

Sexuality, race and empire in Alan Hollinghurst's "A Thieving Boy" (1983)

Ed Dodson*

University of Oxford, UK

*Email: edward.dodson@univ.ox.ac.uk

By returning to the very start of Alan Hollinghurst's literary career, this article begins constructing a different narrative about this "gay" British author -- one in which sexuality, race, and empire are intimately connected, and in which sexual liberation is haunted by imperial histories of racial exploitation. Through a "contrapuntal" analysis of his 1983 Egyptian short story "A Thieving Boy", the article complicates dominant "queer" interpretations which overlook the postimperial politics -- the aesthetic negotiation of Britain after empire -- at stake in his representations of race and nation. In particular, through a dialogue with Hollinghurst's non-fiction, it interrogates the political ambiguity of the story's postimperial rewriting of E.M. Forster's (homo)sexual awakening. It concludes by exploring the implications of this rereading for conventional conceptions of "postcolonial" and "British" contemporary fiction.

Keywords: Alan Hollinghurst; postimperial; sexuality; race; exoticism; E.M. Forster.

Postimperialism and the "contrapuntal" method

The sexual fetishization of a black "criminal" in postcolonial Egypt; the homoerotic diary of a colonial officer in Sudan; a wealthy Belgian family whose fortunes were amassed in the Congo; black and middle eastern lovers in the house of a Thatcherite MP; and a 1913 English country house saga centred on an imperialistic and bisexual young aristocrat: moving from "A Thieving Boy" (Hollinghurst 1983b), through *The Swimming-Pool Library* (Hollinghurst 1988), *The Folding Star* (Hollinghurst 1994), *The Line of Beauty* (Hollinghurst 2004) and *The Stranger's Child* (Hollinghurst 2011b), this brief sketch of Alan Hollinghurst's literary output presents an author implicated in issues of both sexuality *and* race -- moreover, sexuality alongside

histories of empire and decolonisation.¹ Such a portrait of Hollinghurst, which will be developed below through an analysis of “A Thieving Boy” and some of his non-fiction, complicates the reductionism of dominant “queer” interpretations which overlook the ambiguous postimperial politics – the aesthetic negotiation of Britain after empire, or what Hollinghurst has called an “imperium in decline” (1999, 243) – at stake in his representations of race and nation. It is important to note here that, informed by Paul Gilroy (2004), I tend to prefer the term postimperial to postcolonial in this context because it defines a former imperial nation – i.e. Britain – after the demise (or transformation) of its imperial status, rather than a colony after its liberation from colonial rule.

Hollinghurst’s debut, like the rest of his oeuvre, is “generally read as a ‘gay novel’” (Lewis 2011, 91) and “a determinedly gay novel in every way available” (Brooker 2010, 206). The journalistic response to Hollinghurst’s 2004 Booker-Prize victory for *The Line of Beauty* indicates the reductive extremity of such pigeonholing; the day after the ceremony the right-wing tabloids *The Express* and *The Sun* ran with the respective headlines “BOOKER WON BY GAY SEX” (October 20, 2004) and “GAY BOOK WINS [BOOKER]” (October 20, 2004). Various literary critics (such as Lassen 2009; Johnson 2014) have developed more nuanced accounts by situating Hollinghurst in the context of queer theory, thus recognising his detailed and sexually explicit literary exploration of homosexuality. Queer theory and postcolonial theory have occasionally intersected in Hollinghurst criticism, but usually only with regards to his debut. With reference to Robert Young, Simon Lewis (2011) accuses Charles Nantwich (the mentor of protagonist William Beckwith) of “homosexual colonial desire” (99), whilst Brenda Cooper (2002) argues that Will’s interracial exploits “continue the unsavoury and unstable traditions of oppression” (207).

To properly excavate what I am calling the postimperialism of Hollinghurst's fiction, a concept which will historicize and thus ultimately enhance (rather than supplant) our understanding of sexuality in his work, we initially need to move away from these "queer" interpretations. (As Hollinghurst has stated in an interview: "the sex tends to blot out all sorts of other things that are going on" [Hollinghurst 1999, 241].) I do so by updating Edward Said's (1993) influential theory of "contrapuntal reading", or "read[ing] the great canonical texts [...] with an effort to draw out, extend, give emphasis and voice to what is silent or marginally present or ideologically represented" (78). By addressing a postimperial figure – Hollinghurst was born in 1954, in the midst of postwar decolonisation, two years before the Suez Crisis – I am building specifically on scholarship that extends Said's method beyond the period of Britain's imperial dominance. For various commentators (such as Gikandi 1999 and Baucom 1999), "British thought, British society", in the words of Salman Rushdie (1986), "has never been cleansed of the filth of imperialism" (para. 7). Most influentially, Gilroy (2004) argues that "postimperial melancholia" is the defining condition of Britain's contemporary political discourse and popular culture: "rather than work through those feelings, that unsettling [imperial] history was diminished, denied, and then, if possible, actively forgotten" (98). Rachael Gilmour and Bill Schwarz's *End of Empire and the English Novel since 1945* harnesses these approaches to argue that post-war English "fiction [...] which does not appear to concern itself in any way with empire or its demise [...] nonetheless carries the memory-traces of these former histories" (Schwarz 2011, 21). The essays in their collection turn to the so-called national "centre" – those authors who are not deemed to be "postcolonial", but "English" or "British" instead – and read them against the grain. Rather than reiterating Gikandi, Baucom and others' repetitive focus on

archetypal postcolonial figures like Rushdie, Gilmour and Schwarz's contributors range from Alan Sillitoe to Ian McEwan; their collection includes a chapter by Sarah Brophy on "Queer Histories and Postcolonial Intimacies in [...] *The Line of Beauty*" and seeks to "elaborate an appropriate hermeneutics: in other words, reading for empire in Austen or Dickens represents a different procedure from reading for empire in William Golding or A.S. Byatt" (Schwarz 2011, 33). By relegating this comment to a footnote, however, the collection's Introduction fails to outline what this contrapuntal methodology, updated for postimperial fiction, might be.

A vital aspect of an updated contrapuntalism involves examining the literary traditions that an author works with and against. As Edward Said writes of Kipling, "how then do we read *Kim* as a late-nineteenth-century novel, preceded by the works of Scott, Austen, Dickens, and Eliot?" (1993, 164). Many of Hollinghurst's influences have been easily identified – E.M. Forster and Ronald Firbank, for instance, feature explicitly in several of his fictional and non-fictional works – but often only with regards to their sexuality. Instead we might ask: what is the ideological significance of these writers' imperial contexts and aesthetics for Hollinghurst's postimperial fiction? This is an updated form of the contrapuntal method because it asks, firstly, what exactly are the *remnants* of empire in Hollinghurst's work, and secondly, what *political relationship* does it have to these imperial ideas and strategies – more specifically, does this *postimperial* fiction unquestioningly perpetuate, or critically distance itself from, the imperial aesthetics and perspectives identified in the first section of this article? I thus adopt Laura Chrisman's (2000) "conception of authorial – political – agency". Her contention that "writers were not passive vehicles but actively involved in interpreting, revising, and intervening within and against the dominant imperialist 'structures of feeling'" (20) allows for more politicized analyses

than the Gilmour/Schwarz collection achieves, the latter being more concerned with “reading for empire” (2001, 33) than assessing the postimperial ideologies at work.

I will now discuss Hollinghurst’s first piece of published prose fiction, the short story “A Thieving Boy” (Hollinghurst 1983), which has received almost no critical attention. After demonstrating the persistence of imperial aesthetics in Hollinghurst’s story, I will discuss the extent to which this self-aware writer consciously negotiates the problematics of Orientalism – the extent to which we can interpret his fiction as postimperial or postcolonial. By returning to the very start of Alan Hollinghurst’s literary career, I will thus begin constructing a different narrative about this “gay” author, one in which sexuality, race, and empire are intimately connected – and in which sexual liberation is haunted by imperial histories of racial exploitation.

Egypt and empire

“A Thieving Boy” is narrated in the first-person plural – “our” and “we” – by the unnamed godparents of Timothy Taylor.² They came to adopt Tim after his biological parents died; however, after raising him and supporting his successful scholarship to study at Cambridge, they found that he suddenly “disappeared” (Hollinghurst 1983b, 98). Twelve years later these retired teachers go on holiday to Egypt and – by coincidence – bump into him on the streets of Cairo. When he invites them to his flat a young man called Mustafa is introduced as Tim’s servant but turns out to also be his lover. Towards the end of their trip they read in a local paper that Tim has been robbed and that his “servant” is the “prime, and indeed only, suspect” (109).

The story is structured around two narratives of discovery. Firstly, having previously only “tak[en] a break in Bournemouth or Swanage” (Hollinghurst 1983, 95), the provincial couple from Southampton discover “the liberating influence of abroad”, where “inhibitions [...] suddenly reveal themselves” (101). Secondly, Tim’s “coming out” tale is one that recurs, in various forms, throughout Hollinghurst’s fiction, from Lord Nantwich (and his erotic diaries) in *The Swimming-Pool Library* to Cecil Valance (and his posthumous memorialisation) in *The Stranger’s Child*. Tim’s travels through “Turkey, Syria, the Holy Land” (99), and finally Egypt, allow him, like Forster in colonial Alexandria, to develop his sexuality and “come out” to his godparents. This revelation does not just concern sexuality but also the politics of race in postcolonial Egypt; in other words, by reading “A Thieving Boy” through an imperial context we can historicize its narrative of sexual awakening.

According to M.W. Daly (1998), Britain occupied Egypt in 1882 “and there began a long new chapter in Egypt’s foreign domination and Britain’s global empire” (239). The British supposedly “intend[ed] to end the occupation as soon as possible” but in fact “prolonged their control until the 1950s” (251). This was because, in Said’s terms, “Egypt was not just another colony [...] it was to become the triumph of English knowledge and power” (2003, 35). The Egyptian Revolution of 1952 brought about Independence. British involvement then came to a disastrous climax in 1956 with the Suez Crisis – the invasion of Egypt by Britain, France, and Israel in order to regain western control of the Suez Canal (a lucrative trade link to the east) and overthrow Egypt’s President Gamal Abdel Nasser. When the British were made to withdraw by an appalled international community, Suez “forcefully reasserted

Britain's subaltern role on the world stage" (Schwarz 2011, 9) and has come to mark the symbolic – although not actual – end of British imperial power *in toto*.

Britain's occupation of Egypt would not have been particularly prominent in the public imagination when Hollinghurst's story was published in January 1983, but the recent Falklands/Malvinas War against Argentina certainly would have been.³ In contrast to the Suez catastrophe, which led to Prime Minister Anthony Eden's resignation after only a year in office, the Falklands victory of April–June 1982 resulted in Margaret Thatcher's landslide re-election (in June 1983) and a renewed wave of imperial pomp and nostalgia. As Anthony Barnett (1982) writes, "in her 1982 victory speech on the lesson of the Falklands, Thatcher proclaimed that Britain was still 'the nation that had built an Empire and ruled a quarter of the world . . . The lesson is that Britain has not changed'" (47). It is within this context that I situate Hollinghurst's return to the location (Egypt) of Britain's postimperial nadir (Suez), as an opportunity to explore the nation's recent past and its legacy for Britons and Egyptians today.⁴

The legacy of empire is most apparent in the orientalist gaze of Hollinghurst's holidaymakers, indicating that, as Ali Behdad (1999) argues, "tourism (in the 'Third World') is 'an extension of cultural domination' by the industrial nations" (37). Here, for instance, is one of their descriptions of Cairo:

if the first way to know a foreign place is by its smell, then our introduction was unhesitating and violent. [...] The smell in Cairo [...] insisted on the otherness of where we were, was a rank and soft smell of rotting matter, absolutely pervasive as soon as one stepped into the street. (Hollinghurst 1983, 100)

The apparently obvious – “if the first...” – conflation of the “foreign” with the sensory, in this case smell, exposes an assumed division between the rational west and the chaotic east. Moreover, the anxious metaphorical association of aroma with violence belies the fear of “otherness”, just as its “rotting” quality is suggestive of a backwards society. Such judgments are made on the basis that their own country and history has nothing to do with Cairo’s “otherness”; the phrase “as soon as one stepped onto the street” stresses the distinction between the safety of colonial hotels (geared for westerners) and the violent, rotting east just beyond their doors. The couple’s journey of discovery is reliant upon this “backward glance” (in Chinua Achebe’s [1977] phrase) at Egyptian life, a visual and verbal construction of the exotic and barbarous east (wrenched out of its postcolonial context) which reinvigorates their dull lives: “returning to England, incredibly enriched and ready to talk of our experience for ever” (Hollinghurst 1983, 109).⁵ Although, post-Suez Egypt is no longer technically a colony, it continues to serve a thoroughly orientalist function in the postimperial imagination of these British tourists.

“Going native”

Whilst his godparents’ gaze provides the most obvious manifestation of “belligerent neo-Orientalism” (Said [1977] 2003, xxi), at the level of description, Tim’s permanent migration from Southampton to Cairo and his relationship with Mustafa are more subtly interwoven, at the level of narrative, with the aesthetic and ideological framework of postimperialism. An implicit division between the stultifying west and the transformative east is established at the beginning of Tim’s

story, partially through the adoption of a first-person plural perspective which binds the reader to the narrator and creates a logic of “us and them”. The image of “godparents” at “the font”, on the first page, specifies the Christian background – “our” – from which Tim escapes (Hollinghurst 1983, 95). Tim’s upbringing is also traditionally English and middle-class. This “quiet, introspective, temperamental” boy, with “his intelligence, his good bookwork, his interest in learning” (96), “won an open scholarship to Cambridge” (98). Through a nautical image, the narrator warns that “there was no coming back to the harbour, no re-absorption into the life from which he had broken away” (99). They fear that the corrupting possibilities of travel will alter him beyond repair, that the (former) colony will undo his civilized Englishness and turn him into a “native”.

It is through such anxieties that we can read the racialized descriptions of Tim in Egypt. When they first re-encounter him:

his hair [was] much fairer, bleached by the sun to what seemed almost an artificial colour, and his skin a brown that months back in England would not wholly have been able to fade. He wore a high-necked cotton shirt which seemed more Indian than Egyptian, and which made him look oddly, comically, like a missionary in an ecclesiastical collar. (102)

His “bleached [...] artificial” hair and “brown” skin reveal the physical changes that have taken place during his time abroad, the latter epithet indicating their racial quality. This transformation, the narrator worries, could not be reversed even with “months back in England”. Implicit here is the racist association Robert J.C. Young (2008) identifies with the imperial period: “Englishness often came to function as a

coded term for whiteness, for the invisible norm against which all other ethnicities were measured and defined” (239). There is little possibility of re-absorption into national life because Tim has lost his racial purity and become an ethnic outcast. Tim’s new clothing suggests further assimilation into Egyptian society, something the narrator also struggles to accommodate. By insisting upon his specifically Indian sartorial appearance, the narrator evokes another literary racial hybrid. As Don Randall (2000) argues, Kipling’s English-Irish-Indian “imperial boy” Kim, despite being “dressed as a low-caste Hindu boy” (143), “is ‘white’, although poor, bazaar-fostered, and ‘burned black as any native’” (120). The description of Tim thus contains an allusion that reveals the persistence of imperial fears around racial hybridization and the continued “precarious investment” in adolescent males of what Randall refers to as “the national and imperial future” (7).

The tension between Tim’s new identity and his godparents’ resistance to it is most apparent in the following passage:

Tim’s next surprise was one which we ought to have foreseen: he addressed Mustafa in Arabic. It didn’t quite have the choking, erotic coarseness on his lips that it would have had from a native speaker [...] it seemed incredibly chastened as he used it, in that way that any foreign language spoken with an English accent sounds as if corrected of a natural tendency to libidinous and incomprehensible fluency. (Hollinghurst 1983, 105)

Tim’s voice, like Kim’s “clipped uncertain sing-song” (Kipling 1951, 1), is hybrid. It both is and is not Arabic, just as he both is and is not Egyptian. The narrator admits that Tim speaks Arabic, and has “a number of books in Arabic” on his shelves

(Hollinghurst 1983, 104), but also insists that his use of it is fundamentally different to that of a “native speaker”. Native Arabic has a “choking, erotic coarseness”, a “libidinous” quality which Tim’s English voice “chasten[s]”. His voice “correct[s]” the original, setting up a clear moral hierarchy between wholesome English and seedy Arabic.

The narrator’s concerns about Tim’s transformation – at the levels of body, clothing, and voice – can be situated in a long tradition of imperial literature: Rod Edmond (2000) points out that “the phenomenon of ‘going native’, of the European becoming decivilized in savage surroundings” can be traced through “Conrad’s Kurtz [...] back at least as far as *Robinson Crusoe* (1719)” (43). In these texts, “the fear of degeneration in colonial settings” poses the question: “would civilization survive the encounter with its other?” (Edmond 2000, 43). Hollinghurst’s story suggests that “the nightmare of ‘going native’” (Brantlinger 1988, 39) persists in the postcolonial global system, still ideologically divided into Manichean binaries – east and west, black and white, primitive and civilized – which produce fears (as well as fantasies) of hybridity and conversion.

E.M. Forster and erotic exoticism

I refer to fantasies here because “going native” narratives often included an erotic component: “desire for the cultural other [and] for forsaking their own culture” (Young 1995, 3) were bound up in one another. It is important to recognize, by way of a short digression, the relevance of E.M. Forster in this context. Forster’s influence on Hollinghurst’s *The Stranger’s Child* has been widely noted, but he has been a guiding presence throughout Hollinghurst’s career, beginning with his post-graduate

thesis,⁶ “The Creative Uses of Homosexuality in the novels of E.M. Forster, Ronald Firbank and L.P. Hartley”, which discusses *A Passage to India* (1924) in terms of simultaneous erotic and exotic discovery: “it is significant that Forster makes this moment of revelation about India [...] a striking homoerotic description” (Hollinghurst 1979, 57). In this early queer reading, Hollinghurst foregrounds Forster’s faint suggestion of an interracial, homosexual, colonial romance between protagonists Fielding and Aziz.⁷ This trope is much more explicit in two of Forster’s short stories which are not discussed in Hollinghurst’s thesis.⁸ In “The Life to Come” (written in 1922) the English missionary Mr Pinmay, who is bringing about the “advent of civilization” in an unidentified foreign location (Forster 1972, 73), tries to repress his night of “pleasur[e] with a native” called Barnabas (74). The idea that leaving home, watching “England recede” (175), increases the possibility of such illicit activity finds its fullest expression in the “The Other Boat” (written in 1957–58). The English Captain Lionel and the “half-caste” Cocoanut develop a sexual relationship as:

the ship [bound for India, where Lionel is to meet his potential wife Isabel] entered the Mediterranean. Here resistance weakened under the balmier sky, curiosity increased. [...] More happened off the coast of Sicily, more, much more at Port Said, and here in the Red Sea they slept together as a matter of course. (177)

The further East they travel, the more their desires (and sexual encounters) increase, eventually leading to a tragic climax in which Lionel murders Cocoanut before “div[ing] into the sea” (196).

If eroticism, exoticism, and death are merged in Forster's fiction, this seems to emerge out of his personal life, both his frequently-discussed experiences in India and the considerable time he spent in Egypt.⁹ As recounted in P.N. Furbank's two-volume biography *E.M. Forster: A Life*, published in 1977–78 and cited several times in Hollinghurst's contemporaneous thesis, Forster “embarked from England for Egypt” in November 1915 to begin working for the International Red Cross (1978, 19-20).¹⁰ “In October [1916] he had a casual escapade with a soldier on the beach. It was his first full physical encounter” (35) shortly followed by a relationship with a tram “conductor, a young, slightly negroid-looking Egyptian” (36) called Mohammed el Adl (Mohammed died prematurely in 1923). Although Nicola Beauman's (1993) biography, published ten years after Hollinghurst's story, denies that this was “mere ‘nostalgie de la boue’” (1993, 302) – or “desire to regress to more primitive social conditions or behaviour than those to which a person is accustomed” (*OED Online* (Oxford University) – Furbank claims that this “was the realization of all [Forster's] secret ambitions. He had, or so he had felt, broken through the barriers of class and colour” (1978, 40). As well as viewing “class and colour” as “barriers” between Forster and his first proper lover, one might propose that Mohammed's social and racial “exoticism” (and the fact that their encounter took place in the liberating environment of the colony) were integral to Forster's desire – an interpretation that is supported not only by his fiction but also his association of Mohammed's “African-Negro blood” with “handsome[ness]” (Moffat 2010, 152).¹¹

This would be to situate Forster's colonial romance, his “going native”, within the tradition of Egyptian homoerotic fantasy documented by Joseph Boone (2001): “of all the regions of the Near East, Western writers most readily came to associate ancient and modern Egypt with the spreading “contagion” of homosexuality” (51).

Egypt was the archetypal “Western fantas[y] of the ‘Orient’”, a “non-Western mecca [...] where European men [...] traveled to act on those homoerotic desires legally persecuted and socially condemned at home” (Boone 2014, xviii; 228). For Boone (as for Robert J.C.Young, Christopher Lane and others), the colonies, and this colony in particular, were not merely the locations of homoerotic experiences but the driving force behind such fantasies.¹²

Forster’s romance has clear parallels with Tim’s: they both present racialized homosexual awakenings taking place in Egypt, one in a colonial, one in a postcolonial context. Later Hollinghurst texts are focalized through the perspective of their young gay male protagonists, but for now we must trace the echoes of Forster’s “homoerotics of Orientalism” or erotic exoticism (the sexual fetishization of darker-skinned races) in the narrator’s depiction of Mustafa:

his appearance was intensely striking, his skin the blackest it could possibly be. There was something so aesthetically calculated about his presence that the idea could only have sprung from the imagination of a white person: the boy was the absolute focus of attention in the scholarly virginal cell of the room.
(Hollinghurst 1983, 104)

In Cooper’s analysis of the story, Hollinghurst “is in some difficulty [...] with his passive, parental spectators” when trying to describe Mustafa; the desire expressed here belies the author’s own closeted homosexual attraction, inappropriately ventriloquized through his narrator (2002, 170). However, we can also interpret such strained descriptions as indicative of the godparents’ double-edged exoticism, their indulgence in and attempted distance from the trope of the “beautiful [Arab] boy”

which Boone identifies in Middle Eastern and orientalist writing (2014, 54-67). At risk of admitting desire for his “handsomeness [which] grew second by second” (104) – desire which is potentially both homo- and heterosexual as the narrator’s gender is left ambiguous – the apparently “virginal” quality of the room dampens the intensity. This image is not just presented, but converted into “the imagination of a white person”, the narrator essentially admitting that the scene is “aesthetically calculated” to produce a nostalgic imperial fantasy (like Forster’s) of the virile yet pacified “blackest” body.

This uneasy combination of physical description and self-aware commentary continues:

We had, of course, none of the self-consciousness with regard to blacks that is so typical in middle-class England. We had taught hundreds of them over the years, and liked them in general more than white children; the very school-oriented life we had always led gave us perhaps an edge of social intelligence over most people of our age and background. (Hollinghurst 1983, 105)

The very existence of this passage undermines the claims of unselfconsciousness. Their praise for Mustafa translates into political point scoring over their peers as exaggerated liberalism patronisingly privileges black over white children, lumping “blacks” together and categorically dividing them from whites. As Fredric Jameson (1986) glosses Said, “it does not matter much that the radical otherness of the culture in question is praised or valorized positively [...] the essential operation is that of differentiation” (77). Despite the heightened self-consciousness of these postimperial

travellers, they continue to reproduce the (erotic) exoticism of colonial forbears such as Forster.

The vicious potential of such orientalist differentiation is revealed in the story's hasty conclusion. Via the *Egyptian Gazette*, an English-language paper founded by the British in 1880, the narrator informs us that Tim "had been robbed of all his possessions by his Egyptian servant", or rather: "it had not been proved that the boy was the culprit but his complete disappearance from the flat at the same time as the valuables [...] made him the prime, and indeed only, suspect" (Hollinghurst 1983, 109). On the basis of little evidence, a binary between Egyptian criminal and white victim is produced, between the danger of foreign seduction and the safety of old England. The story's structure, then, affords Mustafa only the typical role of native subjects in imperial literature: he seduces an Englishman, gains his trust, and then breaks that loyalty.

Postimperial or postcolonial?

Having outlined the story's specific modes of imperial persistence – in terms of perspective, intertextuality, description, and plotting – we can now turn to its central political ambiguity: its ability to function as both a belated imperial narrative, what we might call postimperial, and a critique of enduring imperial aesthetics, what we might call postcolonial. As Cooper puts it: "this is the political razor on which Hollinghurst skates in his story" (2002, 174). The first reading is supported by Hollinghurst's non-fiction, which often praises orientalist strategies in imperial-era writers such as Forster and Firbank. In celebrating Firbank's many "hybrid" locations Hollinghurst quotes the author himself – "half way to the East already" – before

clarifying: “Firbank uses the term ‘the East’ in the old Orientalist sense to mean North Africa and the Middle East, not the Orient itself” (Hollinghurst 2000, xv). Evidently, Orientalism is not a problem for Hollinghurst, as it is for Said and other postcolonial theorists, merely an “old” term which needs explaining. If orientalist depictions of the east are applauded in Hollinghurst’s commentary, so too is Firbank’s fusion of exoticism and (homo)sexuality: “a significant part” of Firbank’s “hybrid” settings are “the ‘*wonderful boys*’ that are to be found there” and “the sexual freedom of [an] ‘Eastern’ homeland” (xv–xvi; italics in original).

Whilst this conflation of otherness and desire endorses the “homoerotics of Orientalism”, Hollinghurst’s defence of Robert Mapplethorpe engages the politics of race and representation in more complex ways. In 1983, the same year as “A Thieving Boy” appeared, Hollinghurst wrote the Introduction to Mapplethorpe’s exhibition catalogue.¹³ Recognising that Mapplethorpe’s images have been “criticized for their content – the black males, the [...] S/M photographs”, he insists that “Mapplethorpe is [not] unaware of the political implications of a white man shooting physically magnificent black men” (Hollinghurst 1983a, 8); “his art has continued to thrive on stereotypes which are allowed their full potency at the same time as they are ironized” (11). For Hollinghurst, Mapplethorpe’s “formative ambiguity” (13) both celebrates and ironizes stereotypes. As with Firbank and Forster, Hollinghurst is consciously defending a white artist who artistically addresses race in potentially problematic ways. “What is important [...] in Firbank’s work”, he writes, is the “development away from the merely ‘decorative’ use of negroes [...] towards giving them central roles in the fiction” (Hollinghurst 1979, 138). If this is questionable in Firbank, then it is certainly so in “A Thieving Boy”: the narrator even describes Mustafa’s smile as “almost decorative” (Hollinghurst 1983, 104). In the light of Hollinghurst’s quotation

marks around this term in his thesis, “decorative” might also be deemed ironic, thereby producing distance between the story and its prejudiced narrator. John Sutherland’s (1983) brief review in the *London Review of Books* picks up on the fact that Hollinghurst “cunningly manipulates the frustration of the reader irritated that the narrative is in quite the wrong hands” (para. 4), however, his comments do not explain how this occurs or what the implications are.

Ironic detachment is primarily created by the fact that the guidebook in which the narrator learns about Ancient Egypt is the 1928 Baedeker, “the most up-to-date information we could get” (Hollinghurst 1983, 105). This famous brand of German guidebook, with its “smug and secure Eurocentrism” (Moffat 2010, 139), helps to explain the archaic impression of Cairo they arrived with: “a primitive desert city” (Hollinghurst 1983, 100). After finding out Mustafa is Nubian, they admit that “our knowledge of them was coloured by the general notes in our Baedeker” which state that Nubians are often “boots [...] Mustafa was clearly not a boots, but he was still in service *chez* Tim” (105).¹⁴ “Coloured” by their guide, the couple form an impression of Mustafa – servile – based on his ethnic background. This perception leads them to interpret his actions in certain ways: “as we entered the room a black boy was arranging, rather than simply placing, some bowls of the delicious Egyptian roasted peanuts” (104). The choice of “arranging” over “placing” verbally indicates his servile status, as opposed to being another guest in Tim’s flat. Likewise, the last clause of the phrase “the very strong gins Mustafa had given us, probably at his employer’s suggestion” (105) is drawn into question by the revelation of Tim’s sexuality – maybe Mustafa is not so subservient, perhaps, although not necessarily, he has more agency (as a lover) than their assumptions afford him? Bound by a peculiar choice of narrative perspective, such attention to Mustafa’s experience is absent from

the text itself. There is in fact more consideration for Barnabas, Cocoanut, and certainly Aziz in Forster's writing. Hollinghurst does not offer Mustafa's point of view, or even Tim's, as an alternative or counterpoint to the maternal-paternal gaze.

While there is no direct opposition to this gaze, Hollinghurst does at least ironize the representation of Cairo and its inhabitants provided by the narrator. Pushing this reading to its political limits, narratorial detachment enables a critique of the lingering attitudes of postimperial Britons, a critique that would have been particularly pertinent in the wake of Thatcherism and the Falklands. In Graham Huggan's terms: "exoticism is effectively *repoliticised*, redeployed both to unsettle metropolitan expectations of cultural otherness and to effect a grounded critique of differential relations of power" (2001, ix-x; italics in original). Although "metropolitan expectations" are put under some strain in this story, the "differential relations of power" between postimperial Britain and postcolonial Egypt are hardly acknowledged. Due to the imperial baggage of the literary and historical tradition Hollinghurst is working within, a much stronger sense of ironic detachment would be required in order to achieve Huggan's critical, postcolonial aesthetic; moreover, some consideration of Mustafa's perspective and *his* desire might have led Hollinghurst further away from his forbears. Despite ironic potential then, "A Thieving Boy", as a first work of fiction, is still embedded in an imperial tradition and its ideological parameters, particularly through the narrative premise of Egyptian erotic exoticism. Hollinghurst's commitment to a certain tradition of "gay" writing does not allow, at this stage in his career, for a critical redeployment of the imperial context within which their sexual and literary activities often took place.

The close reading offered here, in conjunction with a consideration of his non-fiction, lays the ground for a resituating of Hollinghurst's later and more major

novelistic works in a postimperial context. If in *The Swimming-Pool Library* erotic exoticism comes back “home” to the metropolitan centre, allowing Hollinghurst to work through the intersection of race and sexuality that dominates his inherited tradition, his later novels carve out a more original path in their engagement with imperial history (the Belgian Congo in *The Folding Star*); the neoimperial present (Thatcherism and the Falklands War in *The Line of Beauty*); and postimperial nostalgia (militarism and memorial culture in *The Stranger’s Child*). Ultimately, whilst Hollinghurst is too tonally complex a writer to be categorized simply as a belated imperialist or an avowed critic of postimperial ideology, one might be able to trace an aesthetic-political shift across his oeuvre: from embeddedness in an imperial literary tradition to, broadly speaking, an increasing redeployment of ideas, strategies, and histories – although the spectre of exoticism and nostalgia can never wholly be banished.

Conclusion: Postcolonialism and “consensual parochiality”

Situating Hollinghurst in a postimperial context, as a politically ambiguous response to Britain’s history of empire and decolonisation, challenges “the processes by which marketplace categories are constructed” (Squires 2012, 101) – specifically, the generic division between postcolonial and non-postcolonial contemporary British literature. As Susheila Nasta argues:

why is it so many years after empire and the major processes of decolonisation that many English writers now deemed postcolonial seem to remain bracketed into a location which essentially separates them from the so-called

mainstream, in terms of ethnicity, colonial heritage and race? [...] The paradoxical effects of this kind of distancing and denial and I would say erasure, no doubt [act] as a form of protection... (2011)

Prompted by Nasta, Schwarz, Gilroy, and others, my postimperial contrapuntal method threatens this “form of protection” by flooding mainstream contemporary British literary fiction with the history of race and empire hovering at its edges. The current division of authors, as Nasta goes on to say, has led to “a consensual parochiality in terms of reading habits” (2011), which I interpret as the refusal to read for empire where it is not expected -- that is, in a Hollinghurst rather than a Rushdie – a division that seems to be conducted on biographical if not racial criteria. In rethinking this partition not only can we reread authors like Hollinghurst, historicising and thus complicating our understanding of sexual politics in his work, but can work towards resituating contemporary British fiction more broadly as an ambiguous aesthetic response to the nation’s postimperial transformations.

Notes on contributor:

Ed Dodson is a doctoral student in English at the University of Oxford. His thesis is entitled “Postimperial Ideology in Contemporary British Literature, 1979–present”.

References

Achebe, Chinua. 1977. “An Image of Africa: Racism in Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness*.”

Massachusetts Review 18. <http://kirbyk.net/hod/image.of.africa.html>.

Barnett, Anthony. 1982. “Iron Britannia.” *New Left Review* 134: 5-96.

Baucom, Ian. 1999. *Out of Place: Englishness, Empire and the Locations of Identity*.

Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.

- Beauman, Nicola. 1993. *Morgan: A Biography of E.M. Forster*. London: Hoddon & Stoughton.
- Behdad, Ali. 1999. *Belated Travelers: Orientalism in the Age of Colonial Dissolution*. London: Durham University Press.
- Boone, Joseph A. 2011. "Vacation Cruises; or, The Homoerotics of Orientalism." In *Postcolonial, Queer: Theoretical Intersections*, edited by John C. Hawley, 43-78. Albany, NY: State University of New York Press.
- Boone, Joseph A. 2014. *The Homoerotics of Orientalism*. New York: Columbia University Press.
- Brantlinger, Patrick. 1988. *Rule of Darkness: British Literature and Imperialism, 1830-1914*. New York: Cornell University Press.
- Brooker, Joe. 2010. *Literature of the 1980s*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press.
- Brophy, Sarah. 2011. "Queer Histories and Postcolonial Intimacies in Alan Hollinghurst's *The Line of Beauty*." In *End of Empire and the English Novel since 1945*, edited by Rachael Gilmour and Bill Schwarz, 184-201. Manchester: Manchester University Press.
- Chrisman, Laura. 2000. *Rereading the Imperial Romance: British Imperialism and South African Resistance in Haggard, Schreiner, and Plaatje*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Cooper, Brenda. 2002. *Weary Sons of Conrad: White Fiction Against the Grain of Africa's Dark Heart*. Oxford: Peter Lang.
- Daly, M.W. 1998. *The Cambridge History of Modern Egypt. Volume 2: Modern Egypt, from 1517 to the End of the Twentieth Century*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Edmond, Rod. 2000. "Home and Away: Degeneration in Imperialist and Modernist Discourse." In *Modernism and Empire: Writing and British Coloniality 1890-*

- 1940, edited by Howard J. Booth and Nigel Rigby, 39-63. Manchester: Manchester University Press.
- Forster, E.M. 1972. *The Life to Come and Other Stories*, edited by Oliver Stallybrass. London: Edward Arnold.
- Furbank, P.N. 1978. *E.M. Forster: A Life. Volume 2: Polycrates' Ring (1914-1970)*. London: Secker & Warburg.
- Galgut, Damon. 2015. *Arctic Summer*. London: Atlantic.
- Galligan, David. 1997. "Beneath the Surface." *The James White Review* 14 (3): 3-7.
- Gandhi, Leela. 2006. *Affective Communities: Anticolonial Thought, Fin-de-Siècle Radicalism, and the Politics of Friendship*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.
- Gikandi, Simon. 1996. *Maps of Englishness: Writing Identity in the Culture of Colonialism*. New York: Columbia University Press.
- Gilmour, Rachael and Bill Schwarz, eds. 2011. *End of Empire and the English Novel since 1945*. Manchester: Manchester University Press.
- Gilroy, Paul. 2004. *After Empire: Melancholia or Convivial Culture?* London: Routledge.
- Hollinghurst, Alan. 1979. "The Creative Uses of Homosexuality in the Novels of E.M. Forster, Ronald Firbank and L.P. Hartley." M.Litt. diss., University of Oxford.
- Hollinghurst, Alan. 1983a. "Introduction." In *Robert Mapplethorpe: 1970-1983*. London: Institute of Contemporary Arts.
- Hollinghurst, Alan. 1983b. "A Thieving Boy." In *Firebird 2: Writing Today*, edited by T.J. Binding, 93-109. Harmondsworth: Penguin.
- Hollinghurst, Alan. 1988. *The Swimming-Pool Library*. London: Chatto and Windus.

- Hollinghurst, Alan. 1994. *The Folding Star*. London: Chatto and Windus.
- Hollinghurst, Alan. 1999. "[Interview with] Alan Hollinghurst." In *Something Inside: Conversations with Gay Fiction Writers*, edited by Philip Gambone, 231-246. Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin Press.
- Hollinghurst, Alan. 2000. "Introduction." In *Three Novels*, by Ronald Firbank, vii-xxiv. Harmondsworth: Penguin.
- Hollinghurst, Alan. 2004. *The Line of Beauty*. London: Picador.
- Hollinghurst, Alan. 2011a. "The Art of Fiction No. 214: Interviewed by Peter Terizan." *The Paris Review*, 199.
<http://www.theparisreview.org/interviews/6116/the-art-of-fiction-no-214-alan-hollinghurst>.
- Hollinghurst, Alan. 2011b. *The Stranger's Child*. London: Vintage.
- Huggan, Graham. 2001. *The Postcolonial Exotic: Marketing the Margins*. London: Routledge.
- Jameson, Fredric. 1986. "Third-World Literature in the Era of Multinational Capitalism." *Social Text* 15: 65-88.
- Johnson, Allan. 2014. *Alan Hollinghurst and the Vitality of Influence*. Houndmills: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Kipling, Rudyard. 1951. *Kim*. London: Macmillan.
- Lane, Christopher. 1995. *The Ruling Passion: British Colonial Allegory and the Paradox of Homosexual Desire*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.
- Lassen, Christian. 2009. "Sheep Thrills: Pastoral Camp in the AIDS Elegies of Alan Hollinghurst." In *New Versions of Pastoral: Post-Romantic, Modern, and Contemporary Responses to the Tradition*, edited by David James and Philip Tew, 216-229. Madison, NJ: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press.

- Lewis, Simon. 2011. *British and African Literature in Transnational Context*.
Gainesville, FL: University Press of Florida.
- Moffat, Wendy. 2010. *E.M. Forster: A New Life*. London: Bloomsbury.
- Nasta, Susheila. 2011. "Comments at the Launch of *End of Empire and the English Novel Since 1945*." British Academy, 2 November 2011 [unpublished].
- Rahman, Tariq. 1991. "Syed Ross Masood and E.M. Forster's *A Passage to India*." *ANQ* 4 (2): 78-81.
- Randall, Don. 2000. *Kipling's Imperial Boy: Adolescence and Cultural Hybridity*.
Basingstoke: Palgrave.
- Rushdie, Salman. 1982. "The New Empire within Britain."
http://public.wsu.edu/~hegglund/courses/389/rushdie_new_empire.htm.
- Said, Edward. 1993. *Culture and Imperialism*. London: Vintage.
- Said. [1977] 2003. *Orientalism*. London: Penguin.
- Schwarz, Bill. 2011. "Introduction: End of Empire and the English Novel." In *End of Empire and the English Novel since 1945*, edited by Rachael Gilmour and Bill Schwarz, 1-37. Manchester: Manchester University Press.
- Squires, Claire. 2012. "Too Much Rushdie, Not Enough Romance? The UK Publishing Industry and BME (Black Minority Ethnic) Readership." In *Postcolonial Audiences: Readers, Viewers and Reception*, edited by Bethan Benwell, James Procter, and Gemma Robinson, 99-111. New York: Routledge.
- Sutherland, John. 1983. "Short Is Sharp." *London Review of Books* 5 (2): 15.
<http://www.lrb.co.uk/v05/n02/john-sutherland/short-is-sharp>.
- Young, Robert J.C. 1995. *Colonial Desire: Hybridity in Theory, Culture, and Race*.
London: Routledge.

Notes

¹ I have excluded from this list only his third novel, *The Spell* (1998), due to its lack of postimperial concerns.

² I refer to the narrator in the singular. Even though the narrative voice involves two people, it offers only one perspective.

³ We know from an interview that the story was written in 1980, prior to the Falklands War, but I am interested here in its unintended political resonances as well as the intentions of the author (Galligan 1997, 7).

⁴ For Anthony Barnett (1982), as for many others, the Suez/Falklands parallels were clear: “The most apt and widely drawn comparison, however, has been with the Suez crisis of 1956” (5).

⁵ As Chinua Achebe (1977) protests in his famous critique of Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness*, “if Europe, advancing in civilization, could cast a backward glance periodically at Africa trapped in primordial barbarity it could say with faith and feeling: There go I but for the grace of God”.

⁶ Hollinghurst stated in his *Paris Review* interview: “Forster loomed large when I was starting *The Stranger’s Child*” (Hollinghurst 2011a).

⁷ This reading is encouraged by parallels between Aziz and Syed Ross Masood, the Indian man whom Forster loved but who did not love him. Forster stated in an interview that “Aziz is based on Masood, my greatest Indian friend” (quoted in Rahman 1991, 78).

⁸ For the editor of *The Life to Come and Other Stories*, Oliver Stallybrass, “Forster [is] at the height of his powers” in these two stories and “it is perhaps significant that each is concerned with an East-West encounter” (1972, xvi).

⁹ The latest novel by the South African writer Damon Galgut, *Arctic Summer* (Galgut 2014), reimagines Forster’s erotic experiences in India and Egypt; Chapter 5 (“Mohammed”) focuses on the latter.

¹⁰ Hollinghurst refers to Furbank as “Forster’s biographer” (1979, 12) and cites both volumes (Forster’s Egyptian experiences appear in the second of these).

¹¹ Forster’s class preference is suggested by a “Personal Memorandum, 1935” which reads: “I want to love a strong man of the lower classes, and be loved by him and even hurt by him” (Forster 1972, xiv).

¹² There is a critical debate, often referencing Forster, as to whether interracial homosexuality in the colonies reinforced or challenged imperial power. Whilst Robert J.C. Young claims that “same-sex sex [. . .] posed no threat [to imperial rule]” (1995, 25–26), Christopher Lane “propos[es] that sexual desire between men frequently ruptured Britain’s imperial allegory by shattering national unity” (1995, 4) and Leela Gandhi argues that there is a “strange and emphatic conjunction of homosexuality and anti-imperial thought” (2006, 11).

¹³ The exhibition was held at the Institute of Contemporary Arts (ICA) in London.

¹⁴ “Boots” refers to boot boys, the lowest rank of English household male servants.