“There is no better place for friendships than Canton”: Painting Canton as a Queer Space in Amitav Ghosh's *River of Smoke*

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Abstract
Our essay explores the representation of Canton as a queer space in Amitav Ghosh’s *River of Smoke*, primarily through the character of Anglo-Indian artist Robin Chinnery. Robin, a gay man in his twenties and the fictional illegitimate son of famous painter George Chinnery, first appears as a minor character in the second novel of Ghosh’s *Ibis Trilogy*. Through Robin’s epistolary interjections in the novel, the readers enter the city of Canton (present-day Guangzhou), an enclave of foreigners attempting to do business with the Chinese on the precipice of the First Opium War (1839-1842). In letters to his childhood friend Paulette, a major character in the *Ibis Trilogy*, Robin describes the ongoings of the men-only territory and his blooming relationship with his Chinese love interest Jacqua. Though doubly marginalised because of his Anglo-Indian heritage and closeted homosexuality, Robin finds solace within the borders of Canton and fulfils his desires. Our close readings focus specifically on the novel’s portrayal of nineteenth-century Canton which emerges as a Foucauldian heterotopic world, existing as a liminal space offering avenues for Robin to explore his desire for companionship beyond conventional restrictions, which given his circumstances, otherwise seemed impossible. Canton is further read as a queer utopian space that invites readers to rediscover queer joy in the past, seek comfort in the present, and experience hope for the future.

Keywords: Indian fiction, historical fiction, Amitav Ghosh, queer identities, utopia, heterotopia

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Introduction

Guangzhou, a prominent Chinese city in the Guangdong province, was the dominant centre of trade in Asia during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Europeans loosely termed the Guangdong region and the city of Guangzhou as 'Canton,' which had transformed into a multicultural business hub with traders from Europe, South and South-East Asia, and even North America (Ghosh, *Smoke and Ashes* 2). In *River of Smoke* (2011), the eminent Indian author Amitav Ghosh brings the historical city of Canton to life, serving as a critical backdrop to the narrative. In his recently published part travelogue, part memoir and part essay titled *Smoke and Ashes* (2023), Ghosh reflects on nineteenth century Canton, describing it as a unique and interesting place "where the dominant power was Asian, not European; it was a place where Westerners, Indians and Chinese lived in close proximity, depending on each other commercially, politically and socially" (Ghosh, *Smoke and Ashes* 239). Ghosh's interest in the city of Canton predates his most recent publication, as it is also featured in the celebrated *Ibis Trilogy* (2008, 2011, 2015). The set of three historical fiction novels follows several characters of various nationalities who find themselves on the precipice of the First Opium War. Specifically, in the second novel, *River of Smoke* (2011), Canton gains centrality as most of the novel's action takes place there. In our article, we explore the significance of Canton in Ghosh's *River of Smoke* and its representation as a queer space, primarily through the character of Anglo-Indian artist Robin Chinnery. Robin, a gay man in his twenties, is the fictional illegitimate son of famous English painter George Chinnery. Though a minor character, Robin's epistolary interjections in the novel allow the readers to enter the city of Canton, an enclave of foreigners attempting to do business with the Chinese. Robin, who writes letters to his childhood friend Paulette, a significant character in the *Ibis Trilogy*, describes the ongoings of this men-only territory and his blooming relationship with his Chinese love interest Jacqua.

The enclave in Canton called Fanqui town where foreign traders, or fanqui (a derogatory term meaning 'foreign devils'), resided together and conducted business amongst themselves, and the local population are at the centre of Robin's narrative in *River of Smoke*. Fanqui town emerges as a bustling microcosm of larger political and economic forces at play, and by exploring the enclave through the eyes of Robin Chinnery, Ghosh depicts a detailed vision of this melting pot on the verge of the Opium Wars. The Opium Wars were a reaction to the immoral trade practices of the West, the British in particular, as they forced opium into territories of China that banned the recreational use of the substance. Under the guise of free trade, British traders carried out illegal trading

practices and "bred deceit, hypocrisy and exploitation" (Roy, "Exploring the Orient" 10). Before the trade of opium, the British-Chinese trade relations were relatively straightforward. The British required tea, porcelain, and silk, which they purchased with silver. This trade between foreign and Chinese merchants was thoroughly regulated through the Hong system, which can be described as a guild of merchants. Trade activities such as sales, taxes, and customs tariffs took place within these Hongs of Canton as per the rules of the Chinese authorities (Lovell 2). The Hongs also leased rows of these factories (one for every trading nation) and provided lodging to the foreign traders during their stay in Canton, as no foreigners could venture beyond Canton for any reason.[2] Since no female traders were allowed to enter Canton, the factories became men-only spaces.

By the 1780s, British traders witnessed a growing trade deficit between the two countries due to the increased demand for tea among British consumers (Lovell 2). To tackle this deficit, large quantities of Indian opium were pushed into Chinese markets leading to high rates of addiction and harming the social fabric of the local population. Finally, the Qing Emperor appointed Chinese official Lin Zexu to tackle this illegal trade and to reduce the recreational use of this drug. After fruitlessly chastising local populations and warning British merchants, Zexu confiscated and destroyed 20,000 chests of opium, which became the casus belli for the First Opium War (Lovell 66). *River of Smoke* features a fictionalised version of this historical event to address the junctures between colonialism (and anti-colonial resistance) and capitalist greed. Against this background, Robin's personal journey of self-discovery and realisation adds another facet to the novel's negotiations of transnational mobility.

Within the close quarters of Canton, Robin finds solace and the means to explore his desires, which were otherwise the cause of his marginality. Thus, in our close readings of the novel, Canton emerges as a Foucauldian heterotopic world, existing as a liminal space offering avenues for Robin to explore his desire for companionship beyond conventional restrictions, which, given his circumstances, otherwise seemed impossible. Our essay also focuses specifically on the novel's portrayal of nineteenth-century Canton as a queer utopian space that invites readers to rediscover queer joy in the past, seek comfort in the present, and experience hope for the future, deriving specifically from José Esteban Muñoz's *Cruising Utopia* (2019), where the author writes that "queer relationality promises a future" (6). These readings show how

[2] These factories were not industrial production facilities but rather trading centres where the merchants conducted their businesses.

Ghosh reimagines Canton as a space of queer potentiality and transnational cooperation.

Queer Indian Writing in English and Amitav Ghosh's *River of Smoke*

While exploring modern queer literature in English and *bhasha* (vernacular) languages within the Indian context,[3] Ruth Vanita and Saleem Kidwai highlight two recurring phenomena in works of the nineteenth and twentieth century respectively: "first, the minor homophobic voice that was largely ignored by mainstream society in precolonial India becomes a dominant voice; and second, sexual love between women is depicted increasingly explicitly while such love between men is almost entirely silenced" (Vanita and Kidwai 191).[4] As queer activism gained momentum in the 1990s, many post-liberalization Indian writers such as R. Raj Rao, Hoshang Merchant, Vikram Seth, Vasudhendra, Ruth Vanita, and Arundhati Roy explored narratives on queer identities. However, there has been a lack of intersectional representations of queer identities as they have mostly been "limited to English writing, urban settings and middle- or upper-class characters" (Singh 9). Novels in *bhasha* languages also reiterate the idea of queerness enclosed largely within urban spaces, and instead prefer to use "homosocial terms like *sakhi* (intimate friendship between two women) or *jigry dost/yaar* (two men as passionate friends)" as ways to employ queerness without engaging in "rigid sexual classification of identities" (Chakraborty and Chakraborty 3). Despite the ambiguousness of sexual identities in India, queer characters have emerged as integral or peripheral characters in Indian literature, cinema, and popular culture. In September 2018, the Supreme court of India struck down the colonial-era law Section 377 of the Indian Penal Code. Section 377 states that "carnal intercourse against the order of nature […] shall be punished with imprisonment for life," or is liable to heavy fines. This outdated law was used mainly to ostracise homosexuals. However, the courts decriminalised consensual sex between adults by accepting that

[3] The term vernacular was often used to denote regional or local languages of India; however, it is now considered pejorative due to its etymological connotations and its implication of inferiority. In his critical essay, Makarand R. Paranjape reclaims the term vernacular but in a different context. Instead of referring to regional and native languages as vernacular, he suggests that the vernacularisation of the English language remedies these asymmetrical imbalances thus bringing English into the fore of regional and native languages (Paranjape 91). Hence, the term bhasha is appropriate to refer to India's vast linguistic heritage and languages that are native to the land.

[4] See Same-Sex Love in *India: Reading from History and Literature*, edited by Ruth Vanita and Saleem Kidwai for a detailed exploration of sexual identities including works from ancient, medieval, and modern India.

Section 377 was deployed to control an individual's sexuality. Despite a significant victory, queer communities across the country remain invested in the future of the movement, with a focus on demands for anti-discrimination laws and legal acceptance of same-sex marriages in India (Borah 19). The scrapping of these homophobic laws was a mere first step, as India's LGBTQI+ community continues to face violence, discrimination, and apathy within the folds of a society that is both simultaneously archaic and modern.

During the 1980s and 1990s, the literary landscape of Indian writing in English drastically transformed with the arrival of many new authors who were a product of economic liberalisation with values of cosmopolitanism and transnationalism (Bhattacharya 128). In this period, along with the rise of authors such as Salman Rushdie, Upamanyu Chatterjee, Rohinton Mistry, Jhumpa Lahiri, and Arundhati Roy, we also locate Amitav Ghosh. Ghosh's prominence within Indian and global literary circles has steadily risen, marked by his many accolades, such as the prestigious *Sahitya Akademi Award*, *Padma Shri,* and the *Jnanpith Award*. Owing to a diverse educational background, including a DPhil. in social anthropology, Ghosh's works are characterised by detailed historical research and rich narratives where he places individuals at the centre of his novels and views "human history as an ongoing, multifaceted project" (Bhattacharya 129). Moreover, the idea of journey (travel or movement), both literally and figuratively, is essential to Ghosh's novels—where the character experiences fluidity of borders, positive dislocation, migration, and cross-cultural exchanges (130). As Ghosh weaves these myriads of micro-narratives of individual characters, the macro-narrative of history always looms in the background of his novels (130).

The *Ibis Trilogy* is considered much grander than his other novels, encompassing large swathes of time and space. A work of historical fiction, the *Ibis Trilogy* consists of three novels, *Sea of Poppies* (2008), *River of Smoke* (2011), and *Flood of Fire* (2015). Set against the backdrop of the nineteenth-century Opium Wars, the novels offer glimpses of the British Raj and the intricate connections between India and China. In these novels, readers find what Bhattacharya, in his essay "Amitav Ghosh: The Indian Architect of a Postnational Utopia," calls 'Ghoshean flavours'—a "unique brand of language, a postcolonial variant, interpolating Bangla, Bhojpuri and Hindi words in his prose" (137). The novels include diverse characters whose narratives interweave as they find themselves aboard

the former slave schooner *Ibis*.[5] Aboard the ship, we find Deeti, a village woman and *girmitya* (indentured labourer of Indian origin); Neel Haldar, a Zamindar fallen from grace;[6] Ah Fatt, a convict and opium addict of Chinese and Parsi descent; Zachary Reid, a mixed-heritage American man who is also the second-in-command of the ship; and finally, Paulette Lambert, a runaway orphan of French botanist Pierre Lambert. Apart from these central characters travelling on the *Ibis,* there are other supporting individuals with complex mixed and diasporic backgrounds, such as the one discussed in this essay, Robin Chinnery.

The second novel of the *Ibis Trilogy*, *River of Smoke*, begins with the aftermath of the events aboard the *Ibis*. The characters find themselves dispersed across various locations, but the novel's primary focus is on Canton's bustling trade centre. Paulette Lambert joins the vessel *Redruth,* owned by the botanist Fitcher Penrose, who is on an expedition to China to collect rare plant specimens. In the novel, she reunites with her childhood friend, Robin Chinnery, who is venturing to visit Canton in search of companionship and simultaneously helping Paulette locate a rare plant species. Because Canton is an all-male territory, Paulette and Robin stay in touch by exchanging letters. These epistolary sections of the novel, where we mainly read correspondence from Robin, narrate his quest to help Paulette and his attempts at companionship with local painter Jacqua. The letters also include his observations on those living in this men-only enclave and the various incidents leading to the First Opium War.

Robin Chinnery's Canton as a Queer Heterotopia and Utopia

While Amitav Ghosh's *River of Smoke* and his *Ibis Trilogy* more generally have been the subject of a broad critical debate, the character of Robin Chinnery has only rarely figured in those discussions.[7] Batra remarks on Robin's pan-Asian perspective on the city of Canton but is eventually more interested in the novel's representation of botany (cf. Batra 324). Similarly, Jayagopalan mentions that Robin serves as narrator and then quickly moves on to her main point of interest, the Golden Camelia in the novel as

[5] After the United Kingdom abolished slavery in 1833, many erstwhile slave ships were converted to transport convicts and indentured migrants to remote penal settlements and plantations respectively. These long voyages were treacherous as ever, and were a symbol of imperial violence, coercion, and displacement (Anderson 1528).

[6] A Zamindar can be loosely described as a feudal lord, landlord, estate owner, or a hereditary tax collector. Post-independence, India abolished Zamindars and the Zamindari system.

[7] For scholarly discussions of Ghosh's book series, see for example Batra, Eswaran, Jayagopalan, Martín-González or Roy.

exemplifying modes of knowledge dissemination and preservation (cf. Jayagopalan 359). In contrast to that, Roy reads Robin's narrative as emphasising the long tradition of multiculturalism in the Canton region (cf. Roy, "Exploring the Orient" 156). Our reading in this article differs from those earlier approaches since we focus specifically on Robin Chinnery and the liberatory potential that his queer romantic relationship with Jacqua offers him. Despite featuring several characters who might be read in non-heteronormative ways, very few scholars have brought queer studies into dialogue with Ghosh's work (cf. Eswaran 2-3). We build on and expand the work of Juan-José Martín-González who reads the "Indo-Chinese love relations" in the novel as epitomising a "Pan-Asian perspective on Indian Ocean relations by illustrating idioms, relations and spaces that escaped the control and hegemony of Victorian imperialism" (118-19). Martín-González uses Mary Louise Pratt's concept of the contact zone to identify common patterns in the representation of multicultural spaces in all three books of Ghosh's series that, as he argues, tend to "[dissolve] national and ethnic parameters, rendering the categories of *foreignness* and *nativeness* ultimately ambivalent and fluid" (111). In contrast to Martín-González, whose work concerns overarching themes in the whole *Ibis Trilogy*, our focus is much narrower. We suggest that the setting of Canton diametrically opposes the cultural and social elements of other geographical regions in *River of Smoke*. Through the Foucauldian concept of heterotopia, we understand the spatial otherness of Canton where it exists outside societal norms and is dominated by heteropatriarchal and colonial systems. Canton juxtaposes multiple contradictory and complex customs, and its temporal discontinuity creates an inclusive space for queer characters. Combining the Foucauldian notion of heterotopia with the ideas on queer relationality outlined in José Esteban Muñoz's *Cruising Utopia* enables us to analyse how *River of Smoke* sets up the character of Robin Chinnery as a reader-identification figure through whom we experience Canton as a heterotopian space that enables queer self-expression and that invites us to partake in his joy as he finally has a chance to live out his gay desires.

Michel Foucault first introduced the concept of heterotopia in the essay "Des Espaces Autres" (1984), published in the French journal *Architecture-Mouvement-Continuité*.[8] Foucault begins his essay by directing our focus to those forms of indefinable spaces that contradict but are linked to the conventional spaces of everyday life, which he calls 'utopia' and 'heterotopia'. He defines utopia "as sites with no real place" (Foucault 25) but still related to the actual space of society, where it is

[8] For our purposes, we are using Jay Miskowiec's translation, published in 1986.

presented as either a 'perfected form' or turned upside down, "but in any case, these utopias are fundamentally unreal spaces" (Foucault 25). Heterotopias, for Foucault, emerge in contradiction to utopias since they are real places that exist within the society but behave like 'counter-sites' (25). He describes them as "real sites that can be found within the culture, are simultaneously represented, contested, and inverted. Places of this kind are outside of all places, even though it may be possible to indicate their location in reality" (Foucault 25). Thus, unlike utopias, heterotopias have a location within space and a purpose within society.

Heterotopias challenge traditional notions of categorisation and functions of space because they can exist physically and mentally. It is impossible to name them "because they secretly undermine language" by breaking syntax and familiar names that otherwise aid our processes of categorisation (Foucault xix). A distinguishing factor of heterotopias is their capacity to juxtapose several places within a single real place; Foucault gives the example of a theatre stage or the cinema that can contain "a whole series of places that are foreign to one another" (Foucault 26). Often, heterotopias also exhibit temporal arrangements (heterochronies) reserved for rituals, ceremonies, or states of being that indicate "a sort of absolute break with their traditional time" (Foucault 26). In more than one way, heterotopias subvert the norm and originate as reserved spaces for individuals experiencing crisis. Foucault highlights many examples of heterotopias, such as cemeteries, museums, and ships. The ship, in particular, he writes, "is the heterotopia *par excellence*" (Foucault 27), not just because ships are microcosms distinct from the mainland that bring together people for a duration, but they are also a promise of both literal and metaphorical treasures and the "greatest reserve of the imagination" (Foucault 27). This statement brings to mind the *Ibis*, the ship on which a large portion of *Sea of Poppies* (the first book of Ghosh's *Ibis Trilogy* and direct precursor to *River of Smoke*) is set. While not directly related to the character of Robin Chinnery, who is the main focus of this article, the representation of the *Ibis* in *Sea of Poppies* illustrates how the concept of heterotopias can help us understand how the ship works as a transformative space for multiple characters. Bringing together all protagonists of *Sea of Poppies* who had previously dwelled in separate locations, the *Ibis* constitutes a setting that unites characters beyond national, racialised, or gendered boundaries. Although measures are in place to keep the different groups on board separated, several characters find ways to undermine those and interact with each other. The events on *Ibis* form the starting point for the series protagonists' transnational mobility and intercultural exchange. This is in line with the Foucauldian concept of heterotopia, as he explains: "In civilisations without boats,

dreams dry up, espionage takes the place of adventure, and the police take the place of pirates" (Foucault 27). Heterotopias serve as sites of resistance, imagination, and experimentation that affirm difference and even offer a means to escape. Therefore, heterotopias explain the disruption of established societal norms and deliver the opportunity to reconsider the nature and function of our space. Foucault's heterotopia is a critical concept that yields a "dual function in queer research: it is both a marker to denote spaces that incite or perpetuate the operations of gender regulations and a queer reading or desubjugating practice that re-imagines gender" (Ingrey 149). Thus, the concept of heterotopia provides a framework to explore counter-sites where non-normative identities and sexualities are prioritized and even celebrated.

In addition to Foucault's heterotopia, *Cruising Utopia*, a seminal work in the field of queer studies by Cuban American academic José Esteban Muñoz, supports our analysis of the character Robin Chinnery. *Cruising Utopia* begins with a radical statement: "Queerness is not yet here" (1). That is because it exists on the horizon and is brimming with potentiality; it is not a fixed destination but always remains on the horizon. Muñoz acknowledges the future as "queerness's domain" (1), as it allows us to escape the prison of here and now and to "see and feel beyond the quagmire of the present" (1). This vision of the future transforms queerness from a marginalised identity to a force that propels us toward a better and more inclusive future. Muñoz's 'queer futurity' envisions a utopian horizon. However, like Foucault, Muñoz argues against what he calls abstract utopia, which is not grounded in historical consciousness and prone to "banal optimism" (3). Instead, he endorses concrete utopias that "are relational to historically situated struggles, a collectivity that is actualised or potential" and "are the realm of educated hope" (Muñoz 3). Muñoz's idea of utopia develops in response to pragmatic modes of being. He writes: "Utopia's rejection of pragmatism is often associated with failure. And, indeed, most profoundly, utopianism represents a failure to be normal" (Muñoz 180). He advocates for queerness as a transformative force that opens possibilities for a more inclusive future. This future can essentially be discovered through engaging with queer aesthetics, which includes both the ornamental and the quotidian map of utopian queerness (Muñoz 1). He punctuates the importance of aesthetic practices, as we can "glimpse the worlds proposed and promised by queerness in the realm of the aesthetic" (Muñoz 1), granting us the means of embodying and expressing queer potentialities. In essence, *Cruising Utopia* encourages us to visualise a world where queerness is not merely an identity but a practice that actively shapes cultural and political landscapes to become more inclusive. By juxtaposing the concepts of heterotopia and queer

utopia we gain a nuanced understanding of how queer identities imagine idealised visions of a better world in the spaces that are resistant to dominant heteronormativity. The heterotopian space of Canton becomes a waypoint to a queer utopia climaxing in Robin's romantic and sexual relationship with Chinese painter Jacqua that works to illustrate the utopian potential of unbridled queer joy.

Canton as a queer-positive space emerges in contrast to Robin Chinnery's life in India. Readers first encounter him from the perspective of his childhood friend Paulette Lambert, a French orphan turned aspiring botanist who grew up in Calcutta, India:

> Although he [Robin Chinnery] was several years older than Paulette, there was a childlike aspect to him that made the difference in age and sex seem immaterial: he kept her informed about the latest fashions, bringing her little odds and ends from his mother's dwindling collection of clothes and trinkets – perhaps a payal to tie around her ankles, or bangles for her wrist. Paulette's lack of interest in ornaments always amazed him, for his own pleasure in them was such that he would often string them around his ankles and wrists and twirl around, admiring himself in the mirror. Sometimes they had both dressed up in his mother's clothes and danced around the house. (Ghosh, *River* 132)

Focaliser Paulette's characterisation of Robin as "childlike" and interested in women's fashion recalls negative stereotypes about gay men as vain and frivolous. This impression is reinforced as the readers learn more about Paulette and Robin's friendship:

> Paulette's relationship with Robin was not an easy one: as a tutor he was often insufferably overbearing and the ferocity of his disapproval, when she erred with pencil or brush, was such that it led to many quarrels. But at the same time she was also hugely entertained by his gaudy clothes, his unpredictable shrieks of laughter and his love of scandal - and she was sometimes strangely touched by his attempts to wean her from her hoydenish ways and turn her into a lady. (Ghosh, *River* 133)

This passage once again is steeped in stereotypical conceptions of gay masculinity: Robin is passionate about art, enjoys gossip, and likes to use extravagant clothing as a tool for self-expression.[9] However, despite its reproduction of clichés, it is also notable that both excerpts centre on Robin's joy and pleasure—his queerness does not lead Paulette to reject him but is enthusiastically accepted by her and brings them closer together. This focus on re-discovering queer joy in the past ties in with Muñoz's work. The novel's descriptions of Paulette and Robin's mundane daily life share Muñoz's focus on "quotidian acts" (Muñoz 6). Reading this passage as "a backward glance that enacts a future vision" (Muñoz 4), then invites us, on the one hand, to (re)imagine nineteenth century India

[9] For more information on stereotypes about gay men, see Brooks et al.

as a space that allows for queer joy in the quotidian acts of interacting with friends, creating art and expressing one's individuality through fashion, but on the other hand, it also challenges us to work towards a world in which behaviour such as Robin's is neither associated with negative, potentially homophobic stereotypes nor socially stigmatised.

When Robin reveals his desire to go to Canton to Paulette, he emphasises the city's status as a men-only territory: "I have it on excellent authority that there is no better place on earth for Friendships than Canton's foreign enclave: nowhere else is there such a number of incorrigible bachelors. It is no hardship for them, you know, to live in an enclave that is forbidden to women" (Ghosh, *River* 159). Whereas Paulette appears oblivious to Robin's intentions of finding romance in Canton, readers soon realise that "Friendship" (with a capital F) is used as code for gay romantic and/or sexual relationships in the novel. As soon as Robin arrives in Canton, his experiences in the city are communicated via letters to Paulette. Those letters are embedded in the novel as a hypodiegetic narrative, which sets them apart from the rest of the book and thus makes room for Robin's subjective voice while all other characters remain confined in a heterodiegetic narrator's frame narrative that switches between different characters as focalisers without letting them speak for themselves in such a direct manner. Robin's story does not intersect much with the other characters' plotlines, and at certain points, it even feels more like comic relief from the otherwise tragic events unfolding in the main characters' storylines. During his stay in Canton, Robin meets diverse characters and learns some facts whose relevance to the main plot only becomes clear to the readers much later. As such, Robin's hypodiegetic narrative has both an explicative and a thematic function, as it, on the one hand, provides readers with additional information on other characters' background stories, and on the other hand, expands the novel's discussion of colonialism through Robin's liminal perspective as someone who is neither actively involved with British imperialism nor particularly resistant to it.

Upon arriving in Canton, the city first seems overwhelming to Robin:

> In a way Fanqui-town [i.e., Canton's international quarter] is like a ship at sea, with hundreds - no, thousands - of men living crammed together in a little sliver of space. I do believe there is no place like it on earth, so small and yet so varied, where people from the far corners of the earth must live, elbow to elbow, for six months of the year. I tell you, Pugglissima mia, were you to stand in the Maidan and look at the flags of the factories, fluttering against the grey walls of Canton's citadel, I am certain you too would be overcome: it is as if you had arrived at the threshold of the last and greatest of all the world's caravanserais. (Ghosh, *River* 174)

To Robin, Canton appears small and cramped but he still appreciates its variety. Canton unites "people from the far corners of the world" (Ghosh, *River* 174), but only temporarily and for a specific purpose, hence the comparison to a caravanserai. Whereas ships feature prominently in Foucault's conception of the heterotopia (as discussed earlier in this article), the cited paragraph instead directs our attention towards the figure of the caravanserais as a culturally specific variant of a heterotopian space. As "ancient trading routes [such as the so-called Silk Road] necessitated places for short-term accommodation, rest, store and security for caravans [i.e., groups of merchants travelling together]," local governments invested in the establishment of caravanserais, that is buildings as intermediate stops where travelling merchants could take care of their animals, rest and trade (Mansouri et al. 665). Mansouri and his co-authors emphasise the widespread sociocultural influence of caravanserais, as those institutions led to "safe and convenient trading routes [that] help[ed] to promote and enliven trading activity, [so that] caravanserais were also helping the development of local and global welfare by means of sharing culture, philosophy, technology, and world views, as well as goods" (665). Just like a caravanserai, Canton is represented as a space of commerce and cultural exchange. The representation of Canton as a multicultural space full of business opportunities subverts colonial conceptions of London/England as the important centre and the rest of the empire as its supposedly inferior periphery. Thus, Canton disrupts the colonial centre/periphery by being both located at the periphery of the British Empire, and also as a bustling trade centre in its own right. Furthermore, the use of the specific term caravanserais in this context also works to remind readers of the longstanding tradition of trade practices outside of Europe. While the motif of the ship has figured prominently in heterotopian thinking, the institution of the caravanserais certainly can also be considered to have heterotopian qualities as a place that exists outside of mainstream society but is still linked to it. Both a caravanserai and the novel's version of Canton bring together people from different regions of the world whose actions reflect on their home country but are not fully controlled or determined by it, as illustrated by the diverging opinions and practices concerning the opium trade among the foreign traders of Canton.

The city is shown to differ from the other settings of the book trilogy through its general acceptance of gay romantic and/or sexual relationships. Robin comes to appreciate Canton as a space for queer self-expression without (or at least with less) social stigmatisation. One example of this apparent normalisation of gay romantic relationships in Canton is the love affair of the owners of the hotel where Robin is staying:

> Mr Markwick runs his hotel in partnership with his Friend, Mr Lane. They both came out to China as boys, to work for the East India Company (Mr Markwick was a steward and Mr Lane a butler) and they have been Friends forever. They are a curious couple and look as though they belong in some childish ditty, for Mr Lane is short and fat and rather jolly, while Mr Markwick is tall and lugubrious and seems always to be sniffing, even when he is not. (Ghosh, *River* 198)

Robin's characterisation of the hoteliers, on the one hand, is shaped by his perspective as an artist, focusing on physical characteristics and temperament that could easily be captured in an artwork such as a painting or a song. On the other hand, Robin's association of the two men with a "childish ditty" echoes Paulette's earlier clichéd characterisation of him potentially hinting at Robin having internalised some disparaging stereotypes about gay men. Robin's mentioning of the fact that both Markwick and Lane used to work for the East India Company reminds contemporary readers of the pervasiveness of British colonial endeavours in the novel's setting and simultaneously highlights the status of the East India Company as a homosocial space as its employees were not even allowed to marry (cf. Aldrich 56). Markwick and Lane are not the only couple that Robin encounters in Canton as his description of British merchant Mr Jardine shows:

> His company is called Jardine & Matheson, but his partner is an unremarkable man and Mr Jardine is rarely seen with him: when he walks abroad it is almost always in the company of his Friend – one Mr Wetmore who is Fanqui-town's great dandy, always exquisitely dressed. You should see how people scatter before them when they take their turns around the Maidan: there is so much salaaming and hat-raising that you would think Mr Jardine was the Great Turk, out for a stroll with his most beloved BeeBee [...] Zadig Bey [i.e., an acquaintance of Robin] says that Mr Jardine is soon to make the 'ultimate sacrifice', by which is meant, leaving Canton and moving to England to get married. Mr Jardine is most reluctant to do this, not only because of his Friend but also because he has spent much of his life in the East and is deeply attached to it. (Ghosh, *River of Smoke* 200-201)

Robin's comparison of Mr Jardine to an Ottoman sultan evokes images of Oriental(ised) splendour and his casting of Mr Wetmore as a fashion-conscious dandy once more characterises Robin as a rather superficial aesthete. Simultaneously, Robin shows how widely respected Jardine and Wetmore are among Canton's international community, inviting readers to imagine Fanqui-town as a liberal-minded place that is accepting of gay relationships. However, the passage is also indicative of Robin's Orientalist worldview[10]: In his description, terms connected to the Ottoman

[10] The concept of an Orientalist worldview that we employ here is based on Edward Said's *Orientalism*, in which he describes Orientalism "as a style of thought based upon an ontological and epistemological distinction between 'the Orient' and (most of the time) 'the Occident'" (26).

empire (“Great Turk”), colloquial Anglo-Indian vocabulary (“BeeBee”), and an unspecified concept of an East/West binary all melt together into an alloy of Orientalised exoticism. This becomes particularly apparent in Robin’s reference to Jardine’s attachment to “life in the East” which refers less to a specific physical location and more to a lifestyle of openly embracing his gay desires that is made possible by the large distance between England and certain colonies. In both this and the previous passage, Robin’s narration highlights how the very existence of Fanqui-town is inextricably intertwined with European imperialist ambitions. So, while the Canton of Ghosh’s novel indeed works as a liminal space, an enclave in which the rules of standard British society do not apply, forming a heterotopia of compensation—a space that, in its difference, challenges traditional notions of identity and community—it is important to acknowledge that Canton is not represented as a perfect utopian place. Aspects that disrupt any complete glorification of Canton include its connection to colonial systems of power as well as the fact that established social hierarchies remain firmly in place, evidenced by the white traders’ often racist treatment of both Parsi and Chinese merchants or their strict social class structures. Even though Robin is neither a merchant nor a sailor, having a bit of an outsider position and not being actively involved in colonising efforts, his worldview is still influenced by imperialist ideology.

Robin’s perspective on Canton is also shaped by his self-identification as an artist. He consciously dissociates himself from the exploitative and aggressive behaviour of the majority of foreign merchants in Canton: “I was not one of those fanquis who come with cannon, but rather one of those who have been drawn here by Art” (Ghosh, *River* 355). Robin actively seeks out the Chinese artist community of Canton, fascinated by their style of painting and eager to expand his artistic repertoire. It is in one of the artist studios in Canton where Robin eventually meets his love interest, Chinese painter Jacqua:

> I am, as you know, Puggly dear, always *greedy* to learn, and Jacqua has taught me things that are sublimely ingenious (how I envy him his education and experience!). I have learnt to create extraordinary effects through subtle variations of the rhythms of the hand; I have seen how, through the regulation of the breath, the vital energies of the body can be brought to bear upon each movement of the brush; I have been initiated into the meditative art of emptying and concentrating the mind so as to make the most of the moment of attack; I have learnt to time my strokes so that they build up to epiphanic conclusions, with the very essence of each creation being both captured and expressed in the final, climactic thrust of the brush. (Ghosh, *River* 410-11, emphasis in original)

Whereas diegetic narratee Paulette can be assumed to understand that passage as merely referring to a professional collaboration amongst

painters, twenty-first-century readers will easily recognise the double entendre and read those descriptions as denoting sexual acts. While this might lead readers to feel included in Robin's inside joke and perceive themselves as superior to Paulette, whose naiveté prevents her from fully understanding Robin's innuendo, it also points to a more serious issue.

The criminalisation of homosexuality throughout what used to be known as the British Empire can be directly linked to British imperialism (cf. Han and O'Mahoney). Even though some "colonies gained fame as sites of homosexual licence" (Aldrich 1), relationships outside of monogamous heterosexuality were not widely accepted in British mainstream society and indeed perceived as threatening the social and moral order and thus subject to penal law. Thus, Robin's use of painting as a metaphor for sex brings to mind that—for a long time—coded, and subtextual ways of writing about gay sex were necessary for queer writers to protect themselves from prosecution. At the same time, the passage in question is brimming with joy and pleasure, which ties back to Muñoz's idea of re-discovering queer joy in the past. Robin's exceedingly sensual descriptions of his interactions with Jacqua invite readers to empathise with him, appealing to the audience on a deeply emotional level. As such, we might read this passage as what Muñoz calls a "glimpse [into] the worlds proposed and promised by queerness in the realm of the aesthetic" (Muñoz 1) that enables us to

> strive, in the face of the here and now's totalising rendering of reality, to think and feel a *then and there*. Some will say that all we have are the pleasures of this moment, but we must never settle for that minimal transport; we must dream and enact new and better pleasures, other ways of being in the world, and ultimately new worlds. (Muñoz 1)

The "new worlds" implied in both the passage in question and Robin's letters more generally are not limited to a celebration of queerness but also include notions of transnational solidarity. Although the novel represents multiple gay romantic relationships, Robin's love affair is the only intercultural one. Robin's genuine curiosity and openness to learning from people with different cultural backgrounds are contrasted favourably with the foreign merchants' focus on profiting from the (illegalised) sale of opium. Despite the conflict between Chinese authorities and the British government concerning the opium trade (that is on the verge of escalating to what would later be known as the First Opium War), Robin manages to carve out a counter-space that enables him to fulfil his desires thereby creating what Muñoz has conceptualised as a "concrete utopia" that is "relational to historical struggles" and can become "the realm of educated hope" (Muñoz 3). Reading Robin's story in *River of Smoke* "as a backward glance that enacts a future vision" (Muñoz 4), on the one hand, we

acknowledge and appreciate that the novel imagines historical spaces that allow for queer self-expression and the indulging of gay desire. On the other hand, by making Robin one of very few characters whose story has a happy ending, it encourages readers to associate queerness with joy and pleasure, rather than the tragedy implied by the "bury your gays" trope that is still common in many media including historical fiction.[11]

Conclusion

Reading the novel's representation of Canton through the analytical lens of Foucauldian heterotopian thinking has enabled us to grasp the liminal status of the city in the novel that provides potentially empowering spaces for certain marginalised characters. *River of Smoke* makes for a particularly interesting case study in this regard: its historical setting in the international quarter of 19th century Canton re-creates the city as—to use Muñoz's terminology—an example for a "[c]oncrete utopia," that is, "relational to historically situated struggles" (3). Whereas Robin's story at first glance seems like a comedic side stage to the dramatic events unfolding across the main plotlines of the trilogy, our close readings have shown how European (and especially British) efforts at imperialist expansion and exploitation are represented as pervading all areas of life. Whereas Canton's international merchants can set their own rules within their zones of influence, this potential empowerment of queer men comes at the cost of the oppression and disenfranchisement of local populations. In contrast to that, Robin and Jacqua's relationship is presented as a desirable alternative to the profit-driven ambitions of colonising powers and their institutions. Their queer relationship also emerges as revolutionary and in opposition to the trajectory of most heterosexual relationships in the novel. Their interactions are marked by mutual curiosity, respect, and the desire to learn from each other, thus exemplifying the liberatory potential of transnational solidarity. In the following quotation, Robin expresses his hope that the delightful experiences with Jacqua will stand the test of time.

> One day all the rest will be forgotten – Fanqui-town and its Friendships, the opium and the flower-boats; even perhaps the paintings (for I doubt that anyone will ever love these pictures (and painters) as much as I do; this is, after all, a bastard art, neither sufficiently Chinese nor European, and thus likely to be displeasing to many). But when all the rest is forgotten the flowers will remain, will they not, Puggly dear? The flowers of Canton are immortal and will bloom forever. (Ghosh, *River* 502)

[11] For more information on the pervasiveness of the "bury your gays" trope in mainstream media, see Seymour (90-91).

Thus, “the flowers of Canton” do not only refer to the vast botanical gardens of Canton that had become an object of imperialist desire for appropriation and commodification (as addressed through Paulette’s botanist aspirations in *River of Smoke*) and the literal flower paintings that Robin and Jacqua created together (as the primary object of their painting endeavours were actual flowers). They also signify the blossoming love between the two men that—as a thing of beauty—outlasts the existence of Canton as a colonial merchants’ enclave, an example of how “queer relationality promises a future” (Muñoz 7). Finally, Ghosh’s novel imagines queer-positive spaces, especially in historical settings that were otherwise considered traditional, regressive, and hetero-patriarchal.

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