

“A Shared Burden”: Reading Chaos and/as Utopia in Amitav Ghosh’s *Sea of Poppies*

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In Amitav Ghosh’s 2008 historical novel *Sea of Poppies*, two prisoners on board the Mauritius-bound ship *Ibis* develop a unique friendship within immensely inhospitable circumstances. In the confining space of the chokey where they are held captive by the British, the two friends—one a “filthy foreigner” from Canton named Ah Fatt and the other a bankrupt rajah and “fallen outcaste” named Neel—overcome differences in language, religion, and nationality to care for each other in such a way that profoundly disturbs their guard, the subedar, Bhyro Singh (353). Unsettled by the fact that “neither [prisoner] seem[s] to want to overmaster the other,” the subedar believes that his prisoners are “not men at all, but castrated impotent creatures”; he thus sets out to make his prisoners men by eliciting from each of them the desire to wield power over the other (353). His attempts largely fail and in this failure, he “perceive[s] the subtle undermining of his own position” such that he becomes crueler and more determined in his quest, giving only one prisoner an extra helping of food, or bribing one man to urinate on the other (353). The subedar’s incessant desire to tease the prisoners apart begs a number of questions that motivate this paper: what so unsettles the subedar about the prisoners’ lack of desire to “overmaster” one another? How does their friendship render the subedar’s claim to power tenuous? While Bhyro Singh does, in just one instance, succeed in momentarily rupturing the prisoners’ solidarity with one another (the “filthy foreigner” is also an addict whom the subedar baits with the false promise of opium), how might we read his overall failure to impose hierarchy onto the friendship? In other words, can the persisting friendship between the two prisoners offer us a vision of, and hope for, the future of political collectivity?

In this paper, I attempt to think through these questions and, in particular, to consider the possibility that collectivity across racial, national, caste, and religious difference is a viable mode of resistance to and within the colonial encounter. I argue that in *Sea of Poppies* we can trace a form of collectivity through which people act together, despite differences in experiences, identities, and histories, in order to successfully resist colonial violence. I suggest that this form of collectivity has broad and significant implications for the practice of anticolonial politics in general; indeed, collectivity across difference offers us an important alternative to a contemporary anticolonial politics rooted in identity politics and characterized by rigid notions of difference between the Self and the Other. As many postcolonial

theorists have argued, identity politics as a form of anticolonial practice is profoundly limited in scope; in *Affective Communities*, for example, Leela Gandhi (2006) argues that the binary systems of logic on which identity politics rest are remnants of the colonial project. She quotes Edward Said in *Culture and Imperialism*:

Throughout the exchange between Europeans and their 'others' that began systematically half a millennium ago, the one idea that has scarcely varied is that there is an 'us' and a 'them,' each quite settled, clear, unassailably self-evident. As I discussed in *Orientalism*, the division goes back to Greek thought about barbarians, but, whoever originated this kind of 'identity' thought, by the nineteenth century it had become a hallmark of imperialist cultures as well as those cultures trying to resist the encroachments of Europe. (Said qtd. in Gandhi 2)

Tracing forms of anticolonial thought that productively defied the limits of "identity thought" in late-nineteenth and early-twentieth-century British India, Gandhi argues that it is imperative to "break ... down the stern binary of the colonial encounter by refusing the myths of cultural purity, origin, inauguration, and initiation both to the imperial West and to its opposite, anticolonial nationalism or nativism" (4). Indeed, the rise of Hindu nationalism in India—both contemporarily and in the historical context of which Gandhi writes—functions as one example of how the anticolonial repurposing of binaries based on difference keep intact the very ideological conditions that justify colonial oppression.

It is important to note here that many Black and antiracist feminist theorists crucially remind us that poststructuralist skepticism of identity, such as Said's and Gandhi's, risks ignoring the materiality of race and the consequences of racial difference under white supremacy. bell hooks (1994) argues that "[t]he postmodern critique of 'identity,' though relevant for renewed black liberation struggle, is often posed in ways that are problematic. Given a pervasive politic of white supremacy which seeks to prevent the formation of radical black subjectivity, we cannot cavalierly dismiss a concern with identity politics" (423). More recently, Sharon Patricia Holland (2012) has argued that the anti-identitarian work of "the theory-inclined Left" manifests as a refusal to recognize the Black body and, thus, both colludes in and relies on anti-Black racism and white supremacy (69). With these critiques in mind and through a reading of *Sea of Poppies*, I hope to explore the possibility that we can *better* address the material consequences of difference through a form of political collectivity that recognizes racial, national, caste, and religious difference while nonetheless contesting these categories of difference themselves.

In order to ground my claims, I turn to conversations in queer theory that engage the notion of political collectivity. While these conversations are, on the surface, quite distinct from those in postcolonial studies, queer theory, in its excavation of the relationship between identity and the maintenance of political order, is helpful for framing the complex representations of political alliance, friendship, and love that we see in Ghosh's novel. Recent queer scholarship has attempted to theorize the ways in which collectivity is not only a

worthy goal but is, in fact, necessary in order to achieve political progress that moves beyond the limited language of identity and inclusion. In his incisive critique of the antisocial or “antirelational turn” in queer theory, for instance, José Muñoz argues that the relinquishment of hope for a better queer future functions as a rejection of the collective—a refusal to engage issues of race, class, and gender within queer politics (11). Muñoz’s *Cruising Utopia* is thus an attempt to revitalize the possibility of a queer future through the potentiality of collectivity, or what Muñoz deems “utopia.” Indeed, for Muñoz, utopia functions as a methodology that hinges not on the creation of an ideal or inclusive world but on a world in which “multiple forms of belonging in difference adhere to a belonging in collectivity” (20). In other words, utopia emerges at the site of convergence—when multiple differences in experience and identity coexist with the collective.

Within the North American queer context in which Muñoz writes, the call for a collectivity that realizes “belonging in difference” is necessarily and increasingly trenchant. Queer critiques of gay marriage, framed as critiques of white or class privilege, are, at their centre, attempts to reckon with and mourn the loss of a queer collectivity that once seemed possible. For critics of gay marriage such as Muñoz, Jack Halberstam (2013), Lisa Duggan (2012), and Dean Spade (2014), such loss is the consequence of identity itself—the creation and maintenance of a singular gay identity—and the incorporation of a rights discourse by LGBTQ movements. The inclusion of certain gays and lesbians into the mainstream through the right to marry occurs at the expense of engaging in collective action with those queers for whom marriage is less important than poverty, violence, inadequate access to health care, etc. In this sense, conceiving of utopia as a “belonging in collectivity” is a significant political intervention, one that resurrects the losses of the past for the sake of a better queer future.

Central to the realization of such a utopian future is the undoing of rigid notions of difference and the troubling of identity categories. Jack Halberstam suggests something similar in his theorization of “the wild.” Conceiving of “wildness” as a potentiality born of epistemological chaos and the disruption of ordinary ways of knowing and organizing bodies, Halberstam argues that wildness emerges from the breakdown of the “the building blocks of human identity ... —what we call gender, sex, race, and class” (126). Tracing moments of chaos in music, performance, and gender presentation, ze posits wildness as an important “set of alternatives to political discourse, to identity politics, ... to how we want to think about being— both being together and being apart” (127). It is the possibility of “being together” to which I am drawn here. If our attempts to stave off chaos through the maintenance of institutions (such as marriage) and discrete identity categories (such as the singular gay identity) “have created a world order where every form of disturbance is quickly folded back into quiet, ... where every instance of eruption has been tamped down and turned into new evidence of the rightness of the status quo” (126), a commitment to chaos might work in tandem with the goals of queer

collectivity that, by their very nature, re-imagine “being together” outside of our current logics of identity and difference; in forcing disorder upon us, these “wild” spaces manifest the potential for utopian collectivity that is otherwise obscured.

Of course, a politics of wildness cannot be divorced from histories of colonialism that have rested on myths of the racial Other *as wild* and that, in turn, attempt to control this Other via different forms of knowledge. For this reason, it is perhaps particularly important to think through chaos in relation to the colonial project to which the creation of discrete and binaristic identity categories (white/Other, West/East, civilized/uncivilized) was so integral. Indeed, Ghosh’s novel is a particularly fecund site to think through the relationship of chaos to identity given that much of the scholarship on *Sea of Poppies* importantly elucidates the ways in which the novel “challenges essentialist definitions of nations and societies” (Roy 38) and “demonstrates the dissolution of boundaries of language, class and caste among those who are forced to travel” (42). As such, I read the friendship between Neel and Ah Fatt as a model of possibility and argue that, through their friendship, we can see that the conditions that generate chaos—that contest structures of hierarchy and notions of immutable difference—become sites of meaningful political collectivity. More broadly, I suggest that the *Ibis* becomes a “wild” space wherein the traumatic and violent experiences of individual passengers—once incommunicable and untranslatable between categories of identity and difference—become the “shared burden” of all (Ghosh 299). In rendering this profound intimacy among the passengers possible, Ghosh evinces the potential for “belonging in difference” to manifest as a form of resistance to the colonial encounter and in the struggle for a better world.

“Chaotic Encounters”: Intimacy and the Undoing of Difference

I have been using the term “political collectivity” to denote a kind of “being together” despite differences in identity and, at times, political investments. However, perhaps a more capacious way of describing the relationships that structure these texts would be as *intimacies* that, in turn, lead to meaningful forms of collectivity. Indeed, the “united front” that Neel and Ah Fatt present to the subedar is motivated not by a coherent political strategy but rather feelings of closeness, of friendship and love that manifest as a commitment to each other’s personal and political struggles. While in his first few days of captivity, Neel is consumed by his feelings of disgust towards Ah Fatt and despair at his own fate. The fact that Neel does not better his own situation at the expense of his cell-mate’s (despite frequent opportunities fomented by the subedar), suggests that the chokey is a site of emotional transformation—one that facilitates love and friendship within the context of a “shared burden.” Importantly, Neel’s feelings for Ah Fatt are his first experiences of selflessness, of learning

to love and care for another without consideration of his own needs and desires. As he bathes Ah Fatt, who has soiled himself in an opium-induced stupor, Neel comes to realize how a love detached from the immediacy of one's own needs is possible: "the mere fact of ... investing one's attention in someone other than oneself created a pride and tenderness that had nothing whatever to do with the response of the object of one's care—just as a craftsman's love for his handiwork is in no way diminished by the fact of it being unreciprocated" (300). Ah Fatt does, however, reciprocate Neel's investments by bringing Neel into his own life, divulging the tale that led him to the *Ibis* and keeping Neel's "sanity intact" through his gestures of vulnerability and openness (345).

In this sense, Neel and Ah Fatt's shared fate as prisoners aboard the *Ibis* leads to a powerful form of intimacy between them. We might return here to the question of *why* their friendship troubles the subedar to the extent that it does; what does this friendship reveal about the relationship of intimacy to political disorder and to the subversion of power? In one sense, their friendship comes to signify the intimacy of "spatial proximity"—or the intimate contact between bodies that challenges the racial biopolitics of the colonial project (Lowe 193).¹ Indeed, the chokey is particularly significant not only because it is a site of overt colonial oppression, but because it is in the chokey where two previously disconnected bodies come to meet and successfully subvert attempts to discipline them. For instance, while the coolies (who form a similarly intractable unit as the convicts) share certain points of commonality between them—language, the experience of exile, intimate knowledge of the caste system, and the desire to relinquish their former selves once onboard the *Ibis*—that facilitate their friendships with each other, Ghosh makes clear that Neel and Ah Fatt (who, unlike Neel, is "from across the sea") are brought together through fate (290). Indeed, it is their "common destination" that renders "their shame and honour a shared burden" to Neel, and eventually incites him to overcome his sense of separateness from and disgust toward Ah Fatt (299).

In this sense, fate, insofar as it results in intimate contact, works to challenge notions of immutable difference between the Self and the Other and leads to the realization of collectivity between the prisoners. We see the disruption of the seemingly entrenched lines between Self and Other most profoundly in Neel's changing relationship to cleanliness. Prior to his encounter with Ah Fatt, Neel is driven by the "zealous ... observance of upper-caste taboos" associated with Orthodox Hinduism and the desire to protect his body from contamination (Ghosh 37). While Neel is not a Brahmin, Brahminic traditions structure his interactions with his own body and with the bodies of others; living with Ah Fatt, who is incontinent and covered in his own vomit, means "cohabit[ing] with the incarnate embodiment of his loathings" (297). Neel's fastidiousness reflects much more, however, than a dogmatic adherence to Hindu tradition or a commitment to class and caste boundaries; rather, Ghosh makes apparent the ways in which cleanliness and the threat of contamination

work to maintain Neel's sense of self, of interiority and separateness from others. As he begins the process of cleaning the jharu (toilet), for example, he is aware that once he has "touched his cell-mate's shit," he will "cease to be the man he had been;" once he touches the scoop used to clean the jharu, he does, in fact, feel within him "the intimations of an irreversible alteration" (298).

It is important that, rather than the new experiences of poverty or captivity fundamentally changing Neel, it is the experience of contamination that leads to his undoing. In this sense, Neel's process of unbecoming—linked as it is to his experience of disgust—demonstrates how disgust is, as Sara Ahmed argues, "crucial to power relations" (88). Indeed, the fear of contamination by the Other necessitates the regulation of bodies in numerous ways onboard the *Ibis* that are ultimately challenged throughout the course of the ship's voyage. Aside from Neel's aversion to his cell-mate's shit and the conditions of the chokey, racial difference most notably incites disgust and leads to the "hierarchizing of spaces as well as bodies" (Ahmed 88). We see this, of course, in the strict separation of the prisoners from the rest of the crew who, being "misbegotten, befouled creatures" are only allowed on the main deck in chains and in the presence of the subedar (Ghosh 353). Indeed, racial disgust emerges as a regulatory force even in the behaviour of the benevolent and biracial skipper Zachary, who refuses to allow the Frenchwoman, his love interest Putli, to travel on the *Ibis* because he cannot assimilate the thought of her dressed as a lascar and surrounded by Indians when he knows her to truly be a "delicate rose" (284). As such, multiple manifestations of disgust work to regulate bodies on the *Ibis*, legitimizing the power relations between them and managing the affective bonds that are possible.

Neel's explicitly disgusting encounter with the jharu thus comes to symbolize his mastery over feelings of revulsion and separation and to signal the emergence of new affective networks between the convicts. Cleaning the toilet becomes a collective activity as the other convicts soon begin to help Neel and later extend their friendship to him in the courtyard. Neel reciprocates their friendship; using his knowledge as a rajah and his skills to act as a translator between the prisoners and the zemindars of their villages, he writes letters for prisoners who wish to petition for their land. In other words, the cleaning of the jharu incites not only friendship among the prisoners but the potential for an explicit form of collectivity insofar as Neel—who had once "rarely taken the trouble to read [the letters]" he received as a zemindar himself—now takes on the work of appealing on the behalf of prisoners (299). Most importantly perhaps, overcoming his disgust of the jharu allows Neel to care for and love Ah Fatt as Neel might care for himself, instigating the friendship that enables their collective escape from the prison. Only once he has cleaned Ah Fatt's shit does Neel prepare to bathe him, trading with the other convicts the ability to write in return for fresh clothes and toiletries for his cell-mate. If contamination threatens to disrupt the organizing and hierarchizing of bodies, then the process of being

contaminated by another signals a moment of noticeable disruption within the text. It is in this moment that Bhyro Singh becomes most acutely aware of his convicts' relationship with each other and the implications of this relationship to his own power: eager to prove that he is "uncontaminated by the creatures placed in his power" who have been so contaminated by each other, he thus begins his attempt to undermine their friendship (352). While one such attempt appears to succeed—Ah Fatt urinates on Neel in exchange for goat dung disguised as opium—the incident demonstrates the necessity of collective resistance and, in part, motivates the prisoners' escape from the chokey and their killing of the British first mate, Jack Crowle.

In this sense, the "common destination" in which Neel and Ah Fatt find themselves leads to the revelation that the difference between the Self and the Other, inasmuch as these differences manifest through and on the body, is precarious. Indeed, if colonialism itself was made up of "fractious and chaotic encounters that ... sponsored politically unsettling forms of intimacy" (Ballantyne and Burton 4), then the relationships that emerge on the *Ibis* suggest that the colonial encounter, in placing once disconnected bodies in close proximity, makes apparent the unstable nature of the differences ascribed to these bodies and, as such, troubles the very "building blocks of human identity" (Halberstam 126). To return to Halberstam's articulation of a politics of wildness as one that embraces this kind of epistemological disorder, we might read the relationship between Neel and Ah Fatt as one that manifests the potential of political collectivity precisely because of how this relationship makes use of chaos. Indeed, Neel's foray into the unknown—his willingness to risk and accept contamination and the undoing of his previous Self—leads to a friendship with Ah Fatt that exceeds the differences in their backgrounds, histories, racialization, and personal investments. If this form of collectivity functions as an alternative to identity politics, such an alternative emerges from the "chaotic encounter" itself (Ballantyne and Burton 4).

This encounter does not, of course, collapse the material consequences of difference and the social context in which these differences arise; for instance, it is important to note that, while Neel develops an alliance with the other prisoners for whom he writes letters, their respective treatment as prisoners is determined by their individual subject positions. While Neel awaits trial he lives in a separate section of the jail, "well removed from the other areas where other, less fortunate prisoners were detained" and given particular privileges (such as food from his own kitchen) so that he would not immediately "lose caste" (Ghosh 183). Such a contrast between Neel's treatment and the treatment endured by other, lower-caste prisoners demonstrates why, as hooks and Holland remind us, an anticolonial or utopian politics must necessarily centre on the materiality of racial, class, and caste difference even as it seeks to trouble these differences as innate (hence, Muñoz's focus on "belonging in difference"). Nevertheless, insofar as the encounters between Neel, Ah Fatt, and the other convicts challenge the rigidity and logic of difference—of the

separation of the Self from the Other—they open up the potential for connection across and through difference. For Neel and Ah Fatt, such a connection—the manifestation of “belonging in difference”—intimates the kind of utopian futurity that Muñoz conceives of: at the end of the novel when Ah Fatt kills Crowle on both his and Neel’s behalf, their freedom arises not only from their eventual escape from the *Ibis* but from the sense of futurity, of promise for a life outside the chokey, made possible through their friendship with and love for each other.

Wild Spaces: Becoming a “Single Family”

I have aimed to demonstrate in the previous section why the intimacy of “spatial proximity” results in a kind of generative chaos vis-à-vis identity; however, it is also true that chaotic conditions lead to intimacies from which forms of political collectivity and resistance arise. Indeed, the political potential of Neel and Ah Fatt’s relationship emerges not only because the encounter between them breaks down the “building blocks of human identity” but also because the breaking down of these building blocks leads them to the encounter itself. In other words, the intimacy that so unsettles the subedar is possible precisely because the everyday orderliness of Neel and Ah Fatt’s lives is first undone. For instance, Ah Fatt as an *ahfeemkhor* (addict) without access to opium comes to foreshadow and symbolize the multiple forms of chaos that manifest in the text. As Neel notes upon learning Ah Fatt’s name, its corollary in Hindi (“aafaat”) means “calamity” which is made literal through Ah Fatt himself—the circumstances of his birth, his body, and the persistent effects of his addiction. His addiction manifests as a profound form of bodily chaos. In the moment we are first introduced to him, the effects of his addiction render him almost inhuman: he is animalistic—a “creature making a sound more like a whine than a moan ... [with] a single glinting eye” (291). Covered in faeces and unable to speak, Ah Fatt is unidentifiable to Neel as human such that Neel “recoils more in fear than in revulsion, as he might from an animal” (291).

Moreover, Ah Fatt remains largely racially ambiguous throughout the text, relating to Neel only late into their voyage the story of his birth. The illegitimate child of a Chinese woman and a Parsi man, Ah Fatt is the product of transient subjects who have been brought together through the processes of trade and colonial expansion. With his birth comes the possibility of disorder: his illegitimacy and his mixed racialization threaten the sanctity of his father’s legitimate marriage and upset the fragile racial division between the Chinese in Canton and the Indian, Arab, and white settlers. Indeed, Ah Fatt’s father’s refusal to take his son to his native Bombay stems from the fact that the boy’s existence, “fleshly evidence” of unsanctioned intimacies, threatens to incite a “great flame of scandal” (387). While such a “flame of scandal” never erupts and Ah Fatt lives contentedly in Canton, he signifies, as both an addict and a mixed-race subject, the ever-present potential for chaos that frames the novel.

For Neel too, the experience of imprisonment results in a series of chaotic encounters that distance him from previous ways of knowing and understanding himself and the world. For instance, the process of becoming powerless introduces Neel to an alternative network of human relations previously unknown to him as a rajah: as he is strip-searched by sepoys, he experiences a feeling he “could never have imagined between two human beings—neither intimate nor angry, neither tender nor prurient— ... the disinterested touch of mastery, of purchase or conquest” (266). Insofar as the “disinterested touch of mastery” constitutes a new territory of feeling for Neel, it enables another affective experience far removed from the detachment of ownership: his love for Ah Fatt. Similarly, the experience of relative powerlessness makes apparent to Neel the precarious nature of power itself. He learns, for instance, that speaking English well—once a barrier to his attempts to ingratiate himself with British traders unsettled by his command over the language—functions as his only source of resistance as a prisoner. While his captors tattoo Neel with his crime (“forgerer, alipore 1838”) in order to identify him as a criminal and to impute criminality onto him as a necessary part of his identity, Neel’s use of English disrupts his legibility as Other and as criminal. As he responds in English to the sergeant who orders his strip-search, Neel comes to realize that “even in his present state, stripped to his skin, powerless to defend himself from the hands ... — he still possessed the ability to affront a man whose authority over his was absolute” (266). Insofar as a common language calls into question the veracity of Neel’s difference, the experience of imprisonment allows his own sense of separateness from others to disintegrate (and perhaps enables him to later handle Ah Fatt’s shit). As such, while Ah Fatt’s addiction and his need to be cared for are the catalysts for the utopian potential that grows between him and Neel, such potential is possible only insofar as any semblance of order, or ordinary ways of identifying oneself and others, is first undone.

Of central importance to this process of “undoing” is the ship itself, which is ruled by a kind of “wildness”—a distempering of the ordinary mechanisms of organizing and identifying bodies through race, caste, gender, and history. Onboard the *Ibis*, the crew members relinquish their sense of separateness from each other in order to commit to a form of brotherhood that ensures their survival away from land. The lascars, for instance, come “from places that [are] far apart and [have] nothing in common, except the Indian ocean; among them [are] Chinese and East Africans, Arabs and Malays, Bengalis and Goans, Tamils and Arakense” (13). Despite their difference in origins, Zachary discovers that the lascars “ha[ve] to be taken together or not at all” (13). Such a commitment to brotherhood across racial or national difference is not unique to the lascars. While much of this paper is focused on the relationship between the convicts as a site of political potential, the coolies, all misfits exiled from or disillusioned by their respective lives on land, similarly resist the cruelty of their masters together. When the coolies band together to save Deeti (the dishonoured wife who refuses to burn on her husband’s pyre) from

rape by the subedar and, in turn, to rescue her lover from execution, they do so insofar as they see the subedar and the first mate as their common enemy, responsible for their collective, rather than individual, oppression. Indeed, it is the subedar's violent treatment of one coolie, Munia, upon the discovery of her relationship with a lascar that catalyzes the mutiny at the end of the text and demonstrates the extent to which "the ship's womb had made [the coolies] into a single family" (397).

In "Reinventing Caste: Indian Diaspora in Amitav Ghosh's *Sea of Poppies*," O.K. Singh draws on the work of Paul Gilroy and Vijay Mishra to argue that, while "caste purities were largely lost" onboard ships carrying coolies to British colonies and "replaced by a new form of socialization that went by the name of jahaji-bhai (ship-brotherhood)" (Mishra qtd. in Singh 54), the *Ibis* cannot rightly be read as a space free of caste even as it functions as a "wild" space where the customs of the land are not rigidly enforced. Deeti, for instance, while committed to creating a caste-less family among the coolies, carries with her guilt for dishonouring her biological family and regret for relinquishing her caste through her relationship to the Untouchable man, Kalua (Singh 54). Indeed, Deeti commits herself to carrying on such traditions as the *bhauji* or matriarch of the coolies, making the arrangements for a marriage and ensuring that her new kin continue to do what was "right and honourable" away from land (Ghosh 396). Nevertheless, while the ship does not entirely denude caste of its effects, the ship does become a space wherein the coolies escape the rigid constraints of their respective identities and histories and form a family unmoored by ordinary customs, traditions, and prejudices. The water that surrounds the ship becomes a metaphor for what becomes possible away from land: staring out in to the "abyss," Deeti wonders how what she sees can, in fact, be water, "for water surely needed a boundary, a rim, a shore, to give it shape and to hold it in place" (363). The boundlessness of the water mirrors the erosion of old ways of differentiating between and disciplining bodies: while Deeti and Kalua find refuge as lovers among the coolies on the ship, so too does Munia, exiled from her community on account of her sexual indiscretions. And while the other coolies remark upon Putli's light skin and the notable differences in her education, they nevertheless extend their unequivocal friendship to her. In this sense, Putli's claim when she meets Deeti—that once they are out to sea "there will be no differences between them"—proves true: despite her differences in upbringing and her race, Putli acts as a "child ... of the ship" in her effort to help Neel and Ah Fatt escape and in attempting to save Kalua from execution (328).

The coolies thus become a family in the sense that ordinary ways of identifying themselves and each other dissolve such that they are able to come together on the basis of their "shared burden" of oppression. Indeed, the epistemological chaos of the ship also makes apparent the ways in which the coolies, despite their differences on land, are bound together not only by their common experience of oppression but also by their own innate desires. While Deeti is awed

and affronted by Munia's overt displays of sexuality and her lack of contrition for bearing an illegitimate child, the text draws out the similarities between the two women who find themselves on the *Ibis* in order to live out their unsanctioned desires. Indeed, Munia's claim that she will continue to follow her sexual desires despite the consequences to her honour recalls Deeti's own relinquishment of caste through her relationship with Kalua and the abandonment of her daughter in Calcutta from where she and Kalua flee. While it remains true that Deeti is haunted by guilt for succumbing to her desires while Munia is not, the similarities in their characters and in the events that lead them onto the *Ibis* come to symbolize the collapse of the various forms of difference that occur more broadly on the ship; in much the same way that the coolies form a "single family," so too do their respective stories reflect points of commonality and convergence. Much like the collectivity that develops between Neel and Ah Fatt, the dissolution of separateness, of the entrenched belief in the Self as fundamentally different from the Other, allows Deeti to save Munia from the subedar's violence by putting herself at risk and being discovered as the woman who escaped the pyre in his village.

While Muñoz's conception of utopian community does not require the breakdown of difference (but rather, the realization of "belonging in difference") and the formation of a single family, I have tried to demonstrate in this section how both the chaotic conditions that lead Neel and Ah Fatt to each other and the space of ship—untethered to the laws and customs of land—enable a utopian collectivity to emerge. Indeed, the "building blocks of human identity" come apart throughout the course of the *Ibis*'s voyage which opens up the space for alternative connections formed across lines of race, class, caste, and personal experience. In this sense, perhaps we can read the subedar's growing anguish at his failures to come between Neel and Ah Fatt as a kind of prescience: the chaos that facilitates this friendship, in challenging ordinary ways of organizing and disciplining subjects, speaks to the political possibilities of resisting order and of venturing into the wild.

Conclusion

Ghosh's *Sea of Poppies* ends while the multiple narratives at play in the text are still unresolved: while we know that the subedar and the first mate are dead and that the convicts, along with Kalua, have escaped on the longboat, we are left to wonder what happens to them at sea and what becomes of Zachary, his relationship with Putli, and to Deeti herself. Yet, the lack of resolution allows the novel to retain a sense of possibility and of hope, whatever the eventual outcome of the characters' lives might be. It is this relationship between utopian possibility and the unknown which I have attempted to trace in this text by centring the role of chaos. I have aimed in this paper to bring conversations in contemporary queer theory into readings of the colonial encounter and to consider how a political commitment to

chaos might offer an antidote to colonial and anticolonial politics rooted in identity. The forms of chaos that structure the novel both arise from and generate disruptive forms of intimacy that, in turn, call into question the very stability of racial, gendered, national, and caste categories. Indeed, for Neel and Ah Fatt, the love that grows between them stems from the chaotic encounters that lead them to each other and produces an intimacy that challenges the very foundation of the colonial project and gestures toward the possibility of achieving a utopian political collectivity. In reminding us that the distinctions between the Self and the Other are inevitably unstable, their relationship suggests that, though we may “belong ... in difference,” we can also imagine and act collectively in the pursuit of a better world.

Notes

1. In “The Intimacies of Four Continents,” Lisa Lowe argues that the management of colonial intimacies was a form of biopolitics, orienting bodies—and the affective bonds between them—toward the goals of the colonial project. Writing on the import of Chinese indentured labourers to West Indian colonies, Lowe argues that Chinese coolies were used to create a “middle” race, an intermediary that maintained the distance between the white colonial and its Black Other (197). Lowe argues that the discreteness of a middle race could only be maintained through the strict management of intimate relations between Chinese coolies and African slaves; the “unspoken intimacies of the colonized”—what Lowe defines as sexual or intellectual cross-over between African slaves and nonwhite labourers—threatened to denude racial difference of its capacity to discipline bodies and, thus, to rupture the very foundation of the colonial project (203). Coolies were thus “located in masses together, not scattered throughout the colonies” where their contact with slaves were necessarily limited (White qtd. in Lowe 203). In this sense, intimacy has a double valence: it signifies both “spatial proximity” as well as the affective ties that emerge between bodies as a result of proximity (193).

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