IN AN IMPRESSIVE BODY OF WORK often located in South and South East Asia, Amitav Ghosh revisits territory many readers of novels in English have known through colonial writers such as Conrad, Kipling, and Greene. This is not a surprise. Several writers we categorize under the rubric ‘postcolonial’ are impelled, at least in part, by a revisionist agenda, which leads us to question the worlds the colonial novel offered. Among these postcolonial novelists, Amitav Ghosh is one of the foremost, and not only in the context of India. His training as an anthropologist and his involvement in academic debates inflect his novels so strongly that the latter are often more scholarly than novelistic in their engagement with issues that concern postcolonial theorists and historians. Ghosh’s works, more than those of other writers on the world stage, are critical to an ongoing understanding of the previous two centuries and their legacies in this one.

What might it mean, then, for Ghosh to say, as he did in a 2008 interview after the publication of *Sea of Poppies*, that breaking the imperial gaze brought by Kipling or Conrad did not interest him? Conrad’s maritime world, Ghosh said, contained few, if any, Indian or South Asian characters of note. The few that appear there are caricatured, whereas Ghosh claimed that Melville is the truly cosmopolitan writer with whom he wanted to engage. There is no denying the truth of Ghosh’s understanding of Conrad: Conrad’s colonial worlds, situated though they may be outside Europe, are peopled by Europeans, Europeans

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disintegrating through their location and their interaction with the locals with whom they come into contact. Yet, one ghost hovering over Ghosh, it seems to me, is that of Conrad. Kipling seems a more distant ancestor, but Conrad, concerned with the moral and psychological ambiguities that mark his characters and deliberating on particular moments of contact between Europeans and others, seems an unlikely figure for Ghosh to distance himself from.

By probing Ghosh’s comments on Conrad and Melville, I want to understand better the weight behind what seems an unnecessarily precise distinction between affiliative connections. In order to tease out what may be at stake in Ghosh’s position, I will work my way through Conrad’s “Geography and Some Explorers,” a late essay which has received little attention except as another articulation of Conradian concerns better spelt out in *Heart of Darkness.*

Through this essay, I argue for the presence of Conrad in Ghosh’s work. Having done so, I address his comments quoted above and try to dismantle the simpler oppositions implied by the binary colonial/postcolonial.

**Geography and Some Explorers**

“Geography and Some Explorers” was published in Britain by Strangeways, in a limited edition of thirty copies, in January 1924. In February that year, it appeared as “The Romance of Travel,” again in Britain, in a publication called *Countries of the World* that came out between 1924 and 1925 and was intended as “a photo-illustrated gazetteer of all the world’s countries and regions in alphabetical order.”

Conrad’s essay was included in the first volume of the publication and given prominence by being cited on the cover itself. In addition, this first volume also carried an essay on Conrad by the series’ editor, John Hammerton. Later that year, in March 1924, Conrad’s essay was published under the title “Geography and Some Explorers” in the *National Geographic Magazine,* complete with sixteen full-page illustrations, selected by the staff at the

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5 Although Conrad’s essay is cited often, there is next to no sustained work on it. Ray Stevens’s “Conrad, Gilbert Grosvenor, *The National Geographic Magazine,* and ‘Geography and Some Explorers,’” *Conradiana* 23:3 (1991), 197–202, is the only full-length article I have found on the essay. The article addresses, as its title suggests, the life of Conrad’s essay in the *National Geographic Magazine,* rather than Conrad’s text itself. I rely on Stevens’s essay for the publication information shared above.