

## Zachary Reid's Transoceanic Performance of White Gentility in *Sea of Poppies*

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“Freedom, yes, exactly. Isn't that what the mastery of the white man means for the lesser races?”—Benjamin Burnham to Zachary in *Sea of Poppies*, p. 77

Roughly 90 % of free and enslaved African Americans worked on land in the antebellum USA. But that minority who did sail on whalers and merchant ships has taught scholars about the liberties of seafaring, and about the plantation as just one component of a global system of labor (Bolster 1997).<sup>1</sup> Amitav Ghosh further interrogates the history of these African American slaves and freemen at sea in his postcolonial and postmodern novel *Sea of Poppies* (2008a, b). I argue that the fictional plot of *Sea of Poppies* distinguishes itself from the autobiographical maritime narratives of Paul Cuffee, Oludah Equiano, Briton Hammon, and John Jea by imagining an alternate route: The novel features Zachary Reid, a free African American sailor passing as white, and a circulation of Asian migrants between the Black Atlantic and the Indian Ocean during Great Britain and China's opium trade.<sup>2</sup> Zachary's voyage as second mate aboard the *Ibis* initiates our encounter with a multiplicity of subaltern cultures and languages which transform a former slave ship into the vessel for transporting coolies under the mast of Britain's expansive imperialism of the early nineteenth century.

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<sup>1</sup>Although by 1805 about 18 % of American seamen were Black (and “mostly free”), their population declined with the downsizing of American maritime culture, in addition to the increasingly discriminatory laws against Blacks that followed the Civil War (Bolster 1997).

<sup>2</sup>Scholars have also shown interest in the circulations between east Africa and Asia within the Indian Ocean, which contained its own African slave trade, though on a smaller scale (and with fewer records) than would come to dominate the West, especially after the British forbid slave trading in the nineteenth century. See Joseph E. Harris, *The African Presence in India* (1976), xiii. In contrast, for a history of high caste Africans in India, see *African Elites in India: Habshi Amarat* (2006) by Kenneth X Robbins and John McLeod.

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What do we learn from Ghosh's imagined sea voyage? I briefly put the novel in conversation with the scholarship of Paul Gilroy to reveal its ambitions. First, Ghosh animates Gilroy's *The Black Atlantic* by imagining the ways in which a sea voyage forces an African American and Asian migrants into postmodernity. These migrants merge their language and culture. In addition, Ghosh charts the voyage of Gilroy's central chronotope, the slave ship, as a mechanism for "reading" the Black Atlantic into the Indian Ocean, and to submerge our thinking of slavery in a transnational context. In this way, too, Ghosh uses a similar approach to transnational literary scholars who, in the wake of *The Black Atlantic*, have conversed across disciplines.

Finally, *Sea of Poppies* also teaches us about sea voyages, about superficial methods for determining "slavery" and "freedom," and about the struggle for human rights for African Americans during the nineteenth century.<sup>3</sup> The novel's political perspective in this regard mirrors Gilroy's commentary in *Darker than Blue* (2010), in which he elaborates on the terms that have consistently made "freedom" unstable for Blacks. In short, Gilroy argues that if scholars focus on merely the presence or the absence of human rights, then we fail to realize how the law dictates who has rights, and how the law can normalize racial crimes.

I argue that Ghosh's character, Zachary Reid, is one of the major tools that Ghosh uses to expand our modern concept of "freedom." In this article, I am arguing that Amitav Ghosh imagines the near-impossible for Zachary Reid in *Sea of Poppies* when Zachary ascends to second mate aboard the *Ibis* and gains the privileges of mobility and of power over lower ship hands. At the same time, Ghosh forces his readers to confront the historical conditions that make Zachary's rank and voyage across the Atlantic dangerous and, I argue, temporary. First, the *Ibis* is a degraded ship that few other sailors dare to command. Second, Ghosh deliberately features the racist tirades of characters like Ben Burnham and Mr. Crowle to remind us that we must interrogate the novel through the particulars of African American history to understand the particular plight of that race as played out on a global stage. The delicate and illusory nature of Zachary's freedom aboard the *Ibis* emerges from my analysis. I treat the scenes in which the Middle Passage haunts Zachary, his brutal memory of racial violence in Baltimore's shipyards, and the Negro Seamen Acts as evidence for his necessary act of passing for a white sailor. While Zachary dresses properly, speaks properly, and enforces the rules of the superior colonizers, I point out that he can only create an illusion of the free African American sailor.

In these ways, Amitav Ghosh shows that in spite of his characters' attempt at creating cosmopolitanism, a cultural and racialized hierarchy persists aboard the *Ibis*. He encourages us to expand our perspective on the waters of the Black Atlantic, the Indian Ocean, and sailors, slaves, and coolies of the nineteenth century by showing how Zachary's "freedom" on the *Ibis* is not freedom of will—rather, he is "free" to occupy a different position in the same capitalist system as a white-passing enforcer of the law of the boat upon his mostly Asian subjects.

<sup>3</sup> Greg Grandin's *The Empire of Necessity: Slavery, Freedom, and Deception in the New World* (2014) and Marcus Rediker's *The Amistad Rebellion: An Atlantic Odyssey of Slavery and Freedom* (2013) also help us to imagine complex transnationalisms through the rebellious attempts to seize freedom aboard the slave ships *Tryal* and the *Amistad*. See also Kane G. Landers, *Atlantic Creoles in the Age of Revolutions* (2010).

I also point out that *Sea of Poppies* also rejects my attempt to intellectualize its plot. While Gilroy considers a range of mostly Black intellectual subjects in *The Black Atlantic*, Ghosh writes about the average, debased, and abused African American and Asian who experiences limited mobility across the Black Atlantic and the Indian Ocean. These characters of color, like Zachary Reid, do not have the privilege of writing their own narratives. In this novel, Ghosh removes them from older systems of order that silence their voices from the historical archive to reveal their shared debasement and suppression as they sail the vast, open sea.

### Reading the Black Atlantic into the Indian Ocean

*Sea of Poppies* is a recent and well-reviewed novel, the first in Ghosh's Ibis Trilogy. It takes place in 1838, just one year before the Opium Wars began between Britain and China. The novel describes the journey of a former British slave ship, the Ibis, from Baltimore, Maryland to Calcutta, India, the center of the opium and coolie trades. The Ibis, in the wake of Britain's Slavery Abolition Act of 1833, must then take Asian indentured laborers and convicts—or, "coolies"—from Calcutta to the island of Mauritius to replace slaves on its plantations.<sup>4</sup> Upon their future arrival in Mauritius, the coolies will cultivate poppy seeds into opium. The ship voyage signals a series of additional transformations: Class and caste in *Sea of Poppies* does not remain static. Language and culture intermix. The novel, undoubtedly inspired by the expansive wordplay of Herman Melville's *Moby Dick* (1851), contains its own dictionary.<sup>5</sup> Ghosh's characters also struggle over power—about who has the right to impose it, and upon whom. In this way, I argue that his characters mirror the upcoming struggle between China and Britain over the concept of free trade.<sup>6</sup>

Though mostly preoccupied with the opium trade, *Sea of Poppies* also allows us to imagine the voyage of Zachary Reid, a free African American sailor, and an interchange between the British presence in the Black Atlantic and the Indian Oceans. Zachary Reid is one of the myriad characters who attempts to use the ship to escape the suppression in his homeland.<sup>7</sup>

<sup>4</sup> See *Coolie Woman: An Odyssey of Indenture* by Gaiutra Bahadur (2013) for more on the nature of coolie labor on plantations. The British transported one million coolies to plantations like British Guiana, Trinidad, Jamaica, Suriname, Mauritius, and Fiji between the years of 1830 and 1880 (xx). Bahadur points out that the term "coolie" was originally an epithet that the British used toward their workers (ibid.). I use the term "coolie" not to reproduce the violence of this term, but to emulate the novel's vocabulary.

<sup>5</sup> Fanon argues that "the characteristic of a culture is to be open, permeated by spontaneous, generous, fertile lines of force" ("Racism and Culture" in *Toward the African Revolution*, 34). Thus, we can consider that mixed races and languages on the boat—for whom the accompanying dictionary is not always accurate—reveal how *Sea of Poppies* portrays a culture that is singular to the interaction of various groups aboard the ship.

<sup>6</sup> See W. Travis Hanes, *The Opium Wars: The Addiction of one Empire and the Corruption of Another*; (2002).

<sup>7</sup> One could undertake a similarly expansive study of any of the novel's characters, like Deeti, Paulette, Jodu, Neel, or Serang Ali, especially with attention to the terms of voluntary and forced migration. Vilashini Coopan urges against any area study of the novel that may attempt to create a primary mode of analysis—each holds equal weight in the narrative. ("Net Work: Area Studies, Comparison, and Connectivity" in *PMLA* 128.3 (2013), 615–621).

While scholars have analyzed *Sea of Poppies* from historical, linguistic, and literary standpoints, few have focused solely on Zachary Reid and the Black Atlantic.<sup>8</sup> Jacob Crane uses the concept of the Black Atlantic to point out that Ghosh recognizes the dearth of nineteenth century sources written by South Asian laborers. Crane argues that Ghosh uses his allusion to, and revision of, the autobiography of Frederick Douglass to expand that Black Atlantic text outwards. Therefore, Crane argues that Ghosh uses the novel to “fill a conspicuous void in the modern history of labor migration and displacement” by revealing the parallels between the Atlantic and Indian Ocean diasporas (Crane 2011). But, transnational literary critics like Isabel Hofmeyr warn us against over-reading through comparative approaches used by scholars like Crane under the umbrella of the Black Atlantic. At their worst, Hofmeyr explains, cross-comparisons can “appear to imply transnational processes emanating from the West and then radiating outward,” lending themselves to various forms of exclusion (Hofmeyr 2007). In actuality, I notice that the dearth of sources causes Ghosh himself to overextend the waters of the Black Atlantic. I respond to Crane and Hofmeyr by recognizing that my training has best equipped me to focus on Zachary and the particular plight that he faces as an African American character aboard the *Ibis*. In this article, I intend to animate Zachary to diversify the discourse on *Sea of Poppies*, not to dismiss the South Asian characters of *Sea of Poppies*.

I further argue that Ghosh demands that we remember the legacy of the Black Atlantic and the United States when the *Ibis* begins its journey. For example, he begins *Sea of Poppies* with a specific evocation of the Middle Passage. One of Zachary’s earliest duties is to re-fit the *Ibis* for its new owner, Burnham Bros. It is an undermanned, degraded, and disorderly ship whose crew routinely fights with one another. Nine of the 19 crewmen, including Zachary, are Black (Ghosh 2008a, b).<sup>9</sup> While refitting the ship, Zachary confronts a fossilized history of the transport of Africans to the Americas for the development of agriculture and capitalism. Zachary discovers that “the ‘tween deck, where the schooner’s human cargo had been accommodated, was riddled with peepholes and air ducts, bored by generations of captive Africans” (ibid.). Zachary must remove this material archive of slavery—his ancestral legacy—from the *Ibis* to invoke his existence as an African American sailor: In so doing, he attempts to negate the history of African cargo and replace it with coolies.

I argue that this scene begins Zachary’s symbolic exchange of the Black Atlantic with the Indian Ocean—as second mate, he becomes “the link between the two parts of the ship” (Ghosh 2008a, b). He “rises” to second in command after the original second mate, “who was a hard-horse, hated by every black man in the crew, fell overboard and drowned” (Ghosh 2008a, b). Only Zachary offers to replace the second mate, even though “everyone knew the fall to be no accident” (ibid.). Even further, after Zachary becomes second mate, “The reputation of the *Ibis* was so damaged that not a single American or European, not even the worst rufflers and rum-gaggers, could be induced to sign on: the only seamen who would venture on her decks were lascars” (ibid.).

<sup>8</sup> See for example Antoinette Burton’s “Amitav Ghosh’s World Histories from Below” (*History of the Present* 2.1, 71–77), and Anita Roy’s review “Charting Histories” (*India International Centre Quarterly*, 32.2, 198–202).

<sup>9</sup> We later learn that Zachary initially does not realize that it would be to his disadvantage to reveal his racial heritage to the record keeper upon first boarding the *Ibis*, Ghosh p. 491.

Zachary inherits a legacy of degradation and violence, and this legacy never fully escapes the *Ibis*. His ascension is falsely heroic.

Once Zachary becomes a ship mate, he realizes that the merchants have invested in coolie labor. Today, however, and unlike the clippers of Zachary's Baltimore, the *Ibis* will export its own "cash crops," poppy seeds and opium, because it is "not swift enough" to continue to illegally transport slaves from West Africa where British and American vessels patrol the coast (ibid.). Furthermore, ignorant and money-hungry characters like Ben Burnham, the English owner of the *Ibis*, conflates these two oceanic systems while justifying himself for smuggling coolie laborers. He points out that it was America who gave him his ship "so perfectly suited for its cargo" (ibid.). He explains, "When the doors of freedom were closed to the African, the Lord opened them to a tribe that was yet more needful of it—the Asiatick," he explains to Zachary, "... A hold that was designed to carry slaves will serve just as well to carry coolies and convicts" (ibid.). Burnham treats the bodies of both Atlantic and Indian Ocean captives as equal currency and to "link" the "two parts of the ship," Zachary must do the same.

But Burnham's plan to transform the *Ibis* requires universalizing language, the same language that Hofmeyr warns us against reproducing in our scholarship. Burnham equates slaves and coolies as inhuman microcosms to exploit profit. The ship's superiors consistently use language that reveals their attitude about the interchange of races. For example, "The Captain declared them [the lascars] to be as lazy a bunch of niggers as he had ever seen" (ibid.). In contrast, Zachary discovers that the lascars who fill the *Ibis* are transnational: "They came from places that were far apart, and had nothing in common, except the Indian Ocean; among them were Chinese and East Africans, Arabs and Malays, Bengalis and Goans, Tamils and Arkanese." (ibid.).<sup>10</sup> Lascars are comprised of, but not limited to, coolie laborers. Ghosh explains that the history of the term reveals its nautical and colonial usage. The reference to "lascars" aboard the ship as a means of indiscriminately referring to "Arabs, South Asians, Malays, east Africans and Chinese" undermines the diversity of this class of ship hands.

Ultimately, Burnham's speech reveals that Zachary has exposed the global pervasiveness of capitalist exploit. Although we can discuss the exploit of coolie laborers in conjunction with African slaves (and their descendants) despite Burnham's universalizing rhetoric, fundamental differences characterize and constrain both groups, differences that the novel insists upon at various turns.<sup>11</sup> For the remainder of this article, I focus on the racialized struggle that Zachary

<sup>10</sup> Ghosh, "Of Fanas and Forecastles: The Indian Ocean and Some Lost Languages of the Age of Sail," *Economic and Political Weekly* 43.25, 57.

<sup>11</sup> Like Black slaves, Asian coolies were targeted for their ability to work on land (in the tropics). See L.G.W. White, *Ships, Coolies and Rice* (1936). 15). Coolies also died in large numbers, and they are shipped to penal islands. (Clare Anderson's *Subaltern Lives: Biographies of Colonialism in the Indian Ocean World, 1790–1920* (2012)). However, in *Coolie Woman*, Bahadur traces the etymology of the word "coolie," explaining that it comes from the Tamil word "kuli" for "wages or hire" (xx). Theorists like Frank Wilderson would note that this opportunity to earn wages—even if poor ones—is one of the most fundamental differences between coolies and slaves as false participants within an economic system.

experiences as a white-passing Black character, a struggle that undermines his rise to power aboard the *Ibis*.

### “Mus wear propa cloths”: Zachary’s Education in the Performance of White Gentility

Who is Zachary, and how does he become the link between the two parts of the *Ibis*? Before his journey into the Indian Ocean, Zachary, a 20-year-old, sharp-tongued son of a Maryland freedwoman, appears in the novel as a man who “laughed easily and carried himself with a carefree lightness” (Ghosh 2008a, b). Unlike the narrators of most nineteenth century slave narratives, “he took no small pride in the fact of knowing his precise age and the date of his birth” (ibid.). He is naïve and privileged. Yet despite Zachary’s seemingly lighthearted life, Ghosh sharply describes the “push” factors that propelled Zachary away from the USA and into an unknown abyss. The most potent example occurs when Zachary remembers an instance of brutal violence and “crude racism” at a shipyard in Baltimore.<sup>12</sup> While aboard the *Ibis*, he

... closed his eyes, and, for the first time in many months, his vision turned inwards, traveling back across the oceans to his last day at Gardiner’s shipyard in Baltimore. He saw again a face with a burst eyeball, the scalp torn open where a hand spike had landed, the dark skin slick with blood. He remembered, as if it were happening again, the encirclement of Freddy Douglass, set upon by four white carpenters; he remembered the howls, ‘Kill him, kill the damned nigger, knock his brains out’; he remembered how he and the other men of color, all free, unlike Freddy, had held back, their hands stayed by fear. And he remembered, too, Freddy’s voice afterwards, not reproaching them for their failure to come to his defense, but urging them to leave, scatter. ‘It’s about jobs, the whites won’t work with you, freeman or slave: keeping you is their way of saving their bread.’ That was when Zachary had decided to quit the shipyard and seek a berth on a ship’s crew. (Ghosh 2008a, b).

This scene establishes the limits of Zachary’s freedom in the increasingly systemic, violent, and quotidian manifestations of white supremacy. Freddy’s suffering warns us that any African American—“freeman or slave”—who might violate the rules of that supremacist society can face a violent punishment, whether by “a hand spike” or suffering from “a burst eyeball” (Ghosh 2008a, b). I echo Saidiya Hartman who has argued that the banality of such performative scenes of violence in the antebellum USA is precisely their horror: Zachary sees Freddy’s beating while otherwise engaged in a normal day at work.<sup>13</sup> Therefore, I contend that although Zachary has some “freedom”—particularly, his ability to change jobs—his life in Baltimore alerts us to

<sup>12</sup> According to Fanon, “Racism is not the whole but the most visible, the most day-to-day and, not to mince matters, the crudest element of a given structure. ... Racism, as we have seen, is only one element of a vaster whole: that of the systematized oppression of a people.” *Toward the African Revolution: Political Essays* (1994). 33.

<sup>13</sup> See Saidiya Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection: Terror, Slavery, and Self-Making in Nineteenth Century America* (1997).



the pervasiveness of racial prejudice and to the inhumane treatment that all African Americans face. Zachary attempts to flee this normalized violence, and the persistent threat of harm by boarding the *Ibis*.<sup>14</sup> But Zachary's memory of the shipyard reveals that he has not escaped that racialized threat. Although the *Ibis* initially symbolized his freedom and his mobility, that Zachary's "vision turned inwards" reveals that he carries this traumatic memory in his emotional body.

The poignance of the Baltimore shipyard in *Sea of Poppies* also derives from its continuities with Frederick Douglass' experiences. Jacob Crane has noticed Freddy's resemblance to Frederick Douglass, a protagonist in African American history, who escaped in 1838, the same year that Zachary sails aboard the *Ibis*. Crane then argues that Douglass' autobiography shows the continuities between the Black Atlantic and the Indian Ocean, and that Douglass' texts helps Ghosh to recover the lost subaltern voices of the nineteenth century Indian Ocean. I further argue that Ghosh does not just conflate Freddy with Douglass, but rather, he conflates Zachary with Douglass. The nuances of Douglass' life are crucial to my point here. Paul Gilroy has pointed out that Frederick Douglass caulked ships in Baltimore and that "he had less to say about the embarrassing fact that the vessels he readied for the ocean—Baltimore Clippers—were slavers, the fastest ships in the world and the only craft capable of outrunning the British blockade" (Gilroy 1993). Both Zachary and Douglass paradoxically seek freedom while helping to refurbish slave ships.

Thus, from early in the novel, Douglass embodies Ghosh's portrayals of freedom in a maritime context, the failures of achieving freedom as a Black body in a globally capitalist system, and, ultimately, the irony of gaining more mobility by participating in that system of exploit. Therefore, Zachary's journey across the Atlantic signals not his loss of subjectivity, but his reclaiming of his humanity and of his power by way of becoming an oppressor of his Asian subjects.<sup>15</sup> In this way, Ghosh characterizes the *Ibis* as both constraining and liberating for Zachary: He can perform the roles of gentleman and second mate at sea, but, like the Southern beating he suddenly remembers, Zachary cannot escape his inferiority.<sup>16</sup>

The impact of the Negro Seamen Acts further solidifies my claim about Zachary's inability to be "free" in the Indian Ocean, and prevents us from assuming that Zachary's fear is merely psychological. He has attempted to ascend into a class that was denied African American sailors during the first half of the nineteenth century. Free African American sailors—mobile, sophisticated, well-educated, and worldly—shared

<sup>14</sup> From Orlando Patterson's *Slavery and Social Death: A Comparative Study* (1982). "Indeed, the single most important factor determining the condition of the freedman in the society at large will be the nature of his relationship with his former master," 240.

<sup>15</sup> That journey aspires to create a brotherhood of the boat between the ship's subjects, perhaps Ghosh's imagined compliment to the Middle Passage in which Africans created new forms of kinship under the pressures of their shared suffering. Simon Gikandi of Princeton University discussed the Middle Passage and subjectivity in his lecture, "Inside the Atlantic Crypt: Rethinking the Archive of Enslavement" as New York University's (Graduate School of Arts and Science) English Department's Goldstone Lecture of 2014 on March 5, 2014.

<sup>16</sup> Fanon explains this phenomenon occurs as a result of the nuanced system of racial exploit that persists despite the oppressed (Zachary) imitating his oppressor through his "gentlemanly guise." While "having judged, condemned, abandoned his cultural forms, his language, his food habits, ... the oppressed *flings himself* upon the imposed culture with the desperation of a drowning man" and yet "the necessity that the oppressor encounters at a given point to dissimulate the forms of exploitation does not lead to the disappearance of this exploitation." *Toward the African Revolution* (1994), 39.

radical texts and ideas. They returned home to tell their communities about what they had learned about culture and liberty during their travels. They also helped slaves to escape. For these reasons, the Negro Seamen Acts emerged in the USA. First practiced in South Carolina in 1822, similar versions of the Acts quickly spread to Maryland (Zachary's home), in addition to Louisiana, Georgia, and Spanish Cuba (Bolster 1997).<sup>17</sup> The laws mandated that free African Americans were not allowed to command large ships. In addition, the Seamen Acts reflected the hostile Southern atmosphere in which the kidnapping and the incarceration of free, Northern, African American sailors became a common practice. African Americans were only allowed to perform roles that maintained a strict separation between free/enslaved and while remembering that they were all still subordinate to whites. Against this historical backdrop, I contend that even if Zachary did not pass as white, his role as a sailor would be dubious.

So, in an attempt to exert some control over the permanence of his freedom, Zachary becomes a proxy for the British colonizer. He precariously ascends the ranks. When Zachary boards the *Ibis* with "great eagerness" and a general ignorance about sailing as a profession, he immediately adopts and performs stereotypical and superficial markers of whiteness—he passes for white, dresses and speaks like a gentleman, and he enforces the law of the boat (Ghosh 2008a, b). And Zachary easily passes. As a mulatto, Zachary has "skin the color of ivory" and "the pupils of his eyes were as dark as his hair, except that they were flecked with sparks of hazel" (ibid.). These features subvert the racism that relies on stereotypical markers of "blackness" and "whiteness" in order to assign privilege, especially as the USA became increasingly anxious about preserving whiteness as a monolith in the face of increasing rates of miscegenation.<sup>18</sup> Zachary, like other mulattoes of the antebellum USA, could "pass" for white in public, and even, with careful strategy, choose to live among whites, and enjoy social superiority by inhabiting those spaces.<sup>19</sup> Although Zachary is technically

<sup>17</sup> By the time these restrictions were revised or lifted, by the mid-century and the approaching Civil War, Northern free African Americans had less economic license to sail.

<sup>18</sup> Martha Hodes explains that the 1890 census was the first and only to divide African Americans into four categories—Black, mulatto, quadroon, and octoroon. This census alludes to anxieties that began with the rise of abolitionism in the 1830s, when Zachary sails aboard the *Ibis*. Thus, throughout the nineteenth century, the American empire has consistently and increasingly depended on physical markers of the "other" so that they may be excluded from privilege. ("Fractions and Fictions in the United States Census of 1890" in *Haunted by Empire: Geographies of Intimacy in North American History* ed. Laura Ann Stoler. 2006, 242).

<sup>19</sup> Ghosh also presents us with a complex portrayal of "passing." *Sea of Poppies* is set in the nineteenth century, but Ghosh writes it during the twenty-first, so we must venture to believe that Ghosh has thought of earlier novels about the act of passing. Ghosh rejects the "tragic mulatto" stereotype. Rather, Zachary emerges as the hero of the *Ibis*, and not a depressed (or dead) victim, by the final pages of *Sea of Poppies* when he overcomes his racist boss, Mr. Crowle, in a tense showdown, when Ah Fatt kills Crowle with a handspike. But he is only heroic because he seems "white."

Zachary might have enjoyed certain advantages due to his less-obvious racial appearance. The text is not specific in this regard. We know that Zachary's mother was a freedwoman. Therefore, Zachary does not necessarily gain advantages on the *Ibis* that he would never have experienced otherwise if he chose to pass in the USA.

Finally, Zachary is not the only character who passes. Paulette, who is white, fights throughout the novel for the opportunity to serve as one of the ship hands aboard the *Ibis*. Zachary is stunned by her determination to pass not for high rank, but to descend in rank. "It's not only that you're a woman—it's also that you're white. The *Ibis* will be failing with an all-lascar crew which means that only her officers will be "European," as they say here," Zachary explains (301). "Anything Jodu can do, I can do also," Paulette argues. "It is true that he is darker, but I am not so pale that I could not be taken for an Indian" (302). In these ways, Ghosh both upholds and destabilizes stereotypical conceptions of the act of passing.



listed as “Black” in the ship’s registry, the text makes little reference to his Blackness until the ending when Zachary confronts his superior, Mr. Crowle (Ghosh 2008a, b). Therefore, Zachary becomes second mate, a role typically reserved for white Europeans, by passing as white.

Zachary creates an intricate disguise to signify his superior rank and his superior class. Zachary wears the costume of a “gentleman” so that the Asians he encounters on land do not “Shanghai” (kidnap) him. At first, when Zachary prepares to deliver a letter at Port Louis, Mauritius, he shrugs at the prospect of changing his loose-fitting clothes, and of washing his hair (ibid.). Serang Ali, a leader of a lascar company, persistently tells Zachary that he must wear proper attire to signal his superior rank: “Plenty blackbirder wanchi catch one piece slave,” he warns. “Malum go be Shanghaied, made slave, allo time floggin, beatin. No good” (Ghosh 2008a, b). After a few further miscommunications, Zachary soon stands in front of a mirror, “looking at an almost unrecognizable image of himself” (ibid.). Zachary’s transformation astonishes himself, too. While observing his new look, he remarks, “Hey! They’ll make me Mayor, for sure” (ibid.). In addition to the proper clothing, also Serang Ali equips Zachary with a pistol.

While wearing the proper clothing, Zachary must speak like a member of the higher caste. Ghosh describes this process in another extended scene, which I abbreviate here:

...it was about time, the pilot said, that he, Zachary, stopped behaving like a right gudda—‘that’s a donkey in case you were wondering.’ This was India, where it didn’t serve a sahib to be taken for a clodpoll of a griffin... *This was no Baltimore* this was a jungle here, with biscobras in the grass and wanderoos in the trees. If he, Zachary, wasn’t to be diddled and taken for a flat, he would have to learn to gubbrow the natives with a word or two of the zubben. ... ‘The zubben, dear boy, is the flash lingo of the East ... Just a little peppering of nigger-talk mized with a few girleys. But mind your Oordoo and Hindee doesn’t sound too good: don’t want the world to think you’ve gone native.’ (Ghosh 2008a, b)<sup>20</sup>

Here, Zachary learns that his education in white gentility is a precaution against the dangers of misarticulation (Zachary must use the right vocabulary) and of mistranslation (Zachary must not “be taken for a clodpoll of a griffin”). His performance also represents the hybridity of culture that characterizes Ghosh’s subaltern world—Zachary, our link between the two parts of the ship, must also blend his work choice and fake his fluency in “Oordoo and Hindee.” Therefore, Zachary treats language as a tool for tricking others into believing in his superiority. I point to Zachary’s brief memory of his mother’s discipline as further evidence of his performativity. “But not had she spared him her hand when he’d shown signs of getting all seddity and airish; to watch her soon playing the spook would set her turning in her grave” (ibid.). Zachary’s “seddity” fluency—“bourgeois” in African American slang—has primed him to perform his role as second mate aboard the *Ibis*. In this way, Ghosh portrays Zachary as consistently rejecting low class behaviors to portray himself as a man of privilege. Zachary soon understands the social impact of his physical transformation. He realizes that “he was to become what no lascar could be—a ‘Free Mariner’, the kind of sahib

<sup>20</sup> My emphasis.

officer they called a *malum*. For Serang Ali and his men Zachary was almost one of themselves, while yet being endowed with the power to undertake an impersonation that was unthinkable for any of them; it was as much for their own sakes as for his that they wanted to see him succeed” (Ghosh 2008a, b). Zachary’s power is so rare in this nineteenth century context that even his supposed inferiors wish to see him reign.<sup>21</sup> As a *sahib*—a “master”—Zachary not only adopts a new set of clothing and vocabulary, he becomes the most revered rank (*ibid.*).

As he inhabits the system of coolie labor as a man of high rank, Zachary also adopts the racist language and behaviors that his superiors have taught him. On the Indian Ocean, Zachary operates from a standpoint that demands that India, and the East at large, is “no Baltimore,” but, rather, “a jungle.” As a result, Zachary mimics the language that both his high rank peers, and American writers, used against Blacks, characterizing them as inherently savage, uncivilized terrain, in need of forcible taming, and meant only to work on the land.<sup>22</sup> For example, during his first days on the *Ibis*, the style of dress among the lower class lascars disturbs Zachary. He felt “...they appeared ridiculous more than anything else. ... it still discomfited Zachary to see them in the rigging, hanging like monkeys on the ratlines: when their sarongs blew in the wind, he would avert his eyes for fear of what he might see if he looked up” (Ghosh 2008a, b). Similarly, when Zachary first arrives at the plantation in Port Louis, Zachary feels relieved that Serang Ali equipped him with a gun after he first sees a group of “expressionless” slaves watching him (*ibid.*). Zachary’s inferiors are supposedly untamable and animalistic, and although he does not speak as violently against them, he does fear them. His duty which now entails that he, too, violently control those laborers if the need should arise.

To complicate my argument about Zachary’s racist attitude, I must point out that he does attempt to befriend ship hands like Serang Ali. But, to retain his superior role, the novel shows that Zachary must continue to degrade the ship’s laborers, especially under the watch of his racist ship owner Ben Burnham and the first mate Mr. Crowle. When Burnham meets Zachary, he warns him against trusting Serang Ali due to his supposedly inherently violent nature. “That old Mug of a Serang...That’s what they call the Arkanese in these parts,” Burnham says. “The very word strikes terror into the natives of the coast. Fearsome bunch the Mugs—pirates to a man, they say” (Ghosh 2008a, b). Mr. Crowle also keeps Zachary under close watch. When Zachary asks, “What was I to do? Pretend he [Neel] doesn’t exist?” Crowle responds, “Exactly. Present he don’t exist. ‘S not yer place to be talking with the quoddies and coolies” (*ibid.*). Although Zachary wants to merge “the two parts of the ship”—its high and low classes—his

<sup>21</sup> While at Port Louis, it is the lascars with training in tailoring who mend Zachary’s clothes and who properly dress him. Serang Ali remains committed to helping Zachary upkeep his image. “It was as if he had acquired a claim on him, in having aided in his transformation into a *sahib*; no matter how much Zachary cursed and slapped his hands, he would not stop: it was as if he had become an image of gentility, equipped with all that it took to find success in the world,” 22. These lower ranks create the image of gentility from which Zachary will benefit, not unlike the ways in which the hands of these ranks later cultivate the poppy seeds from which the British Empire would benefit.

<sup>22</sup> See Paul Outka, *Race and Nature from Transcendentalism to the Harlem Renaissance (Signs of Race)* (2013).

attempts at creating a brotherhood cannot survive the rigid and ruthless policing of Burnham and Crowle. (In turn, throughout the novel, Zachary polices characters like Paulette, telling her to uphold an elitist attitude toward the workers, although to a less vicious extent than Crowle advocates attitude).

Thus, Zachary's fabricated superiority depends on his enforcement of a strict boundary between himself and the colonized, of avoiding the "miscegenation and mongrelism" of the "decayed" Spanish and Portuguese, and, as such, maintaining strictly delineated lines of empire (ibid.). "The day that the natives lose faith in us, as the guarantors of the order of castes," the Captain explains, "that will be the day, gentlemen, that will doom our rule" (ibid.). The paranoia that Mr. Crowle, Ben Burnham, and the Captain express about the "natives" at their disposal derives from the pressures of global capitalism. Despite the repulsion that Blacks and coolies seem evoke in their superiors, those superiors actually rely on that underclass to solidify the foundation of their power. The material foundation of the *Ibis*, which contains the history of African slaves, symbolizes this dependence, one of the greatest challenges to attaining a brotherhood of the boat. In this context, I argue that Zachary, as an African American, is especially vulnerable to becoming another nameless Black ship hand if anyone should disrobe him of his clothing. We cannot claim that Zachary achieves freedom at sea because he has not and cannot change the nature of his inferiority. He has simply made it more difficult to detect.

We witness Zachary's fragility when he meets Neel, the new Raja of Rashkali. Neel invites Burnham to his home for a dinner party to discuss Neel's debts to Burnham Bros. He spurns Zachary's attempt to shake his hand. "Keep your hands to yourself, you gudda of a griffin," the pilot whispers to Zachary, "Touch him and he'll be off to bathe, and we won't be fed 'til midnight" (ibid.). Although Neel seems motivated not just by racism but also by xenophobia (as evidenced by his fixation on Zachary as a "foreigner" throughout the dinner), and while Neel soon shifts his thinking, musing that Zachary could be "descended from an old, aristocratic family," Neel's initial reaction reminds us that Zachary's high rank is artificial (Ghosh 2008a, b). Neel immediately notices that Zachary is "evidently at some pains to dress for the occasion" (ibid.).<sup>23</sup>

Later, Neel's suspicions are confirmed when Crowle finally discovers Zachary's Blackness by way of the crew list. Crowle, who originally seemed afraid of Zachary's rank (despite Crowle's higher rank as first mate), feels relieved. Crowle argues that Zachary's Blackness will make it easier for Crowle to stage a mutiny with him aboard the ship. "Y'made a fool o'me with yer tofficky trolly-wags and yer buncomising tongue," he says, "thought y'was way above my touch. But this'ere paper changes everything—I'd never'a thought I could've been so far off course. ... Y'think life owes y'any different just cause ye're a m'latter?" (Ghosh 2008a, b). Crowle's discovery reminds Zachary again that his status as a "propa pukka sahib" can be as easily removed as the clothing that he wears, especially when he encounters a character of

<sup>23</sup> Ironically, later in the novel, Neel will lose his caste after committing forgery, and he becomes a prisoner aboard the *Ibis*. Both Neel's reaction to Zachary, and Neel's own humiliating descent, remind us how easily power can be undermined for Ghosh's characters.

higher rank who suspects—let alone who knows—that he is Black.<sup>24</sup> Once Zachary’s race is discovered, Crowle assumes that Zachary becomes a pawn, rather than a man of power. No vocabulary or clothing can convince Crowle of otherwise.

### The Limits of African American and Asian Cosmopolitanism

While *Sea of Poppies* testifies to the herculean force of empire and capitalism, Ghosh responds to this legacy by creating a fuller subjectivity for his colonial characters than they enjoy in our archives—his characters have personalities, friendships, love, and agency.<sup>25</sup> Ghosh seems keenly aware of both nineteenth century African American and Asian history, and he uses his knowledge to push back against its silencing of the plight of the underclass. In his personal essay “Confessions of a Xenophile,” Ghosh describes his fascination with colonialism’s interruption of the potential for cosmopolitanism (Ghosh 2012). In this context, I consider *Sea of Poppies* as Ghosh’s lament about colonial dehumanization which stifled the potential for a durable cosmopolitanism between subaltern groups on his ship.

But *Sea of Poppies* ends with uncertainty after Crowle is killed. Of course, part of this uncertainty serves as a segway to the second and third novels of Ghosh’s trilogy. But perhaps the characters are also unsure about the *Ibis*’s fate without Crowle. Will their attempt at cosmopolitanism survive? Much like the dark and violent history of the *Ibis*, the system they inhabit relies on a permanent underclass. For Zachary especially, the archive of suffering that he attempts to remove from the ship upon first boarding has unavoidable implications for his existence. The imprints of those slaves may suggest that as Zachary travels, even as he takes painstaking efforts to effectively pass as white, Zachary will persistently face suspicion about his racial heritage and about whether he is truly of high rank.

The trajectory of the trilogy further supports my claims about the vulnerability of his freedom and its predication on the rejection of his poverty and of his Blackness. His status as a free sailor becomes increasingly irrelevant as the trilogy progresses. In the second installment of the *Ibis* trilogy, *River of Smoke* (2012), although Zachary is no longer a central character, we learn that a scandal haunts him: He is held responsible for a capsized boat of coolies who escapes from his ship. By the end of the novel, he is finally cleared of this charge. In *Flood of Fire* (2015), Zachary is acquitted of his charges, and early book reviews describe him as “hungry” for Benjamin Burnham’s elite status. Ultimately, I conclude that Ghosh’s very point is to portray Zachary’s life as second mate as fictional so that we may encounter the material conditions, like the *ibis*, that bear the mark of African suffering. In the 19th century seas of both the Atlantic and Indian Oceans, Zachary will never out sail the waters of prejudice.

<sup>24</sup> Crowle dies moments later after “the half-Chinese convict,” Ah Fatt, hits him with a handspike, a moment which brings us full-circle from Zachary’s memory of the Baltimore shipyard. I struggle to interpret Baboo Non Kissin’s reaction to Zachary’s mixed race. He thinks that Zachary’s blackness reveals that he’s an inmate of the Dark Lord. We might interpret this in a similar vein as to how the American slave master often conflated himself as a “god” to his subjects so that they believed white skin evoked the deity.

<sup>25</sup> Furthermore, Ghosh explains that he is interested in how decolonial movements in Third World countries during the nineteenth century had aspired to create their own universalism—i.e., sending letters across the globe as a means of resuming cross-cultural conversation.

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### Compliance with Ethical Standards

**Conflict of Interest** There is no conflict of interest (no receipt of research grants nor honorariums). I am a fully funded 4th year PhD candidate at New York University.

The only potential conflict that I can account for might come from my presentation of an early draft of a portion of this essay during a panel at the CUNY Graduate Center conference in English ("Currents of the Black Atlantic") in March 2014. My moderator there was Jacqueline Brown of CUNY Hunter.

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