

The Queer Surfacing of Captain Brierly: Examining Joseph Conrad's *Lord Jim* through Sara Ahmed's Queer Phenomenology

Kara Hagedorn

Abstract: Sara Ahmed's "Orientations: Toward a Queer Phenomenology" (2006) asserts that queer bodies surface in the heteronormative landscape as disoriented in nature. Her theory of queer phenomenology provides a fresh instrument for exploring Captain Brierly's queer character in Joseph Conrad's *Lord Jim* (1899). Captain Brierly's presence in the text is acute yet fleeting. The abrupt nature of his death by suicide disorients those who speak of his character. The language that describes his temperament breaks through the hetero-masculine mask of the sailors' disposition and invites a broader queer reading to Conrad's text.

Joseph Conrad's *Lord Jim* (1899) demands a queer interpretation. In my analysis of *Lord Jim*, I examine Captain Brierly's brief yet queer existence in the text. By queer, I am referring to the strange instances when Brierly's heterosexual masculinity is so perfected that it draws attention to its performance.¹ As a result, Brierly's performance is no longer just a question of being associated with heterosexual masculinity, but how it masks a homosexual orientation. Indeed, as Brierly presides as a judge in Jim's hearing, his reaction to Marlow's decision to jump from the Patna can be read as queer. By analysing Brierly and Marlow's interactions as captains and as sailors respectively, I argue that their queer linguistics also reveal the ship to be a designated queer space. Accordingly, I apply Sara Ahmed's queer phenomenology to the linguistic structure of Brierly's in-

1 For more on gender performativity and social politics, please see Judith Butler's *Gender Trouble* (1990), and *Undoing Gender* (2004).

teraction with Marlow as a means of examining Brierly's intense discomfort towards Jim's decision to abandon the Patna along with its passengers. For Brierly, Jim's abandonment not only draws attention to the ship as a queer space, but forces Brierly to face his own closeted self. By examining how Captain Brierly's presence in *Lord Jim* re-orientates the novel as a queer text, we can re-conceptualise elements of the colonial frontier as a queer space. I believe the task of 21st-century queer scholars is to unearth hidden histories of queer spaces in classic Western literature. Therefore, the aim of my argument is to add to the growing queer literary analysis of Conrad's work² by re-examining the landscape of *Lord Jim* as one that is both colonial and queer.

In "(Post)colonial, Queer: *Lord Jim*" (2012), William Lee Hughes overlaps colonial theory with queer theory to explore the deep homosocial³ undertones of Jim and Marlow's relationship.⁴ Hughes' analysis argues that a queer colonial reading of *Lord Jim* begins with the "triangulations of desire" between Marlow, Jim, and the "audience" (72). Hughes situates the "Orient" as a discourse in Marlow's narrative structure as well. The "Orient," according to Hughes, is necessary because it stabilises "Jim's place in the text as occidental and masculine" for "imperialism and colonialism ... to be effective" (72). Although I agree with Hughes' method of combining queer and colonial theory, I argue that the first queer-coded slips in the novel begins with Brierly and Marlow's interactions. Instead of examining the queer

2 For more on academic literature regarding Joseph Conrad's life and work, please see Richard Ruppel's *Homosexuality in the Life and Work of Joseph Conrad: Love between the Lines* (2008) and Philip Holden's *Imperial Desire: Dissident Sexualities And Colonial Literature* (2003), specifically, Richard Ruppel's essay "'Girl! What? Did I Mention a Girl?' The Economy of Desire in *Heart of Darkness*" (2003).

3 Designating social interaction between members of the same sex, esp. men; of, relating to, or characterised by such interaction. Contrasted with *heterosocial* (*OED*).

4 William Lee Hughes examines Jim and Marlow's relationship through Eve Sedgwick's schema the triangulation of desire from *Between Men* (1985). In doing so, the author argues that a queer reading of the text begins with the examination of Jim and Marlow's interactions through this specific schema.

presence that unfolds between Jim and Marlow, I insist that a queer reading of *Lord Jim* begins with an examination of Brierly and his emotional reaction to Jim's jump from the Patna. When queer scholars situate Brierly as the fulcrum for the text's queer analysis, the connection between queer orientations, imperialism, and heteronormativity broadens significantly.

To orientate *Lord Jim* as a queer text, I need to establish how England's colonial frontier doubles as a queer space. Industrial expansion in the 19th-century brought the Western world up to the edges of an unconquered space. England's naval industry and commerce excluded women and domestically orientated men, which made this frontier primarily populated by men alone. Indeed, if imperial expansion continued to exercise its power, the intimate lives of men operating within its space were free from the attention of the Empire.⁵ In *Orientalism*, Edward Said connects the space of "the Orient" to a "place where one could look for sexual experience unobtainable in Europe" (190). Thus, for queer men in England during the 19th-century, the periphery of the British empire provided a "starting point for [their sexual] orientation" without fear of punishment or cultural ostracisation (Ahmed 545). The isolation of such a frontier drew in those seeking a space to escape the heterosexual decorum of 19th-century England. Therefore, my queer reading of *Lord Jim* is intimately linked to an examination of how Patna functions as two distinct entities: first as a floating signifier of Empire, and second as a queer territory for explorations of desire.

When a queer space exists in a realm that obfuscates its existence, a phenomenological approach can reveal the queer space's framework. In "Orientations: Towards a Queer Phenomenology," Sara Ahmed explains how one spatially orientates themselves to communicate their identity. According to Ahmed, a queer phenomenology begins

5 See Robert J. C. Young's *Empire, Colony, Postcolony* (2015), Edward Said's *Culture and Imperialism* (1993), and Hannah Arendt's "Theories of Imperialism" from *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (1951).

with the understanding that “consciousness is always directed towards objects” that give the individual a sense of their “orientation” in the world (544). For Ahmed, then, a queer phenomenological lens pays attention to what one is orientated towards and what is, by extension, “regulated to the background” (547). As a result, a closeted existence relegates the queer identity to the background to maintain a heterosexual performance in view. So, when Said’s Orient overlaps with Ahmed’s queer phenomenology, “the Orient” becomes a space that “relegates” compulsory heterosexuality⁶ to the “background” for English sailors not of the heterosexual persuasion in the 19th-century (Ahmed 547). Therefore, the colonial frontier doubles as a place for queer men to hide under the guise of imperial expansion. Duty, honour, and codes of heteronormative conduct can be understood as frameworks that uphold the space of Empire. To co-opt and perform this framework, then, becomes the mode of concealment for queer men in the colonial frontier. To amalgamate these spaces in *Lord Jim*, queer scholars can re-orientate our understanding of how Captain Brierly is a closeted homosexual man. In doing so, we have a better understanding of how and why Captain Brierly situates himself within the colonial frontier.

Notions of duty and honour are bound to heterosexual masculinity, which threads sexual ideology into the notion of Empire. Captain Brierly’s dedication to the colonial frontier forces him to submit to a performance of a sexual ideology that upholds the Empire. As a result, this submission doubles as an embodiment that denies his closeted self. Through a phenomenological queer lens, his commitment to notions of duty and honour takes on a double meaning. Specifically, it may serve to uphold colonial ideologies while also masking his queer sexual orientation. Accordingly, Mar-

6 Compulsory heterosexuality is the theory that heterosexuality is the assumed sexual orientation of all people, which is then used to enforce and sustain a patriarchal and heteronormative society. See Adrienne Rich’s 1980 essay entitled “Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence” for a thorough analysis.

low's description of his first impression of Brierly in court signals a heterosexual performance. For example, Marlow states that Brierly "had never in his life made a mistake, never had an accident, never a mishap, never a check in his steady rise" on his way to becoming a Captain (Conrad 81). Furthermore, Marlow emphasises Brierly's reputation of not knowing what "indecision" or "self-mistrust" feels like (81). Marlow adds weight to the value these traits have on Brierly's sense of self. Thus, from Marlow's perspective, Brierly "was acutely aware of his merits and his rewards" (81) to ensure his queer self remains below the surface.

A queer phenomenology, though, begs a question regarding Brierly's firm embodiment of his character traits. That is, we need to ask: what motivates Brierly's performance? To understand Brierly's desire to maintain a perfect record, then, we need to examine his character through a queer phenomenology. According to Ahmed, the objects "we direct our attention towards reveal the direction we have taken in life," which "relegates" aspects of ourselves "to the background" (546). For Brierly to direct his attention toward performing heterosexual masculinity, his queer sexual orientation gets "relegated to the background" (547). In doing so, Brierly's relegation upholds the social and "political" bond between heterosexual masculinity and imperialism (549). In other words, Brierly's dedication to upholding a dutiful position, the epitome of hyper-masculinity, calls into question the desire to sustain a straight orientation. From a queer phenomenological perspective, Brierly's performance becomes clear when it is re-orientated as a submission to the heteronormativity of imperialism.

The background of Brierly's character resides in the narrative structure of Marlow's description of Brierly's behaviour. Accordingly, when Marlow reflects on Brierly's state of "exasperation," Marlow begins to use his words hesitantly (Conrad 81). For example, when Marlow empathises with Brierly's "good [nature] and contemptuous pity" towards Jim, Marlow confesses that Brierly's humanity is an "attractive" quality (82). However, after noting this at-

tractive trait, Marlow quickly backtracks his sentiments by stating that he had “never defined” himself by “this attraction” (82). Yet, he admits that “there were moments” when he “envied” Brierly’s ability to “[present] his self-satisfaction” as a “surface as hard as granite” (82-3). On the surface, Marlow abruptly foregrounds his attraction to Brierly, then abruptly dismisses his own sentiments. However, Marlow brings his background to the fore through a formal semantic play. Just as quickly as the spatiality of the word “sentiment” is perceived, Marlow re-orientates the reader’s gaze on another simile of Brierly’s character: he is like stone. Indeed, a stone as dense as granite transfers the background to its rightful place once more. To Marlow, Brierly is enviable because he possesses such a firm hold on how he orientates himself. However, following Marlow’s encounter with Brierly, Marlow informs the reader that Brierly immediately dies by suicide. The abrupt passing of Brierly completely disrupts the interpretation of the text’s elucidation of Brierly’s honourable character. Accordingly, the death signals a re-interpretation of the linguistic framework of Brierly and Marlow’s dialogue. The question now becomes: what penetrates and disturbs Brierly’s commitment to duty and honour? Furthermore, once the reader is aware that Captain Brierly will die, readers are forced to re-interpret Brierly’s interactions with Marlow. Through the phenomenological lens, how Brierly interacts with Marlow on the topic of Jim unlocks the queer subtext.

Captain Brierly’s candid behaviour with Marlow signals a closeted culture between sailors of the 19th-century.⁷ In Chapter VI, the conversation between Brierly and Marlow is more than just a discussion about why Jim tortures himself by appearing in court. On the surface, Marlow and Brierly

7 For further reading on homosocial bonds in the maritime context please see Stephen Maynard “Making Waves: Gender and Sex in the History of Seafaring” (1993), Dian Murray’s “The Practice of Homosexuality Among the Pirates of Late 18th and Early 19th-Century China” (2017), and Nicole Keegan “Men and Matelotage: Sexuality and Same-Sex Relationships within Homosocial Structures in the Golden Age of Piracy, 1640-1720” (2017).

agree that Jim is putting himself under unnecessary stress. The language Brierly uses, though, alludes to a deep disturbance within himself, one that is linked to Jim's presence. When understood through a queer phenomenology, Brierly's fixation on Jim's behaviour reveals the undercurrent of Brierly's suppressed homosexual orientation. For example, at the beginning of their last conversation, Marlow describes Brierly as being in a "state of irritation," which contrasts with his typical mode of being "perfectly cool, with a trace of amused tolerance" (89). Moreover, Marlow continues to describe Brierly's composure as exhibiting a "pent-up violence" that comes across in a "hotly" manner too (89). As Brierly appears to be unsettled, Marlow decides to hold himself "aloof" during Brierly's tirade so that the dialogue remains superficial (89). In other words, Marlow is concerned that their discussion of Jim's characteristic behaviour might get Brierly so bothered that Brierly reveals his queer sexual disposition.

Between Marlow and Brierly, a language of the closet slips in the beginning of their conversations, which reveals the politics of the closeted homosexual.⁸ As the true meaning of their conversation comes to the surface, Brierly's homosexuality is relegated to the foreground. For example, when he abruptly admits that he feels "like a fool all of the time," this utterance echoes the underlying tension regarding his queer desires (89). Consequently, Marlow takes notice and acknowledges that "[such a comment] was going very far," especially regarding Brierly's character (89). For Brierly to reveal his inner tension between his performative and homosexual spaces, he betrays his relationship to the ship as a queer space. As the tension increases, it nearly pushes the closet door open, and the energy is palpable within the dialogue between the men. That is, when Brierly interrogates their process of "tormenting" Jim in court, Marlow admits that Brierly's tone "chimed ... so well to" his own "certain thoughts" as well (89). However, with a quick

8 For more on the politics of closeted homosexuals, please refer to the essay anthology *The Lesbian and Gay Studies Reader*, specifically Judith Butler's essay "Imitation and Gender Insubordination" (1993).

“cryptic” and sharp “utterance,” Marlow warns Brierly that he should not be “hung” up on Jim, and more importantly, to not “let” Jim into his head (89). As Marlow acknowledges that Brierly is “hanging” precariously too close to revealing himself (89). Furthermore, his direct tone attempts to bring Brierly away from the precipice of foregrounding the queer background. Thus, as Marlow emphasises the military parlance of Brierly “falling into line,” he hopes it will snap him out of his spiralling countenance (89). Indeed, Marlow can see Brierly’s orientation shifting, which is why he tries to refocus Brierly’s attention on his duties towards the court. For readers to understand the double meaning in dialogue, Jim’s presence signals a disturbance deep within Brierly’s concept of himself.

Through a queer phenomenological approach to Marlow and Brierly’s dialogue, we can examine how Jim destabilises Brierly’s performance. Keeping in mind, for Brierly to maintain his performance of heterosexual masculinity, his homosexuality must remain under the surface. Therefore, the space, the conduct, and Jim’s actions in the courtroom all have double meanings. For Brierly, Jim’s abandonment of the boat *Patna* symbolises two simultaneous things. First, it is a queer space, and as such, it must be protected and remain hidden. Secondly, the boat is a vehicle of imperial expansion. So, for Brierly, he must perform heterosexual masculinity within the ideals of Empire to maintain the queer space. Therefore, Brierly’s embodiment of duty and honour between sailors and Empire must be protected because the sailors are representatives of the two realms: queer refuge and Empire. For Brierly, the notion of duty overlaps with the two spaces as well. From Brierly’s perspective, Jim’s jump punctures through the double meanings that stabilise his performance. When Jim jumped from the *Patna*, his act was disruptive in two ways: first, it is an act of abandoning the ship *Patna* as it pertains to Empire and, secondly, to his homosexuality, respectively. In other words, from Brierly’s perspective, Jim simultaneously betrays the surface and the hidden. Therefore, Jim’s act of honesty, by presenting himself in court, undermines Brierly’s commitment to the act

of performance. Jim's jump represents the most reprehensible notion Brierly could imagine. The act of jumping off the *Patna* is to give into bodily desires of survival and the sense of responsibility toward the abandoned passengers of the ship.

By understanding the double meaning within Marlow and Brierly's language, Brierly's desperate attempt to make Jim scarce takes on a new significance. When Brierly admits that Jim ought to "run away" from the court proceedings immediately, an anxiety surfaces in his sense of urgency (90). Ironically, Brierly tells Marlow that Jim should "creep twenty feet underground" and disappear entirely (90). Such choice of words foregrounds the tension between surface appearances and what is hidden beneath. In this instance, though, Brierly subliminally infers that he fears Jim is drawing attention to the ship as a queer space. Marlow's retort encapsulates his desire to re-orientate Jim's willingness to face the consequences of his actions as a "kind of courage," which ought to be commended (90). However, Brierly refuses to entertain the idea that Jim's desire to be in court is courageous or even comparable to his own embodiment of duty and honour towards the Empire. Instead, Brierly insists that "that sort of courage is of no use to keep a man straight" (90). Whether the word straight was used in the 19th-century to indicate heterosexuality remains unknown.⁹ However, Brierly's refusal to agree with Marlow that Jim's courage is setting him on a straight path speaks to Brierly's insecurity towards Jim's behaviour, which brings attention to the ship as a queer space.

Another instance of irony occurs within this exchange as well. Marlow's use of the word courageous fits into the definition of what duty and honour means to Brierly. With Brierly's embodiment of such terms, Marlow assumes that he would agree with his definition of courageousness. According to Brierly, though, Jim being in court is "a kind of cowardice ... [a kind] of softness" as well (90). For Brierly

⁹ According to the *OED*, no working definition of straight referring to heterosexuality does not go as far back to the 19th-century.

to call Jim a coward is a queer reversal of his stance regarding bravery, indeed. Yet, through a queer phenomenological lens, the reversal of Brierly's framing of honour discloses something under the surface of Brierly's emotional state. If Brierly were to agree with Marlow that Jim is courageous, then Brierly would have to re-orientate his performance of duty in his mind. Indeed, from Brierly's perspective, if he admits that Jim is courageous, it would require a major shift in how Brierly identifies himself. Thus, to agree with Marlow would be relegating his dedication to the hetero performance and his duty to Empire to the foreground and agreeing that his is a mark of cowardice. So, for Brierly, to be present in court, to acknowledge what Jim represents, contradicts the basis of his entire orientation. Therefore, Jim's presence in court destabilises and collapses Brierly's entire orientation towards the duty of concealing his own homosexuality. Once his attention is on the truth of the orientation of his sexual desires, there is no way for him to go back. For Brierly, then, Jim is the "object" that causes him to completely re-orientate his attention (Ahmed 543). This new orientation brings Brierly face-to-face with his homosexuality that he relegates "to the background" of his sense of self (543).

In conclusion, Brierly's death by suicide not only represents an acknowledgment of the underlying fears of his own queer desires, but, ironically, echoes Jim's own jump from the Patna. For Brierly to abandon his post is an admission of the closet in his life. Through the act of jumping, Brierly embodies the desire that lurks below the surface of his heterosexual performance. Jim's choice to leap into the ocean is the beginning of his internal trial and his bond with Marlow. In contrast to Brierly, Jim's jump is the abandonment of the closet, which marks the beginning of *Lord Jim's* queer analysis for future 21st-century queer scholars.

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