a mistake" (194). However, Cocoanut's bite "onto [Lionel's] muscular forearm" transforms March into the colonial soldier "in a desert fighting savages" (194). The imperialist wish for domination is mixed with the language of desire for conquest: the cabin is now a battlefield.

The final sexual union of colonizer and colonial subject is a "sweet act of vengeance" (195) which denies any possibility for nonviolent coexistence: the killing of Cocoanut brings Lionel "no sadness, no remorse" (196). Before diving into the sea, Lionel thinks of the trajectory of his relationship with the colonized subject as "part of a curve that had long been declining" (196). Lionel's suicide exposes the very ideology he defends; ironically, he contributes to the "declining" curve. The "deep" that buries

Moraes and March together (196) in a reversal of baptismal rites suggests that only bodies in death can transcend imperialist politics.

Despite the finality of the murder/suicide ending for the main characters, the story continues for three more paragraphs as the *Normannia* sails on and reaches Bombay (196). The double closure of "The Other Boat" renders the text a degree of undecidability reminiscent of the culmination of *A Passage to India* which defers the potential for connection. In the three remaining paragraphs following Lionel's "dive into the sea" (196), the text shifts focus to accommodate the various views of the story ranging from the sensational to the officially sanctioned account. The versions range from "scandal" to "accident" while Lionel is "only a boy" as well as "a monster in human form" (196). Some of the passengers are curious, while others "recoil" and find the revelations "appalling" (196). Lionel's body is never "recovered" as it "attracted the sharks" while the body of "his victim" moved "contrary to the prevailing current" when "consigned to the deep" (196). This variety in versions and representations destabilizes the fixity of identity within the colonial order but also highlights the dominance of normativity and orientalism.

The official version provided to Mrs March insists on Lionel's "good looks and good manners" (196) yet the mother rejects this version: she makes "no comment" and "never mention[s] his name again" (197). The silence of the Mater, who is the representative of Britannia as a colonial power, places Lionel in the position of the other. Mrs March treats her son as she behaved towards her husband, Lionel's father, when he had gone "native" (183): for the mother they have both become other, like the unnameable "'m'm m'm m'm'." The discourse that determines the norms Lionel has transgressed makes him perpetrator and victim simultaneously: he is excised from the family story as well as the history of the nation he has failed to serve.

However briefly, Lionel has liaised with the 'm'm m'm m'm'-other, transferring his allegiance away from the motherland. He punishes himself for this transgression, abandoning his passage to India. As long as alterity remains a threat to norms in Forster's fiction, the potential for "our place" is negated; interactions between the centre and the periphery can only lead to violence and death. The culmination of "The Other Boat" exposes the empire's self-destructiveness and draws attention to an imperialist context which encourages but ultimately denies individual attempts at embracing alterity.

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