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### Avian, anal, outlaw

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Avian, Anal, Outlaw: Queer Ecology in E.M. Forster's *Maurice*

In the introduction to *Queer Ecology*, Catriona Mortimer-Sandilands and Bruce Erickson invoke the art of Walt Whitman and Henry David Thoreau in acknowledging that “natural settings have been important sites for the exploration of male homosexuality” and “rural spaces in particular have served, in a wide range of literatures, as places of freedom for male homoerotic encounters” (23). To this acknowledgment they append a parenthetical whose opening reads, “famously, in Forster's *Maurice*.” E.M. Forster's novel, written in 1913 but not published until after his death in 1971, appears one more time in their introduction in connection with the influence of the 19<sup>th</sup> century “utopian socialist” Edward Carpenter, who is claimed to have transmitted to Forster and others his belief in the harmonious fit between “rural natures” and “the Uranian temperament” (27-28).

Mortimer-Sandilands' and Erickson's inclusion of *Maurice* in a literary corpus devoted to “male homoeroticism as a central facet of the pastoral depiction of nature as a site for innocent, corporeal plenitude” (23) extends a rather conventional reading of the novel for which its ending—Maurice and the gamekeeper Alec Scudder flee forever into the English greenwood—renders the novel a romantic celebration of nature and gay self-acceptance to the end of making same-sex desire appear a thoroughly natural and individual expression. Forster encouraged this interpretation with his 1960 terminal note to the novel, which nods to the immediate influence of Edward Carpenter and his partner George Merrill (whose touch “just above the buttocks” struck an apparently erotic and aesthetic nerve in Forster's “backside”), declares a “happy ending” to be

“imperative,” and laments the “wildness of our island” giving way to commercial and industrial development (235-240).<sup>1</sup>

But in the essay that follows, I argue that multiple aspects of the novel track less successfully with a pastoral tradition of self-actualizing nature-belonging than they do with the unruly sense of ‘queer ecology’ explored by Mortimer-Sandilands and Erickson, the contributors to their volume, and other scholars working at the intersection of queer studies, the environmental humanities, and the new materialisms. As Mortimer-Sandilands and Erickson explain, “the extension of queer into ecology is not, then, simply a matter of making nature more welcome to gay inhabitation; it is also an invitation to open queer theory to ecological possibilities, and to thus producing a queering of ecological relations” (22). This queering of “ecological relations” further radicalizes the philosophical project of decentering the human as a privileged and self-contained site of analysis and regarding it instead, to quote Elizabeth Povinelli, as an “assemblage (a condensation and congregation) of living and nonliving substances” that render the human internally plural, contingent, and irreducible to a steady and settled self in possession of itself. As Nicole Seymour queries in *Strange Natures*, “if even mainstream environmentalist groups ask us to put the ecosystem ahead of individual human desires, might environmentalism as an impulse then be queer at its very core?” (Seymour 6). Encouraging ecological thought as an indispensable companion to queer theory’s posthuman and

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<sup>1</sup> For example, Jesse Matz writes that Carpenter “seems to have convinced Forster that homosexuality would gain greatest acceptance if refracted through cultural nostalgia—if aligned with longing for such things as the English greenwood” (189). By this logic, the greenwood functions as a safe and naturalizing backdrop for the free expression of homosexual love. However, Matz notes, drawing on Gregory Bredbeck’s work, that Carpenter’s use of Eastern religion to conceptualize Uranian love placed the latter within an “indivisibility of being” that might in fact have more in common with ecological thought than with the transcendent “I” of Whitman (189).

anti-social project, Seymour is also gesturing to the fact that “human desires,” heteronormative or otherwise, are always preceded and predicated by an “ecosystem” that exists “ahead” of their immediate experience, exploration, and “fulfillment”—a word I place in quotation marks to draw attention to a certain congruence in modern thought between the satisfaction of a desire and the filling up of an ego toward the end of self-consolidation.

I use ‘queer’ in this essay in the broad sense employed by Noreen Giffney and Myra Hird in *Queering the Non/Human*, where they invoke the “unremitting emphasis in queer theoretical work on fluidity, uber-inclusivity, indeterminacy, indefinability, unknowability, the preposterous, impossibility, unthinkability, unintelligibility, meaninglessness and that which is unrepresentable [as] an attempt to undo normative entanglements and fashion alternative imaginaries” (4). But I find it curious that on the very next page of their introduction they cite Eve Sedgwick’s famous “pronouncement that ‘there are important senses in which “queer” can signify only *when attached to the first person*...all it takes—to make the description “queer” a true one is the impulsion *to use it in the first person,*” without specifically querying what nonhuman forces might instigate this “impulsion” and what “entanglements” might be obscured or simplified when queer subjectivity is constricted or collapsed into an “I” whose declarations are construed as evidence of its unproblematic unitariness. Claire Colebrook’s contribution to Giffney and Hird’s collection poses just such questions, arguing that Judith Butler’s notion of gender performativity, of which Sedgwick’s first person use of queer constitutes a signal example, is “too reliant on an image of life as coming into being and recognition through effected, critical and destabilizing subjects” (Colebrook 24). In other words, what queer theory continues to need, and what *Maurice* proleptically provides, are interrogations of that integrated and intentional “I” whose conjuration by a queer theory in need of a defiant agent risks taking it

for granted and neglecting its status as a performative site for an array of other agencies that usher it into being, enable its continual becoming, and eclipse its claims to sovereignty. By directing attention to what Mel Y. Chen calls the “animacy” of these other agencies, the novel thinks ecologically and thereby connects the precariousness of queerness—a precariousness summoned throughout the novel by scenes of eroticized decay—to the viability and vulnerability of a “natural” world no longer viewed as separate, not even at the level of the skin, from its human and cultural components.

Its idealistic ending aside (for now), *Maurice* highlights time and again the nonhuman and semi-human spurs to and sources of queerness, making homosexual desire appear not as the unencumbered expression of an integrated sexual subject shorn of social prohibitions and cultural constraints (left free to run wild in the woods) but as the outcome of promiscuous entanglements between permeable, impressionable humans and influential environments that cannot be reduced to passive backdrops for narcissistic narratives of heroic self-flourishing and actualization, including the grand “coming out” stories with which the novel is too often, if understandably, confused. *Maurice* anticipates, I argue, Jeffrey Jerome Cohen’s complaint about queer theory that “a critical movement predicated upon the smashing of boundaries should limit itself to the small contours of human form, as if the whole of the body could be contained in the porous embrace of the skin” (Cohen 40). Focusing instead, or at the same time, on bacteria, pollen, rain, dirt, and other interpenetrating agencies, the novel depicts queering not as a matter of pent-up desires emerging from a repressed but distinct self but rather as the dynamic activity of that “self” interacting, often against its will or in spite of its craving for intimate insulation, with external agencies that easily become internal and in so doing smash the boundaries of which

Cohen writes and the attendant certainties about from whence erotic non-normativity emanates and gathers energy.

These muddled boundaries take on a global dimension as the novel connects the threatened greenwood of England, whose disappearance Forster more explicitly laments in that same “Terminal Note,” with the country of Guatemala, which at the time of the novel’s composition was itself undergoing environmental plunder at the hands of the United Fruit Company. Converting Guatemala into a banana republic, the United Fruit Company commandeered the country’s natural and human resources and fundamentally altered its communications infrastructure with a company-run postal system and, in 1913, the launch of the Tropical Radio and Telegraph Company. *Maurice* registers this far-flung geopolitical transformation with the seemingly inconsequential detail of a set of Guatemalan stamps that Maurice receives from his classmates at the beginning of the novel, on which appears a resplendent quetzal, a symbol of indigenous resistance after which the nation’s currency is named, set atop a triumphant pillar. Connecting the lore about this avian creature with a later scene in which Clive, on a very different sort of pillar, loses control of his bowels and falls out of love with Maurice, and with the novel’s conclusion, in which Maurice merges with the natural world surrounding Clive’s estate, I disclose a transnational and transhistorical imaginary through which expansive ecologies are both adumbrated and connected to matters of sexual awareness and awakening . In doing so, I take up Jessica Berman’s call to “reframe the question about transnational, world, or planetary literature to better understand the centrality of sexuality, embodiment, and gender to national and transnational categories of belonging” (218), where “belonging” is understood, for my purposes, in Timothy Morton’s resolutely posthuman and transspecies sense of becoming “humiliated,” frighteningly and pleasurably, by one’s

embeddedness in ecological networks no longer perceived as masterable or secondary to human endeavor.

### **Avian**

What most strongly marks Guatemala as an important location for *Maurice's* transnational imaginary is the critical location of the stamps in the novel's opening pages. They appear at the very moment Maurice begins to receive a birds-and-bees lesson from his schoolmaster Mr. Ducie. Described as "soaked in evolution" (4)—wedded to a pedagogy, first and foremost, of imperial masculinity and reproductive heterosexuality—Ducie appears concerned that Maurice, whose father died when he was young, has missed some important lessons. He seizes the occasion of Maurice's graduation from his first school and a nature walk intended to celebrate it, to wax grandiloquent over a man's duty "to love a noble woman, to protect and serve her—this, he told the little boy, was the crown of life" (8), where "crown" condenses gender, sexual, national, and imperial normativity. But when Ducie launches into this speech, his charge struggles to focus, exclaiming "the fellows have given me a set of Guatemalas up to two dollars. Look, sir! The ones with the parrot on the pillar on" (5). Restless to rejoin these "fellows" and to revel further in his gift, Maurice must instead patiently endure Ducie's peroration, which includes a visual component of male and female diagrams, presumably interlocked in some fashion, drawn in the sand. The stamps and the avian images they bear both insert friction between Maurice and his imperial education and function as currency between him and the "fellows" whose company he would prefer to keep. His excitement is conveyed both by the exclamation mark and by the jumbled articulation of "parrot on the pillar on," where the pileup of prepositions suggests Maurice's prepossession with the image and, contrary to what we expect

prepositions to secure, a loss of location. It is as if Maurice, like the resplendent quetzal, has been transported elsewhere, across an ocean and across history, spirited away by a linguistic and semiotic excess that is animal, an excess imaged in the male trogon's (crucially, the stamp's image is of specifically male beauty) most distinguishing trait—the unusually long tail it grows as part of its breeding plumage, an enticement to its would-be mates. It's worth noting here that if Maurice mistakes the bird's identity, at this point in the novel he mistakes his own as well.

But a more likely explanation for the mistake is the advertising that accompanied these stamps. Philately, considered an appropriate hobby for young boys, was very popular in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, and countless publications aimed at them, such as *Popular Mechanics*, featured ads for Guatemalan stamps in which the bird was referred to as a parrot.<sup>2</sup> *Mekeel's Stamp Collector*, from 1901, offers a more precise description of the captivating creature: “The republic of Guatemala decorates its stamps and its official documents with the image of a beautiful parrot. The bird is of a rich green color, with tufted head and a long tail, which frequently grows to a length of four or five feet” (213). In addition to its noble carriage and plumage, the parrot—which Mekeel's correctly identifies as a quetzal (213)—is celebrated as a “national emblem” comparable to the “bald eagle.” Captivating in its display, the quetzal is metonymic with freedom, as it assiduously evades, according to Guatemalan traditions that in fact borrow from the indigenous beliefs of ancient Aztecs and Maya, human capture. Legend has it that “the parrots are too wary to be caught in a trap” and that “no parrot has ever been brought from its forest home alive” (213). Rounding out the bird's dramatic reputation for refusing domestication, Mekeel's concludes, “the natives say that the birds always commit suicide [when captured] in the same way, by pecking at their breasts until the jugular vein is exposed. A final peck severs the

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<sup>2</sup> See <https://www.apfelbauminc.com/world-of-stamps-3>



artery and the bird quickly bleeds to death. The quetzal dies, but never surrenders” (213). The refusal to surrender in the face of individual and group death might also apply to the “native Indians” (213) of Guatemala, the only people capable of catching the resplendent quetzal and admirers of the bird’s independent spirit. Indigenous Mesoamericans mainly prohibited slaughter of the bird and trapped it only to remove feathers for headdresses that gave the human an avian cast and the quetzal a human incarnation.<sup>3</sup>

I will return to matters of interspecific identification and environmental sensitivity shortly, but I first want to emphasize the radicalism of Forster’s selection of the resplendent quetzal as a creature that gets Maurice’s attention. By the end of the novel, Maurice, like the bird, would sooner perish than remain in Clive’s company and continue with the stultifying profession he inherited from his father, who like and unlike his son briefly indulged queerness (197) but quickly reformed to become a respectable father and community member. As he approaches the pseudoscientific therapy he cautiously hopes will turn him straight, Maurice reflects, “with the world as it is, one must marry or decay” (156). Of course, decomposition restores one to the soil, and so when Maurice elects to flee with Scudder into the enveloping but endangered greenwood rather than persist in the sham that his troubles have all been about a woman who won’t accept his marriage offers, he performs his embrace of decay, his dematerialization into a constituent but in no way special component of a queer ecology. The dichotomy of “marry or decay” would normatively suggest that whereas marriage enables procreation and subjective expansion, decay entails diminution heading toward nothingness. But in the queer ecological framework of Maurice, as my close reading will continue to show, decay is actually the means by which one cultivates intimacy with human and nonhuman others and

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<sup>3</sup> See <http://mexiconewsdaily.com/news/the-colorful-quetzal-is-facing-extinction/>

comes to experience the fortified self as a depressingly meager apparatus. Maurice asks himself after his first sexual encounter with Scudder, “The life of the earth, Maurice? Don’t you belong to that?” This query follows a description of “park trees,” the very sort in which men might have cruised, as “melt[ing] into one huge creature that had fingers and fists of green” (200), the very color for which the resplendent quetzal is admired. Introspective though Maurice’s thought sequence here may be, it catches him imagining the pleasure to be felt not only in merging with his environment but also in being held and perhaps penetrated by its half-personified “fingers and fists of green.” His appreciation of decay is evinced even in that early walk with Mr. Ducie, who breaks into a panic, “sweating with fear,” when he realizes that a “lady” is approaching and that he forgot to erase “those infernal diagrams” (9) of sexual activity. Maurice reassures his now dethroned elder, “the tide’ll have covered them by now” (9), a precocious recognition of nature’s decaying powers (its agency) and, by comparison, of heterosexuality’s feeble efforts to forestall them. Seeing Ducie sweat bullets briefly illuminates for Maurice that his schoolmaster is a “liar” and a “coward,” the obverse of the brave image he espies in the quetzal that he cannot wait to continue sharing with his male friends whose communion, at least in Ducie’s hands, cannot be diagrammed.

### **Anal**

The irony of the quetzal’s courageous depiction, though, is that it would never voluntarily perch upon a pedestal where it would be vulnerable to prey and apart from the camouflaging forests it prefers (Maurice thinks to himself at one point, “the forests and the night were on his side” (199)). To place it there is to suggest that there can be dignity in precariousness and desirability in exposure, a contradiction embodied by resplendent quetzals, which in spite of their showy tail

feathers can actually remain, within native habitats, quite concealed and resistant to ornithological spectatorship. A similar predicament occurs for Clive, who normally hides his defecation from public consumption but, in a scene of gut-wrenching vulnerability, loses control of his bowels while paying Maurice a visit at the latter's family house. Although he is unwell soon after arrival, his condition appears to worsen when, upon fainting, he receives a distressed kiss from Maurice, who proceeds to want to succor him, absolutely, in his time of need. Their critically neglected exchange unfolds like this:

Before long Clive stirred and said feebly, "oh damnation, oh damnation."

"Want anything?" Maurice called.

My inside's all wrong."

Maurice lifted him out of bed and put him on the night stool. When relief had come he lifted him back.

"I can walk: you musn't do this sort of thing."

"You'd do it for me."

He carried the stool down the passage and cleaned it. Now that Clive was undignified and weak, he loved him as never before.

"You musn't, repeated Clive, when he came back. "It's too filthy."

"Doesn't worry me," said Maurice, lying down. "Get off to sleep again."

"The doctor told me he'd send a nurse."

"What do you want with a nurse? It's only a touch of diarrhea. You can keep on all night as far as I'm concerned. Honestly it doesn't worry me—I don't say this to please. It just doesn't."

"I can't possibly—your office" (97-98).

Clive's "night stool," both his toilet and excrement, associates him with the resplendent quetzal mounted atop its pedestal, although it also conjures the cover of darkness Maurice craves and associates with forests. Here again Maurice, even before he breaks with Clive's meager offerings, embraces decay as a quotidian aspect of committed queerness. The "touch of diarrhea" conjures the penetrative "fists and fingers" of the trees—anal contact Clive simply cannot bear—at the same time that it reinforces the unbearable lightness of human being in a deep and deeply entangled natural world. Maurice quite literally touches this diarrhea, carrying and cleaning it and making it the material of an affectionate attachment in which Clive, despite being laid bare, is "put" lovingly upon a platform whilst Maurice opts not to have a "bed taken in" and to sleep "on the floor with his head on a foot-stool," that is, with his head perhaps propped upon the very contraption that will receive Clive's febrile feces (97).

What is "wrong" with Clive's "inside" is that, in part, it insists upon appearing outside and revealing itself despite Clive's strong intention to keep it down. We could fall prey to a bit of essentialism here and suggest that the real Clive momentarily wins out—the Clive who, critics rarely note, would have been running in fright not simply from the stigma of being gay but also, given his enjoyment at being wrestled with and tossed about by Maurice, of being a total bottom. Bottom shame is on full display in this scene, and its unnameability is conveyed through the vagueness and instability of "it," which morphs from the loving handling of excrement into the excrement itself, as if Clive can't quite believe that his anality could bring pleasure, that his decay could become the shared substance of an amorous bond. That Clive cannot experience this "relief" as a relief, an opportunity for letting another carry the load of his corporeality, attests not only to his shame-averse renunciation of physicality but also to his unwillingness to

acknowledge the diverse ecology he occupies and by which he is occupied. This double refusal undercuts our hypothetical essentialism, because what this transactional scene exposes is that Clive's insides are anything but innermost; they are, in fact, the products of what he ingests and the filth with which he comes into contact, including the homophilic Hellenic tradition he imparts to Maurice, who is described as "descended from the Clive of two years ago," a queer reconfiguration of the normative evolutionary framework touted by Mr. Ducie (230). Filth passed back and forth, be it illicit and obscene reading or actual excrement, describes an environment of unconditional exposure in which identities perpetually become and unbecome, and the insertion of "come" in this scene, particularly in relation to relief, connects it with Maurice's first sexual encounter with Scudder, who climbs through the window at Clive's estate after Maurice, in a sort of somnambulant state that itself performs a limit of sovereign sexual intention, gets out of bed and exclaims to an unknown nature outside (he has no clue Scudder is out there), "Come!" (178).

Clive's estate, Penge, is in fact the scene of multiple impingements that preclude static identity and domestic insularity. If Clive's problem at Maurice's home is that his inside manifests outside, the problem at Penge is that the external keeps manifesting internally. Its under-gamekeeper, tasked with managing the outdoors, dashes up ladders and through windows, and its drawing room is perpetually harassed by the "tap, tap" of rain leaking through the ceiling and onto the "lid of the piano" (157). Like a clock ticking down to Penge's demise—the estate is in disrepair, Clive's wife Anne brings no money to the marriage, and no future heir is in sight—this tapping rain, the rhythm of a natural world refusing to be kept at bay, enters through what Anne calls "the sweetest hole in the ceiling" and interrupts a decidedly conservative conversation bashing "radicals" and "socialists" (157-158) as if to radically retort that some things can never

be fully owned. Anne's fondness for this "dear little hole," as well as her efforts "to probe the piano's entrails with blotting paper," associate her with Maurice, who adored Clive's leaking hole and cleaned his entrails with utter devotion. That Ann recognizes value in this widened sphere of permeability positions her at least momentarily on the side of queerness and serves the important reminder that heteronormative constraints—sometimes reacted to with misogyny by the novel's male characters—hem women in as well, even as they sometimes provide an alibi for those who wish, with frustration or not, to pass. So much, we are told, "could never be mentioned" between Clive and Anne (this includes Clive's past but perhaps Anne's as well): "He never saw her naked, nor she him. They ignored the reproductive and digestive functions" (151). Maurice, of course, did not neglect these "functions," and so this description of heterosexual union cannot help but be read as bereft—not of romance or any such treacle as that, but of "belonging," where desire is understood to emanate from an intimate commingling that includes dirt, grime, urine, sweat, and the various secretions metaphorized by the intrusive and irrepressible rain falling upon the piano's fading ivory.

Things have a tendency to leak in and out of Penge—including Clive's queer predilections, of which Scudder, to Maurice's perverse delight, has caught wind—and this porousness verging on infectiousness continues with Maurice's digestion of sex with Scudder and connects the novel with Forster's more celebrated and more unequivocally modernist *A Passage to India*. After the window episode and the subsequent game of cricket in which Maurice plays alongside Scudder, Maurice's complexion turns "green-white" and he becomes "violently sick" at the thought of his late-night rendezvous (188). Recovering a bit, he insists he must leave Penge, but during the drive with Clive, upon learning that Scudder's father is a "butcher," he becomes nauseated again and declares his head "putrid" (190). Reminiscent of the

gastrointestinal upset experienced by Clive after Maurice's kiss (queerness going viral), Maurice's illness documents an intimate relationship between illicit desire and unwell feeling, as if the enactment of the former necessitates at least a partial evacuation of what has been internalized previously. It is impossible to determine in these scenes—recall that Clive is already a bit under the weather when Maurice kisses him—if queer actions precede stomach problems or are portended by them. A critically neglected episode of just this type occurs in *A Passage to India*. Shortly before the ill-fated expedition to the Marabar Caves, Adela Quested and Mrs. Moore join Dr. Aziz, Professor Godbole, and others for a long-awaited picnic whose contents, it is intimated, lead Aziz and Goldbole to fall ill—the former with fever and the latter with, among other things, diarrhea (99). Adela and Mrs. Moore, the two westerners (the former preoccupied with seeing “the real India”), do not succumb at the same time as their fellow picnickers, but each seems less than robust on the trip to the Marabar Caves that soon follows. Mrs. Moore must sit out most of the cave expedition after becoming overheated, claustrophobic, and nauseated (138), and Adela, as is well known, suffers what might best be called a hallucination that Aziz assaults her, for days after which she lies with fever dreams as imperial sympathizers remove the cactus spines (184) with which she collided while dashing away from her imagined assailant. After she recants her accusation, Adela recalls in a conversation with Fielding that she was not feeling well during the cave exploration, although she can never quite explain what it was, man or animal or echo or cave-dweller—here again the question of ecology is of prime importance—that she felt seized her or that a seizure of her perhaps febrile mind auto-generated or projected (227-228).

These nosological considerations might be trivial were it not for a much earlier episode in the novel when the narrator stages a conversation between Mr. Graysford and Mr. Sorley, two

British missionaries working in India, about the range of life and nonlife capable of ascending to heaven. Nodding to local values, they agree “monkeys” and even “jackals” should be able to pass through the pearly gates, but they grow uneasy at the thought of a variety of other living and semi-living forms, including cactuses, mud, and “the bacteria inside Mr. Sorley,” gaining entry (32). As I have argued elsewhere, by locating these bacteria inside Mr. Sorley, rather than apart from him, the novel makes an implicit case for the ecological eclipse of sovereign humanity and for the futility of trying to separate creatures and to render some exceptional at the others’ expense (107-108). There is no Mr. Sorley absent the bacteria that populate his gastrointestinal tract and that constitute the “mud” inside him, just as after the cave episode Adela discovers how easy it is to find oneself commingled with cacti and feverish contagions. Microbiotic science is increasingly establishing that bacteria do not simply reside in humans, quietly leading their own lives and only reminding us of their existence during times of acute illness, but actively influence multiple dimensions of human personality, specifically anxiety, depression, and other mood disorders—or, to be a little less clinical and pathologizing about it, moods. If we admit bacterial involvement in mood, how far away may we be from identifying its implication in desire—in which case gut feelings might be apprehended not as a metaphor for instinct but as an accurate description of gastro-affective ecologies that render human conduct a multispecies affair?

This question, I have been suggesting, is an unacknowledged preoccupation, sometimes mistaken as mysticism, of Forster’s prose, and its fundamentally ecological orientation means that queerness for him is never simply a choice nor a biological given; it is, instead, a developing situation motored by multiple agencies many of which lie outside individual volition. The force of these agencies, to return to Timothy Morton’s vocabulary, should spawn “ecological humility” as well as “tentativeness” in thinking we can understand queerness, make it a stable site of truth



and knowledge production, or narrow its domain to an encased and environmentally exceptionalized human form. Myra Hird asks provocatively how trans subjectivity might be understood from “a bacterial perspective” (243), highlighting that “the bacteria that move freely into and within our bodies are already infinitely sex diverse” and “will avidly exchange genes with just about any living organism anywhere in the world” (Hird 239). But if bacteria are “beyond the female/male dichotomy of human discourse” (Hird 239), they are also the stuff of which men and women—gay, straight, bi, and trans—are both composed and exposed in unpredictable situations of ecological contact capable of decomposing and recomposing all the parties involved. Margaret McFall-Ngai notes that “the fundamental microbial-ness” of humans—the fact that we “are more microbe than human”—means that every “I” is also a “we” (52), and so by extension my sexuality is also a collective sexuality contingent upon the inputs of organisms whose influence might not always be foreseeable, predictable, digestible, or amenable to essentialist AND constructivist accounts of identity that presuppose relatively stable formations of self and world. Perhaps like Adela, whose seizure came on as she pondered whether she was really doing the right thing in marrying Ronny Heaslop (whom she ends up not marrying), Maurice and Clive experience queerness—fall under its influence or spell, as it were—in compromised and attenuated states brought on, at least in part, by proximity to microbial “bugs” that put a whole new queer spin on buggery by suggesting that a bug in the works of sexuality might transition from extraneous element into a constitutive determinant of desire . This experience of ecological entanglement guarantees nothing politically transgressive, of course—Clive reacts negatively, fleeing to Greece to shore up his platonic and disembodied ideals of same-sex intimacy, rejecting both queerness and the vulnerability his diarrhea made manifest—but in certain instances, like Maurice’s digestion of both Clive’s nausea and his own,

it elicits a tender responsiveness to all that lies outside a person's control, which is not to say, as Sorley's bacteria remind us, outside the person.

In the case of Mistery Sorley and Graysford, as well as Adela and Mrs. Moore, the bacteria out of which they are constituted, and keep getting reconstituted, are the bacteria with which they come into contact in India, meaning the queer ecology to which they belong is fundamentally transnational as well. Mrs. Moore exhibits some of Maurice's compassion for Clive in the hospitality she exercises toward the wasp that occupies her "coat-peg"—on which she bestows the generous designation "pretty dear" (29) in unintended defiance of Sorley's and Graysford's reluctance to accept wasps into heaven—where "peg" conjures something of the pedestal on which perches, every bit as precariously as the wasp Mrs. Moore is supposed to want to kill, the resplendent quetzal and the vulnerable Clive. Maurice's bird is of course an image rather than a living organism, but as a commodity and currency it makes its way to him nonetheless; it becomes a part of an ecology, in this case a global media ecology, to which Maurice, quite simply, belongs. In both cases there appears to be a subtle identification—Mrs. Moore's with the wasp's out-of-placeness (she no more belongs in India than it belongs in her room) and Maurice's with the quetzal's rebellious spirit. Or perhaps we can now say that Maurice not only identifies with the bird but sympathizes with its exposed location upon the pedestal, as if what he wants for it, and at one point for Clive, is not simply exaltation but also, more humbly, the safety and surety of the camouflage it prefers. To the extent that Maurice's and Mrs. Moore's posture of humility makes a case for letting be, for preserving ecologies and ecosystems in their fragility and specific locality, it signals Forster's recognition of a link between sexual freedom, environmental conservation, and anti-imperial politics. Maurice's

unrest at Penge, that is, conjures, without corresponding to, imperial unrest abroad, both in the colonies of Southeast Asia and the banana republics of Central America.

### **Outlaw**

But as I have been arguing, Penge is a liminal zone in which Maurice feels both bottled up and summoned by a natural outside that he cannot help but experience as reciprocating his stormy inside. Shortly before Scudder comes to his window, Maurice feels that Penge is starting to prove less “numbing”—his hypnotherapist, Lasker Jones, recommended an environment in which his patient would not worry and “lie fallow” to the suggestions introduced during his “trance”—than “stimulating.” Its “impressions” are described as “vivid” and “complex,” and its “tangle of flowers and fruit” are depicted as “wreath[ing] his brain!,” in which case Maurice is both intoxicated by his surroundings and converted into them: man, in this case, made plant. And these transspecies transformations continue. After returning from a walk outside Penge, Maurice delights Clive’s mother with his altered appearance, on which she comments in an irreverent interruption of the reverend Mr. Borenius, who had been lecturing her on the dangers of employing “unconfirmed” servants like Alec Scudder (175). She remarks upon Maurice’s “exquisite coiffure,” which due to its saturation with “evening primrose pollen” appears “yellow” and “bacchanalian” (175). This suggestive plant reappears at novel’s end when Maurice releases petals of it from his hand that provide the only evidentiary “trace” of his having been outside with Clive professing his repudiation of normality and carnal desire for the estate owner’s gamekeeper (230).

Fittingly, the flowers of evening primroses open only at night—Clive comes to feel that “his friend...was essential night” (227)—making them botanical companions in Maurice’s

search for a fertile life lived fully under the cloak of darkness and camouflage. They are also, like the resplendent quetzal, native to the Americas, having made their way to England in the 1600s, additional reminders that no local site is untouched by global influences.<sup>4</sup> Also relevant is the wildflower's predilection for disturbed topographies such as waste areas, which echoes Maurice's occupation of Clive's digestive remains, suggesting an affinity in Forster's work, as Johan Corne has suggested, between queerness and degraded or abandoned environmental sites—or, relatedly, a queer hope that these locations can be reclaimed, eroticized, and made the scenes of different sorts of flourishing (28). Covered in the primrose's pollen, Maurice becomes the vehicle of the plant's reproduction but also a radiant image of interspecific pollination, of personhood momentarily transfigured by a male sexuality that eclipses the merely human to include a broader ecology of aliveness both planted and free-floating. By making Maurice their own, these pollen grains also camouflage him for his eventual flight into the forest.

When the petals Maurice later drops are described as “mourn[ing] from the ground like an expiring fire,” they serve both as reminders of the vulnerability of queer ecologies and as floral proxies for Clive, who in dropping Maurice from his erotic life, and being dropped in due turn, is left to expire along with his declining estate, melancholically attached to a hallucination that “out of some external Cambridge his friend began beckoning to him, clothed in the sun, and shaking out the scents and sounds of the May term” (231). While this haunted fantasy does some justice to the natural environments with which Maurice stakes his claim, it refuses to acknowledge the post-Cambridge Maurice who demanded more than platonic intimacy and who chose darkness and evening primroses over the sunlit comforts of late spring. To the very end, that is, Clive “hate[s] queerness,” even as he provides Maurice the disordered ecology in which

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<sup>4</sup> See <http://www.wildlifetrusts.org/species/evening-primrose>

the latter eventually finds refuge (161). Upon leaving Penge to visit his hypnotist for the first time, Maurice conflates Penge's deterioration with the unruly nature that surrounds it: "Scarcely anything was perfect. On one spray every flower was lopsided, the next swarmed with caterpillars, or bulged with galls. The indifference of Nature! And her incompetence!" (165). As he stares out of the car window to see if he can find something to his liking—if nature "couldn't bring it off once"—he inadvertently "stare[s] straight into the eyes of a young man," the "keeper chap" Scudder who at this point in the novel has not yet touched Maurice but who has made an impression on him by not acting servilely grateful upon receiving a tip for having organized a hunting expedition (166). Maurice's traveling companion finds it improbable that Scudder could have caught up to their car except by running—perhaps another hallucination brought on by libidinal attenuation—but even as a phantasm Scudder's arresting appearance in a "swarmed" and "bulged" nature undercuts Maurice's sense, a temporary relapse into Clive's anal retentive cleanliness, that nature's decay must necessarily disappoint. Those later dropped petals, I am suggesting, betoken Maurice's discovery of a profound relationship between desire and decay that he leaves Clive to, fruitlessly, decipher and that he later embodies and images in his evening primrose drag.

Maurice's traversal of bird, plant and soil renders him a figure of queer ecology, but it also puts a twist on Foucault's observation that what most terrifies mainstream society is not the idea of two men having sex but rather the prospect that these men will invent a new way of life (136). Foucault's uncomplicated invocation of "life" in this formulation is striking given the pressure he puts on "life" elsewhere in his work, specifically in his interrogation in *The History of Sexuality* of modern biopolitical regimes that harness life in the service of disciplinary power (137). Life as an absolute good—getting more of it, doing more with it, getting more out of it,

conforming to its various imperatives of health and well-being—is the means by which normativity gains its hold upon the self, converting bodies and pleasures into quantifiable and optimizable entities and identities. Maurice and Scudder certainly improvise a new way of life—swapping normality and respectability for sylvan anonymity—but they also install a different way of relating to life that decenters the human and that fuzzes distinctions between life and its others. *Maurice* anticipates, I am arguing, Elizabeth Povinelli’s contention that equally as important to modernity’s machinations as the distinction between life and death (175)—in Foucault’s work, the biopolitical poles of making live and letting die—is the distinction between life and non-life. Povinelli has in mind, among other things, the primary lesson of the Anthropocene: humans and other life-forms are geological and geologically-shaped actors whose survival is absolutely implicated in, and dependent upon, a nonliving world of rocks, winds, and weather patterns, as well as various assemblages of life and nonlife that include forests, lakes, rivers, swamps, oceans, and deserts. Modernity has operated on the assumption that life can be set in relief against these background forces, but what climate change is demonstrating fast and furious is that the background is changing, abandoning its previous rhythms, and refusing to play second fiddle to life’s center-stage performance. Leo Bersani famously asked, also thinking about the threat that queers and queer sex pose to the mainstream psyche, if the rectum is a grave, and while Clive would no doubt agree that his leaky backside feels like death, in the larger queer ecology of the novel the more important question seems to be, is the rectum nonlife—decay, rot, mud, or to use one of Forster’s favorite words, muddle? To the extent that Forster celebrates muddle, he frames queer ecology not as a beautiful pastoral landscape in which homosexual desire can blossom but instead as a compromised and impure scene of degradation—an Anthropocene aesthetic, some might call it—where the unrealizability of

nature's hopes for unviolated wildness and wilderness is reciprocated by the limited horizons of dispossessed and dispirited queers who nevertheless come to experience themselves, and the environments with which they are enmeshed, as never entirely and unerotically beyond diminished inhabitation and tentative reclamation.

For *Maurice*, queer intimacy, if not also queer sex, becomes the site of heightened human sensation and radical human diminution. As Maurice joyfully realizes, while standing with Mr. Borenius and Scudder's family in Southampton, that Scudder is going to remain in England and not board the steamer to a more profitable life in Argentina, he starts to feel "how negligible they had all become, beside the beautiful weather and fresh air" (223). Further realizing that Alec has hidden out in the boathouse at Penge, he departs Southampton—"instinctively," the novel emphasizes with its own dashes—and enters Penge through "a gap in the hedge" that echoes both Clive's rectum and the hole in Penge's decaying roof (224). Having Maurice make this move by instinct works to naturalize homosexuality, not in the sense of essentializing it but of making it the effect of an attuned immersion in nature. At the time he penetrates the estate, "night was approaching, a bird called, animals scuttled," and "he hurried on until he saw the pond glimmering, and black against it the trysting place, and heard the water sipping" (224). Maurice and Scudder are entangled with multiple agencies in this happy reunion scene—living ones such as birds and animals but also nonliving ones such as the night and the pond and the water, which nearly come to life, or rather eclipse life's distinctiveness, with their "approaching" and "glimmering" and "sipping" activity. That the trysting spot is black against the pond confirms the shadow life Maurice and Scudder seek to live and marks the zone of indistinction queerness comes to inhabit when it takes shape within an environment from which it seeks protection rather than submission.

By staying behind in England and refusing the business opportunities afforded by his brother's connections in Argentina, Scudder might seem perfect proof of the novel's insular attachments to a native and uncorrupted England. But the critical lens this essay has been trying to cultivate sees the situation very differently. Although he refuses to become an agent of maritime modernism, Scudder does not, by fleeing into the greenwood, abjure transnational connection and identification altogether. He certainly avoids the transactional connections touted by his brother and by Clive, in which other humans would be involved in a system of capital networking, but he maintains a firm link to the resplendent quetzal and to the forests it too calls home. What Maurice and Scudder want more than anything else is, to borrow Forster's words from his "Terminal Note," an "England where it [is] still possible to get lost" (240). Forster goes on to lament, nearly a half-century after the events of the novel, that "there is no forest or fell to escape to today, no cave in which to curl up, no deserted valley for those who wish neither to reform nor corrupt society but to be left alone" (240). When Forster longs for a time when queer "outlaws" could live outside civilization—rather than inside it as its rebellious "gangsters" (240)—it is not so much political quietism that he urges as it is the quiet that comes with remembering the human's insignificance, something civilization disavows, in and to the geological time known to forests, caves, and valleys. Keeping Scudder at home rather than sending him abroad has two critical functions in the novel; it refuses the common practice of sending working class and sexually problematic men away to do the work of empire in an effort to purge England of dangerous contaminants (Scudder's penchant for scaling ladders and climbing through open windows makes him the ultimate threat to bourgeois domesticity); and it anticipates what we now know is the ecological necessity of keeping a light carbon footprint—so light, indeed, that Scudder and Maurice seem almost to disappear, to become as inconspicuous as



the microbes inhabiting their bodies, making possible their furtive movements, and perhaps even drawing them together. Their queer escape is not only their defiant rejection of a respectable heteronormativity they cannot bear; it is their gift of and to a future in which forests and resplendent quetzals and gay outlaws can continue to desire and decay together.

### **Avian End**

Forster wrote *A Passage to India* in the decade after he completed *Maurice*, but just as he did not lose interest in gastrointestinal drama he also did not lose interest in resplendent quetzals. After Adela and Ronny break off their engagement for the first time, Adela asks, “Do you know what the name of that green bird up above us is?” Ronny hasn’t the slightest clue, guessing that it may be a “bee-eater” (recall Mrs. Moore’s dear wasp) or a “parrot,” to which Adela responds, “Good gracious, no” (77). As they speculate in vain, the bird disappears “into the dome of the tree,” leaving Ronny to “dejectedly” lament, “I’m no good at all at birds, in fact I’m useless at any information outside my own job” (78). In a rare moment of candor and introspection, that is, Ronny admits the narrow focus and environmental insensitivity of the British colonial presence in India. Were one to pay more attention to birds or microbes, the novel suggests, one might reconsider the importance of the imperial “job” that so many of the characters, Ronny most of all, stammer to defend. As in *Maurice*, the “green bird” stands in for a different set of priorities, investments, and commitments that are specifically local and, at the same time, ethically and politically global. By refusing to identify the green bird, the novel leaves its imaginative range open to all green birds—including the resplendent quetzal—and permits this particular avian individual the privacy, anonymity, and right to simply be in defiance of imperialism’s logics of

control, containment, and careful identification. This avian remainder is a reminder of the wide swath of creaturely life dying to be outlaw.

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