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'There's no woods left': the progression of hope in William di Canzio's *Alec* (2021) and E.M. Forster's *Maurice* (1914/71)

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ABSTRACT

In 2021 author William di Canzio published *Alec: A Novel* (2021), a literary text that purports to be both a prequel and a sequel to E.M. Forster's now seminal *Maurice* (1971). The aim of this essay is to analyse and contrast the connections between both texts as exhibited by their endings, focusing mainly on their representation of hope in connection to queer experiences. Thus, I draw on Sara Ahmed's theory of queer orientations and Rita Felski's notion of 'recognition' to suggest that these novels are representations of *queer hope*. I propose to define this term here as a cross-historical and protean concept that avoids clichés often associated with 'happy endings' while articulating queer concerns, struggles, and – eventually – offering an orientation to alternative ways of living, emphasising the importance of literature as a surface through which to understand the history and challenges of LGBTQIA+ people through the 20th and 21st centuries.

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Introduction

In July 2021, playwright William di Canzio published the novel *Alec*, a story that serves as both precedent and continuation to E.M. Forster's *Maurice* (1971) by closely inspecting and developing the life of Alec Scudder, the working-class groundskeeper with whom Forster's protagonist ultimately falls in love.[1] Despite the seemingly engaging storyline and the fact that the novel establishes an interesting dialogue with one of the most influential literary texts for queer scholars working with British literature and culture, it has received, as of yet, very little critical attention. This lack of scholarly attention needs to be remedied, since Forster's original text, *Maurice*, constitutes, by now, an on-going piece of scholarly scrutiny. Furthermore, *Alec* manages to both successfully engage with the main thesis in *Maurice* and, more importantly, it reshapes it in accordance to the twenty-first century. While it is true that Di Canzio's novel fails to convey certain nuanced aspects within Forster's narrative, it nonetheless actualizes and honours the original text by representing hope for queer individuals in a contemporary way. For hope is what *Maurice* is ultimately about, as the novel's genealogy clearly demonstrates. As such, this paper aims to demonstrate how Di Canzio brings up to date the theme of hope within *Maurice* so that it is more relatable to contemporary issues related to the LGBTQIA+ community.

In this sense, the focus of this essay is to articulate and develop the idea of *queer hope* as a protean and plastic concept that evolves through LGBTQIA+ literature in order to represent the community's main concerns and anxieties and offer potential ways of resistance to hegemonically-sanctioned ways of living. From *Maurice*'s utopian ending to *Alec*'s representation of new models of family, I argue that both texts manage to shed light on the ongoing struggles faced by queer people and to suggest potential encouragement to defy them while adapting themselves to the historical circumstances of their age.

In order to achieve this, I provide an in-depth examination of how both texts interact with the concept of 'hope' and how this concept is affectively charged on the basis of the idea of 'recognition' as

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enunciated by Rita Felski. I also examine the history of the application of the concept to queer narratives following the ideas of Sara Ahmed and Heather Love and contrast these ideas with later works by Ahmed, specifically *Queer Phenomenology* (2006) and its emphasis on 'queer orientations'. The result is a term which I refer to as queer hope. The underlying basis for this concept is a conception of happy endings and the hope they offer as having the potential to engage with actual historical concerns by acting as a re-orienting device in line with Ahmed's definition of the term.

Since this essay takes a qualitative approach to both texts, I provide instances from both novels through which to compare the ways in which Forster's and Di Canzio's idea of hope mutate and change in order to adapt to the authors' contexts and ages. As such, I focus, first, on Forster's efforts to provide a 'happy ending' to *Maurice* and the consideration that led him to feel that such an ending was not only necessary but intrinsically connected to his own perception of the challenges face by queer people during his time. Secondly, I examine Di Canzio's version of a 'happy ending', examining the historical, social and cultural differences that it exhibits when contrasted with Forster's original one. Indeed, the article pays special attention to the significant effort made by Di Canzio in order to produce a text that both engages with the past and its conceptions of queer hopefulness while at the same time providing a more actualized form of hope that fits best with current issues related to LGBTQIA+ culture. However, in order to understand what Di Canzio accomplishes in *Alec*, it is important to bear in mind Forster's intentions when writing *Maurice*. To facilitate this understanding, the following sections are divided in three parts that address, respectively, a contextualization of Forster's intentions when composing *Maurice*'s ending and its relationship to hope; a theoretical transition that connects both novels' representation of hope; and, lastly, an analysis of the ways in which *Alec* reconfigures *Maurice*'s ending and adapts it, through the previously discussed theories, to a contemporary context.

Hope in *Maurice*

In 1913, E.M. Forster paid a visit to the philosopher and poet Edward Carpenter and his lover, George Merrill at Millthorpe. During Forster's stay in Millthorpe, Merrill was responsible from inspiring the author to write what would become his last and, arguably, more socially complex novel: *Maurice*. As Forster himself puts it in his terminal note to *Maurice*, one day during his visit Merrill 'ma[de] a profound impression on [Forster] and [touched] a creative spring', as he: 'touched my backside - gently and just above the buttocks … It seemed to go straight through the small of my back into my ideas, without involving my thoughts' (2005, p. 219). This instance of sexually-charged physical contact inspired Forster to start writing *Maurice*, in which he also took Carpenter and Merrill as the model for a successful relationship between two men in the early-twentieth century. In this sense, *Maurice* deals with the romance between a middle-class man, Maurice Hall, educated at Cambridge, wealthy, and well-versed in Hellenism, and a working-class gamekeeper, Alec Scudder.

Forster wrote the novel almost unceasingly from 1913 and finished its original version in 1914, but it was not published until 1971, after Forster's death. And there are, indeed, at least two reasons for this: The first reason is, in fact, quite logical. By publishing a text condoning same-sex desire and love between men, Forster was taking a public stance on a perilous British debate around sexuality still haunted by Oscar Wilde's own fate. Not only was Forster 'understandably rife with sexual inhibitions in the aftermath of the Wilde trials' (Martin & Piggford 1997, p. 12), he had also been accused by early critics of his works for his perceived femininity and potential homosexuality (Martin & Piggford 1997, p. 15), which, logically, would have led him to painstakingly avoid being identified as someone with homoerotic tendencies.[2] But whether this was likely true in 1914, when the novel was completed, one wonders: why not publish it, then, some years later, during the mid-twentieth century, in a more sexually relaxed England? The answer to this question leads us to the second reason why Forster decided to delay the publication of *Maurice* until after his death: the novel's promise of hope, or, in other words, its happy ending.

All along its process of composition, and even long afterwards, Forster maintained that the novel needed a happy ending, even despite Lytton Strachey's and others' admonitions that it had not aged well or that it was unrealistic (Forster 2005, pp. 220–221):

> A happy ending was imperative. I shouldn't have bothered to write otherwise. I was determined that in fiction anyway two men should fall in love and remain in it for the ever and ever that fiction allows, and in this sense Maurice and Alec still roam the greenwood. I dedicated it 'To a Happier Year' and not altogether vainly. Happiness is its keynote - which by the way has had an unexpected result: it has made the book more difficult to publish. (Forster 2005, p. 220)

Forster's novel, indeed, ends with the two lovers abandoning society and going to make their own living in the Greenwoods, a space with which Maurice becomes entranced as the only place in England in which 'people like [him]' can avoid persecution, living a life of rural simplicity close to the one led by Carpenter and Merrill (Forster 2005, p. 186). And, as he himself points out, this 'happy ending' was problematic for publication. As David Leavitt suggests 'publishing the novel in 1914 with a happy ending would have laid him as a potential criminal' (2005, p. xii).

In this sense, Sara Ahmed claims that

> Queer fiction [in the early 20th century] could not give happiness to its characters as queers; such a gift would be readable as making queers appear 'good'; as the 'promotion' of the social value of queer lives, or an attempt to influence readers to become queer … Somewhat ironically, then, the unhappy ending becomes a political gift; it provides a means through which queer fiction could be published. (2006, p. 88)

Forster decided, however, to reject this 'political gift' and to be faithful to his original idea, which is, after all, the second reason why the novel could not be published. Even after the posthumous publication of *Maurice*, however, the novel still received a myriad of negative criticism due to its happy ending. There was an 'overwhelmingly homophobic response to the publication' (Martin & Piggford 1997, p. 18) of the text that mostly depended on the perceived simplicity of this ending. Many, like Cynthia Ozick declared that the novel was 'infantile … about make-believe', a sexual fantasy by a repressed homosexual (1983, p. 64). According to Howard Booth, the novel was greeted, consequently, as a 'failure' by most contemporary reviewers (2007, p. 173), suggesting that 'a text addressing male-male desire could not be good art', and that it was unsophisticated and straightforward due to its happy ending (2007, p. 173).

It is clear, therefore, that the happy ending on which Forster insisted so much became its most controversial aspect, preventing the text from publication during the author's lifetime and ensuring that it would be regarded as simplistic and childish afterwards. The fact that the novel's happy ending remains critically ostracized even more than 50 years after the novel's publication is perhaps unsurprising when considering the current state of scrutiny in which the concept of happiness itself is held. Influential critics of the twenty-first century such as Heather Love and Sara Ahmed had questioned the *status quo* of 'happiness' as a global aspiration, or even as a necessarily positive aspect of human experience. In this sense, Ahmed claims in her book *The Promise of Happiness* (2010), that socially-aware individuals should suspend the belief that happiness is necessarily something good (2010, p. 9). She argues, thus, that happiness is a tool through which people are made to desire certain realities over others, a way of enforcing that people are oriented towards following 'the right way' (2010, pp. 1–9).

In addition, Heather Love claims in *Feeling Backwards* (2007), that cultural products ought to look to the past and embrace the suffering and harsh experiences of queer people from the past, instead of trying to 'happify' them: 'We need a genealogy of queer affect that does not overlook the negative, shameful and difficult feelings that have been so central to queer existence' (2007, p. 127). And while it may be true that *Maurice* does not overlook such difficult feelings at most points of its narrative, the happy ending remains as a stark opposition to both Ahmed's and Love's claims.

However, the definition of queer hope that I propose is intrinsically concerned with social issues without necessarily falling into the clichés and facile formulas of conventional happy endings against which both Ahmed and Love warn their readers. As Ahmed indicates, happiness is often equated with 'ways of life' that have been lost, with a sense of nostalgia for a past which 'multiculturalism' has 'eroded' (2021, p. 375). Additionally, Love remains sceptical of narratives that encourage queer people to seek the 'glow of brilliant homosexual pasts' or to 'build a happier future' (2007, p. 63). Indeed, their criticism to the logic of happiness seems to be mostly directed at its homogenizing effect, at its promise of satisfaction through the adoption of a role that is hegemonically sanctioned by society (be it reproducing conventional gender identities or adopting normative sexual practices) (Ahmed 2021; Love 2007). However, what I mean when I propose to use the term *queer hope* to analyse *Maurice* (and *Alec)* is to draw

attention to a kind of hopefulness (or, in these cases, of happy endings) that do not omit the anxieties, violences, and dangers of historical and political realities inflicted on queer people. Instead, queer hope in fiction critically acknowledges and considers these circumstances while at the same time presenting readers with positive plots that outline the possibility of living happily beyond the pale of societal conformity. In fact, Forster's novel exemplifies this understanding of hope.

In this sense, the painful moments of ostracism that Forster's homonymous protagonist does suffer due to his sexual orientation should be acknowledged. The narrative does not try to 'overlook the negative, shameful and difficult feelings' (Love 2007, p. 127) experienced by Maurice, as he is born and surrounded by the cultural and social epitome of middle-class morality, he is, therefore, bound to suffer. After his platonic idyll with his Cambridge friend, Clive Durham, he enters into a crisis through which he constantly tries to change his sexual preferences. This crisis is ignited by Clive's change of heart. At a certain point in the narrative, Clive realizes that he no longer sexually desires or, indeed, loves Maurice.

Maurice's reaction to this is more or less to be expected: '[f]or three years [he] had been so fit and happy that he went on automatically for a day longer' (Forster 2005, p. 117), but after that he starts experiencing an acute suffering at having been left by Clive. Even if he manages to behave as a perfect example of middle-class masculinity on the outside, he is constantly suffering from an acute sense of loneliness 'proving on how little the soul can exist' (Forster 2005, p. 124). At this point, he starts to lose control of his sexual desire, coming close to raping a visitor who is staying at his family house: '[w]hat a solid young citizen he looked – quite, honourable, prosperous without vulgarity. On such does England rely. Was it conceivable that on Sunday last he had nearly assaulted a boy?' (Forster 2005, p. 134). After this incident (which reflects some of the lonely suffering that Love claims should not be overlooked when contemplating queer history and culture) (2007, p. 127) he decides to consult the family doctor to see is there is any way to 'cure' him of his sexual orientation. Dr. Barry famously warns him against becoming one of those 'unspeakables of the Oscar Wilde sort' (Forster 2005, p. 136), and treats the issue as if altering one's sexual orientation were dependent on one's deciding to follow the conventional lines of marriage and nothing more.

Even when Maurice finally finds someone willing to establish a romantic and sexual relationship with him, he suffers from many of the realities that Love defends as a part of queer history. Before trusting Alec, Maurice considers him both potential blackmailer (Forster 2005, p. 180) and a source of guilt (Forster 2005, p. 183). As he begins to trust him and falls in love with him, however, Maurice and Alec regard each other as a 'casual refuge' from their 'enemies', where 'toughness and tenderness [is] mixed' (Forster 2005, p. 203). From these passages it can be clearly said that the novel does not pretend to be a wholly insincere depiction of the suffering and trials that many queer men experienced during the late nineteenth-century and early twentieth-century when coming to terms with same-sex love and desire.

From this point of the narrative forward, nonetheless, Forster strives to create a 'happy ending' that would provide both Maurice and Alec with hope, with the possibility of establishing a future together. The last part of the novel presents, therefore, a contradiction to the arguments established by Ahmed and Love. On the one hand, it is true that for most of the text Maurice seeks 'happiness' in being able to 'follow the right way' or, in other words, in rejecting a sexual identity that moves him apart from the 'collective directions' of heteronormativity. The ending, however, depicts Maurice and Alec departing to 'the greenwood' (Forster 2005, p. 186) to start a life together of rustic simplicity: '[t]hey must live outside class, without relations or money; they must work and stick to each other till death' (Forster 2005, p. 212). Contrary to Ahmed's idea, the greenwood, as a place where they can be together and enact their sexual desires – 'I have shared with Alec… All I have. Which includes my body' (Forster 2005, p. 215)– provides Forster's protagonists with a space that manages to make them happy without orienting them towards a 'right' or heterosexual, way of living. Forster represents, thus, happiness not as a tool through which to enforce obedience and the perpetuation of a traditional heterosexual genealogy, but rather as the motor that guides individuals to look for places that are right for themselves, rather than for societal and moral traditions.

On the other hand, while I have already acknowledged that *Maurice* does address the suffering and negativity attached to queer existence (Love 2007, p. 127), the ending focuses solely on the potential happiness of defying social conventions and ignores the realities of most queer men of the period by depicting an image of two men being able to live their sexuality and affection freely in a space of their

own. Forster consciously downplays the difficult situation of queer men in England at the time so that he can offer hope for others like himself and, I argue, this is also part of queer genealogy: the quest for hope and happiness in the midst of hostile cultural and social environments.[3]

Forster himself, when writing the Terminal Note to the novel, years after its completion, seemed to be aware of the many difficulties that his happy ending posed. He was aware, first of all, of how the novel cannot keep its promise of happiness for two homosexual men because the text is set in 1912, and only two years later the First World War would have ended with any idyllic space such as the greenwoods. Forster becomes pessimistic, secondly, when he meditates about the Wolfenden Report, and how it would probably never lead to an actual and legal improvement of the conditions surrounding homosexuality. Despite the reasonable doubts that this belief might have shed on what he aimed to achieve with *Maurice*, he still dedicated the novel to 'a Happier Year' (2005, p. 1), and the ending was never changed so that it would still position happiness and its fictitious representation as promises of a happier, hopeful future.

Evolving hope: from *Maurice* to *Alec*

To think of a *hopeful future* may be, however, problematic. Definitions of hope and the way in which individuals relate to it vary from culture to culture and are a deeply subjective issue. Adam Potkay points out, for instance, that hope has been configured as a positive concept in Western culture due to its appropriation by Judeo-Christian dogma, whereas in Ancient Greece it was not necessarily something positive or desirable *per se* (2022, p. 5). In this paper, however, I use the idea of a hopeful future in consonance with Christopher Castiglia's conceptualization of the term. According to Castiglia, hope can be read as positive in as much as it 'challenges present social conditions insofar as they fail to live up to a reader's ideals … hope is [then] socially transformative [as] [h]opeful ideals generate social engagement … by providing the standards against which the already existing world is measured' (2017, p. 6). In other words, Castiglia understands hope 'as a perpetual openness to the as-yet-untried' (2017, p. 4). I argue that Forster's 'happy ending' is, thus, a clear representation of hope, not as a naïve account of impossible outcomes that may appeal to a specific set of readers, but rather as a potentially 'socially transformative' experience that would allow readers to understand the world they live in and orient themselves towards the possibility of the 'untried', or even towards a social and revolutionary engagement with their cultural realities.

In this sense, Di Canzio's *Alec* can be understood as a continuation and evolution of Forster's work and ideals in as far as the author strives to keep the promise of a hopeful future, while at the same time considering his contemporary audience. Di Canzio's idea of hope, however, also follows Castiglia's understanding of the concept in as much as this hope depends on a clear refusal to adapt to social mores that are still present in our society. As stated before, more than an adaptation or a pastiche-like construction, *Alec* is better understood, I argue, when regarded as a contemporary re-orientation towards hope and happiness that makes a *queer use* of Forster's original text. What I mean here by 'queer use' is, indeed, similar to how Ahmed describes the term: 'Queer uses would be about releasing a potentiality that already resides in things given how they have taken shape' (2019, p. 200). In other words, Di Canzio makes a queer use of *Maurice* by releasing its potential to appeal to contemporary queer people and produce in them the same sense of hope that Forster sought to inspire in his readers. Thus, the original text is used (that is, reinterpreted or adapted) so that its potential transgressive nature is released (or represented) in a way that may still be relevant today. Furthermore, in doing this *Alec* contributes to what has been recently identified as the 'orientational impulse' of the representation of hope in narrative texts: 'If hope embeds us in the world, narrative does something similar, for narrative actively orients us not only towards ourselves but also towards the world' (Wagner, Duckworth and Benjamin 2026, p. 3). Indeed, I argue that Di Canzio's 'queer use' of *Maurice*'s hopeful message acts as an orientating device.

In her now seminal *Queer Phenomenology* (2006), Ahmed defended the idea that there exists a 'collective direction' in which 'imagined communities' move. In the case of heteronormative social and cultural mores, these 'collective directions' (2006, pp. 14–15) imply that other directions in life, those that contemplate queer happiness, hope, or the mere existence of sexual dissidence are not considered as valid, since they imply a deviation from the heteronormative 'collective direction': '[t]he queer subject within

straight culture hence deviates and is made socially present as *deviant*' (2006, p. 21, emphasis mine). Ahmed argues, however, that those that are considered deviant within normative culture –that is, those that deviate from the line of heterosexual hegemony– can develop a 'queer orientation' of their own by deciding to follow their own lines, by creating new paths for those who, like themselves, deviate from the sexual and reproductive norms of their societies, more specifically: 'Queer orientations are those that put within reach bodies that have been made unreachable by the lines of conventional genealogy. Queer orientations might be those that don't line up, which by seeing the world 'slantwise' allow other objects to come into view. A queer orientation might be one that does not overcome what is 'off line,' and hence acts out of line with others' (Ahmed 2006, p. 107). Taking this into consideration, it is possible to argue that Forster's *Maurice* is a clear instance of 'queer orientation' due to its time of composition and publication. By positioning same-sex love between men as the main focus of the text, Forster brings into view a reality that has traditionally been made 'unreachable by the [heteronormative] lines of conventional [literary] genealogy' (2006, p. 92). In doing so, the novel becomes an instrument of hope as defined by Ahmed –just as Forster originally intended. For as Ahmed argues, queer orientations 'can offer us the hope of new directions [and] new directions [may be] reason enough for *hope*' (2006, p. 158, emphasis mine).

Just as Forster's original novel follows this pattern and manages to offer hope to its readers –as well as its author– by being an orientation towards a queer reality, Di Canzio's prequel/sequel to the text clearly attempts to achieve the same result, albeit incorporating traces of the contemporary context in which it was written. I suggest, thus, that Di Canzio actualizes Forster's original novel by adapting it to contemporary tastes and by orientating his readers towards a sense of queer hope that addresses some concerns that are relevant today but that were not explored in *Maurice*. This strategy of actualization and adaptation resonates with Tyler Bradway's idea that '[n]arrative is a condition of possibility for queerness. It is a form through which queers forge, experience, sustain, renew, and reimagine relationality' (2021, p. 712). The medium of narrative allowed Forster to delve into the intricacies of queer life in his own era and in the possibilities of an otherwise almost inconceivable 'happy ending' and thus to reimagine the relation of queerness and society. In the same sense, Di Canzio's novel is successful in as much as it manages to use narrative to re-reimagine Forster's work into a text that, while being set on the past, manages to forge a strong connection with some of the most present issues in queer communities today.

Hope and *Alec*

Indeed, *Alec* reads as a contemporary novel from the very beginning. As Betancourt points out, the protagonist 'possesses a canny self-awareness about his sexual desires and a distinctly modern approach to fulfilling them (not only does he not despise his queerness, but he even finds a certain asset to it…)' (Betancourt 2021). There are many passages in the novel that could easily belong in a contemporary war novel, in an erotic novel, and in a romantic melodrama with little regard as to historical accuracy. By its ending, it is clear that Di Canzio has written with a very specific object in mind for, as Alec himself claims: 'We've so few models, men like us, for intimacy, for devotion that endures. By no fault of our own. How many of our stories have been expunged - from history, from memory? With no stories, we're made to feel alone, unnatural, ashamed' (2021, p. 320).

Thus, Di Canzio's aim is made clear to readers: he seeks to create an artificial history, or model, for queer men who seek to see themselves represented in the past. By basing this model in Forster's *Maurice*, Di Canzio stresses the importance of hope and happiness as an element from the past that is still important for queer audiences today, thus countering Love's opinion that a genealogy of 'queer affect' should focus on 'the negative, shameful and difficult feelings' that were central to past experiences of same-sex desire (2007, p. 127). Rather than focusing on the negative, Di Canzio creates a love story with a traditional 'happy ending' as Forster did before. In this sense, Di Canzio's narrative aligns itself with Rita Felski's ideas as developed in *Uses of Literature* (2008). Felski claims that there is an important process of 'affective orientation' that takes place in the reader when they recognize themselves in the plots of certain texts (2008, p. 18). Felski argues that 'recognition… brings together likeness and difference … inspir[ing] a revised or altered sense of who I am' (2008, p. 25). In other words, reading a text where one's subjectivity might be reflected, or where one may find traces of one's hopes and life, produces a

potentially strong emotional response that could signify the beginning of a process of 'self-scrutiny' (2008, p. 26). Such affective orientation leads the subject to experiment a sense of 'affiliation' through which they are 'rescued from the fear of invisibility, from the terror of not being seen', as this orientation and its accompanying sense of affiliation necessarily imply that concerns similar to those experienced by the reader have existed before, and, consequently, may exist afterwards (2008, p. 33). As Felski herself goes on to argue in *Hooked: Art and Attachment* (2020), this potential recognition may lead to a feeling of 'attunment', a 'resonating' and 'aligning' process with the message of a work of art (2020, p. 76). This, in turn, establishes a deep 'responsive relation' (2020, p. 41), a 'coming together' of literature and reader that leads to a new stage of self-knowledge (2020, p. 78). For queer people reading *Maurice* and *Alec*, this may translate in an identification with both their struggles and their potential happy endings. This process, in turn, leads to the socially engaged idea of hope that Castiglia defends.

It can be suggested, thus, that Di Canzio's *Alec* provides readers with a powerful opportunity to experience 'recognition' and to be affectively oriented towards hope. On the one hand, the text clearly reproduces and develops Forster's agenda. It offers the reader the opportunity to contemplate a prosperous queer relationship in the past, thus offering them the chance to feel affiliated to a past that may seem mostly hostile. On the other hand, and as has been said before, the novel has been adapted so that many contemporary issues that are not addressed in Forster's original text play an important role in it. This in turn gives readers a chance to recognize themselves in the plot and its agenda. In this sense, it may be inferred that Di Canzio is both building a larger story in which to contain Forster's original text and updating his treatment of the concept of hope. This idea – of offering readers a new version of a past narrative so that they might reconsider their own relationality to their culture – is, however, not novel at all. Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick already explored it, arguing that to assemble past narratives into contemporary specifications is a form of reparative reading on the part of both readers and authors (1996, p. 278). Di Canzio's novel, in fact, perfectly fits within Sedgwick's conception of hope amongst reparative reading and how it may be generated through the interaction of past and present:

> Hope, often a fracturing thing to experience, is among the energies by which the reparatively positioned reader tries to organize the fragments … she encounters or creates. Because she has room to realize that the future may be different from the present, it is also possible for her to entertain … that the past, in turn, could have happened differently from the way it actually did. (Sedgwick 2019, p. 279)

One of the most evident ways in which Di Canzio seeks to engage the past and the present – and thus show readers, as Sedgwick argues, that there is hope in imagining a better past, for this allows for a better present – can be seen in how the novel's protagonist, Alec Scudder, accepts his sexual orientation from the beginning of the text. When he is still a school-boy he reflects on his sexuality thus:

> Alec felt none of that lust to get under [the girls'] skirts that his schoolmates hooted about. On the other hand, he did find some of those mates appealing in a way that excited him. Whenever he caught himself staring, he'd look away, because he knew that staring meant he was one of those, *which was true*. His schooling, however (and contrary to its intention), taught him not to despise his *queerness*. (Di Canzio 2021, pp. 4–5, emphasis mine)

There are three significant points in this passage. First, Alec is unafraid to accept to himself the 'truth' of his sexual orientation. He feels that he is 'one of those', but this does not lead him on a journey of self-denial as is the case in *Maurice*. Instead, he does not only accept his sexuality but also refuses to 'despise' it. The second significant aspect of the fragment is the use of the word 'queerness'. Throughout the narrative, Di Canzio uses the word 'queer' and its derivatives repeatedly which, indeed, carries more weight for contemporary audiences withing the LGBTQIA+ community than other words that would have been more period-appropriate. Even though the dating of the use of the word 'queer' to reference sexual dissidence remains an open debate (Haralson 2003, pp. 7–9), the consistency with which it appears in the novel clearly signals Di Canzio's intention of bringing *Maurice*'s plot and message towards the twenty-first century. The third important point within the fragment is its mention of how Alec's 'schooling' contributes to his accepting his queerness.

Alec, as 'an advanced and trustworthy' student, is encouraged by his regional school teachers to visit the library at Dorchester to investigate about Ancient Rome and Greece. Thanks to the 'myths of Greece and Rome', he becomes infatuated with the male figures that they illustrate as '[t]heir nudity thrilled him'

and with the pictures of vases in which he admires 'wrestlers and boxers; … boys playing and dancing together –naked and fine. His heart would pound while he gazed; his face would flush; his cock would strain between his legs' (Di Canzio 2021, p. 5). Indeed, the fact that Alec's sexual awakening is closely connected with Greek culture is unsurprising. According to Linda Dowling's seminal study of Hellenism and Victorian culture 'late-Victorian homosexual apologists' found in the emphasis paid to Ancient Greece in the curriculum of great universities such as Oxford or Cambridge 'a legitimating counterdiscourse of social identity and erotic liberation' (1994, p. 36). In other words, the social and cultural elites were able to draw from the myths of Ancient Greece sources from which to rethink and reorient their own socially illegitimate sexual desires. What is surprising about Alec's process, however, is that he is able to access such a counterdiscourse from a small town and coming from a modest, working-class environment. While such important figures for the legitimization of same-sex desire between men in Britain as John Addington Symonds or Oscar Wilde – or even Edward Carpenter himself – were not able to develop his validating theories connecting classical antiquity and contemporary sexual dissidence until they had accessed to Oxford or Cambridge (Dowling 1994, pp. 66–85), Di Canzio portrays a character that takes advantage from this 'prestigious' cultural ideas during his childhood in a small provincial town.

Once again, and as is the case with the use of the word 'queer' and Alec's acceptance of his own sexuality, Di Canzio favours a certain anachronism in order to make his novel's hero more relatable to contemporary audiences, whose sense of recognition or affiliation would be easier to stimulate through struggles that are more relevant to current LGBTQIA+ individuals. In doing this, Di Canzio goes beyond Forster in questioning Heather Love's premises regarding the necessity for 'a genealogy of queer affect that does not overlook the negative, shameful and difficult feelings that have been so central to queer existence' (2007, p. 127). For, as has been stated before, while Forster does represent Maurice's rather complex and traumatic process of coming to terms with his sexual identity, Di Canzio designs a character that is immediately more recognisable for twenty-first century audiences.

Another way in which the story is brought into the twenty-first century is by means of its constant focus on corporal desire and sex. Whereas Forster's original novel tends to be demure when describing passionate scenes or specific physiques, Di Canzio's text focuses on the eroticized body with such vehemence that the novel sometimes reads as closer to the erotic novel than to the historical novel. There's a strong emphasis on the effect that 'Olympian shoulders or arms' (Di Canzio 2021, p. 9) produce on Alec, whilst he is constantly being described in terms that clearly present him as an object of desire for the receptive reader (Di Canzio 2021, p. 24). Once Maurice enters the narrative, this focus is shifted towards him, as his body is described over and over again as a source of pleasure and delight for Alec: 'Alec was met with a sight that provoked a conflict of lust … his sleeping lover's rump, smooth and shapely in the moonlight, dimpled, pale, and muscular' (Di Canzio 2021, p. 121). These descriptions become more and more sexually enticing and explicit as the plot progresses:

> His lover's skin had browned during their weeks in the sun, making his eyes seem greener. When he raised the ax, the muscles of his torso, shoulders, arms, and legs tensed; when he brought it down, he released the strength of his whole body to split the wood, and his glossy hair fell forward over his brow. To anyone, he would have appeared heroic; to Alec, he was the paragon of young manhood. (Di Canzio 2021, p. 159)

This emphasis on the physical aspects of the relationship between Alec and Maurice resounds with many of the contemporary theories in Queer studies that have given to the body a prominent place in the construction of sexual identities. Ahmed does take into account bodies in her phenomenological approach to queerness, but her ideas can be traced back to the work of scholars such as Judith Butler. In the now seminal *Bodies that Matter*, Butler establishes that

> [t]he normative force of performativity – its power to establish what qualifies as 'being' – works not only through reiteration, but through exclusion as well. And in the case of bodies, those exclusions haunt signification as its abject borders or as that which is strictly foreclosed. (2011, p. 140)

Di Canzio seems to take this into account in his novel as the sexual scenes depicted in his novel bring the bodily acts that would have been traditionally abjected or foreclosed to the fore of the narrative. In *Alec*, the presence of the body can be read as breaking the performativity of heterosexuality in the early twentieth century, as including queer bodies back into a narrative. Whereas Forster did reasonably

exclude the physical acts that were not reiterated in his period, Di Canzio rescues them so as to make obvious that his narrative is, despite it being set in another period, a radically contemporary piece that follows the guiding principles of Queer studies in as much as it gives importance to those bodies – and those bodily acts – that were 'strictly foreclosed' in the past in an effort to engage a public whose idea of hope includes visibility and the exploration of the human body as a positive and pleasurable ground.

Apart from the focus given to Alec's perception of his own queerness and to the sexual acts that are a direct consequence of his sexual identity, Di Canzio also pays attention to another aspect that is as anachronistic as it may be hopeful for a contemporary audience: the law. While for Forster the law remained a constant concern even despite his hopeful, happy ending, in *Alec* it is only mentioned in the following terms: 'Under the law they were criminals; outside it, merely young lovers. For them to live by the law would mean –what, separation? … No, the law was unjust. To subject themselves to it would make them complicit with its tyranny. So they would live outside it' (Di Canzio 2021, p. 122). Once again, this superficial approach to the very real concerns that the Labouchère Amendment of 1885 would have presented for men defying sexual normativity can be seen as extraordinarily anachronistic. However, it manages to bring the plot closer to twenty-first century readers in the Western world.

However, the way in which the two narratives are most dissimilar takes place during the second half of Di Canzio's novel. This half of *Alec* acts as a sequel to Forster's original text, so that it is here where Di Canzio most reflects the concerns of his own period. After being separated due to the First World War –which, as stated before, Forster decided not to include in *Maurice*, limiting himself to comment on it in the novel's Terminal Note– Alec and Maurice are reunited once again. From this point on, the novel will tackle a very specific moral and cultural agenda that has the potential to be deeply attractive and recognisable for contemporary readers interested in LGBTQIA+, gender, and racial rights.

In this sense, Di Canzio depicts a reunion between the two lovers in which the reader is left with no doubt as to the enduring quality of their love and desire: 'Nor could they know that this moment would sustain their love for a lifetime … This timelessness of sea, sunlight, and stone would always call them back to their true selves' (Di Canzio 2021, p. 274). This scene, followed by a series of passage in which Maurice and Alec are represented as engaging in romantic and sensual activities (Di Canzio 2021, pp. 274–289), seems to cater to a readership that is aware of the many difficulties that a relationship may entail.[4] Instead of presenting us with a version of the definitive, yet somewhat naïve ending crafted by Forster, Di Canzio acknowledges the complexities of maintaining an enduring romantic relationship. At the same time, the passage is tinged with sexual descriptions, once again producing a picture that is more likely to be recognisable for contemporary readers for whom sex has become inseparable from romantic narratives. This insistence on sex and romance and the capability of both Maurice and Alec to make their relationship last until an undefined future – or, in other words, this rationalized 'happy ending' – demonstrates Di Canzio's ability to make a queer use of Forster's original text. In exploiting contemporary concerns, Di Canzio manages to connect our present understanding of same-sex desire and relationships with what Forster was trying to achieve in his novel, thus realising, or, rather, actualizing, Forster's agenda for contemporary audiences.

In his quest to bring the story closer to the twenty-first century and to translate Forster's idea of a hopeful future into it, Di Canzio goes beyond queer romance and adds to his own text some other contemporary concerns that, as has been said before, are closely related to sexual dissidence. As an example, Maurice's sister, Kitty, whose importance in Forster's original text is minimal, serving mostly as a plot device to assert Maurice's own fragile relationship with his masculinity (Forster 2005, p. 107), reappears in this part of the novel with a very clear purpose. Kitty is, after the First World War, pregnant after having had an affair with an Indian officer. As a nurse during the conflict, Kitty had the chance to transgress the sexual and moral codes of her social milieu and she is represented as being proud of having exploited this chance (Di Canzio 2021, pp. 309–315). The main consequence with which the narrative is concerned, however, is the fact that Kitty will give birth to a 'colored' child (Di Canzio 2021, p. 309). Maurice and Alec are shocked at this. This shock is, however, quite short-lived, and immediately gives way to a much more contemporary idea: to tell Kitty about Alec and Maurice's queer romance: 'You let her know she's not the only outcast, she's not alone. That's how we help her, to start' (Di Canzio 2021, p. 310). Kitty, in turn, reacts to this news in a positive manner (Di Canzio 2021, p. 314). In this particular instance, *Maurice*'s actualization is especially relevant since in it Di Canzio manages to engage two

particularly relevant aspects of contemporary criticism: the interlocked connection between queerness and race. Gloria Anzaldúa has convincingly claimed that identity ought not to be understood as a separate system of 'little cubby holes', but rather as an intersectional engagement of sex, race, class, etc. (1991, p. 252). With the addition of Katie's story to the plot of *Alec*, Di Canzio brings to the fore in a figurative way how these aspects of identity can coalesce by drawing attention to how race and sexuality may become conduits of mutual understanding and of hopeful rebellion against conventional social mores. Furthermore, in doing so Di Canzio strengthens the presence in his narrative of what Gayatri Gopinath has termed the 'impossible subject' (1997, p. 471): those individuals whose mere presence destabilises hegemonic discourses and that are, thus, necessary to understand the intersectionality of contemporary Queer studies.

This episode, once again, sets the tone for contemporary audiences for whom the facts described in it may not be as shocking as for Forster's intended readers. The narrative definitely becomes a contemporary pastiche when both Maurice and Kitty visit their family in order to acquaint them with their situations. As their mother claims that '[t]his nigger bastard is not mine' (Di Canzio 2021, p. 329), Maurice decides to step up and state that he is in a romantic relationship with another man: 'I love him, and he loves me. We plan to live our lives together. We'll stand by Kitty and the baby' (Di Canzio 2021, p. 331). This scene can easily be read as a contemporary 'coming out' plot, in which people who, as Ahmed would put it, do not follow the lines of collective directions (2006, pp. 14–15) articulate their personal orientation towards the world. This 'coming out' of Maurice as a queer man and of Kitty as an independent woman intent on giving a happy childhood to her racially ostracized daughter share many of the characteristics that Elisabeth Sandler has observed in contemporary 'coming out' episodes in which the 'family of origin' becomes a 'place of conflict' (2022, p. 7) due to its inability to accept any kind of orientation that can be considered as 'failed' in as much as it does not engage with the lineal tendencies of traditional heterosexuality (Ahmed 2006, p. 92). These ideas and their representation within the novel are perfectly aligned with what Judith Butler has identified as the contemporary queer rebellion against 'traditional families' as 'sites' of extreme violence and abuse (Butler 2024, p. 87). In this sense, Sandler argues that, when there is a conflict between those who are 'coming out' and their family of origin: 'LGBTQIA+ individuals often replace their family of origin with their family of choice … This empowering reclaiming of family experience through a reconstruction of family … happens when LGBTQIA+ individuals' families of origin leave, are left, or are emotionally and physically distanced from' (2022, p. 7).

In this sense, the 'coming out' scene in *Alec* fits within this very contemporary description of 'failed coming out' processes as articulated by Sandler in 2022. The novel, once again, seems to be aiming to engage, or to produce a recognisable pattern (with all the implications that this process entails for Felski) for contemporary readers. Whereas Maurice and Alec contemplate, in Forster's original text, to live in the greenwoods as outlaws, working the land and secluded from society, Di Canzio's novel reorients the plot so that the ending is quite dissimilar. For now, the couple's main aim is not to find a stable space where to be themselves in isolation but, rather –and in greater consonance with contemporary cultures that promote the formation of new forms of community and family– to find a space where they, alongside Kitty and her baby, can create their own family apart from their 'families of origin' from which they are not only 'emotionally' but also 'physically distanced from' (Sandler 2022, p. 7). When Alec claims '[w]e were goin' to live in the greenwoods –remember? But there's no woods left' (Di Canzio 2021, p. 319), the author orients readers towards his idea of hope which, in this case, differs from Forster's. The lovers are not to be secluded in isolation in an idealised space that no longer exists. Rather, they are going to build an alternative community in an equally idealised –yet more real– space: the United States.

As a matter of fact, when asked about this ending that significantly differs from the original novel from which the author is openly drawing (and the most significant way in which the two novels diverge), Di Canzio has answered that he knew from the beginning that his story would end like this: 'They're heading for New York, where, for better and worse, a new age is being born' (Saso, p. 2021). In other words, Di Canzio seems to be aware that Forster's idea of a happy ending would not be enough for the contemporary world. Its promise of hope for queer people would be largely unfulfilled as the woods, havens for hiding, have effectively disappeared, or, more importantly, hiding is no longer regarded as a desirable experience for LGBTQIA+ people. In this sense, Di Canzio's reconstruction of Forster's ending is intrinsically tinged by twenty-first century ideas while, at the same time, honouring its emphasis on

encouraging those who are not 'a hero or god, but a man embedded in society' to defy hegemonic views on normalcy (Forster 2005, p. 209). Ultimately, this is the strongest affinity between both novels: they establish a dialogue with their historical context while, at the same time, offering readers a chance to reorient themselves towards a hopeful future through the means of fiction and the representation of a happy ending in difficult circumstances.

Conclusion

There are two relevant ideas related to queerness and hope in Di Canzio's ending. The first one is that classical or older literary texts, such as Forster's *Maurice*, can be regarded as important influences and sources of inspiration for the ongoing process of building a world that is hopeful for those whose sexual orientation divers from the lines of heteronormativity. Or, in other words, he releases the potential of Forster's *Maurice* as an ongoing and powerful source of hope for contemporary audiences by making the text more affectively recognisable –or relatable– to them, and thus 'rescu[ing] [readers] from the fear of invisibility, from the terror of not being seen', as the continuity of Maurice's story and its ability to be transported into the present necessarily signify that similar concerns for LGBTQIA+ people have existed before, and consequently, may exist afterwards and be dealt with (Felski 2008, p. 33).

The second relevant idea present in Di Canzio's alteration of Forster's original ending and, indeed, from the other changes to the plot that have been analysed above and that help to contemporize Maurice's story is the mutability of hope. Going back to Castiglio's idea that hope has the potentiality to challenge 'present social conditions insofar as they fail to live up to a reader's ideals' (2017, p. 6) and that it constitutes a 'perpetual openness to the as-yet-untried' (2017, p. 4), it is possible to assert that Di Canzio's novel, in its quest to preserve the spirit of hopefulness that Forster wanted to infuse in his narrative, evidences how hope is, indeed, concerned with '*present* social conditions' (emphasis mine). It is difficult to transmit hope in our global and contemporary circumstances through an ending in which the two lovers are isolated and live in pastoral seclusion. This, as valid as it might have been back in the early 20th century, is now an impossibility, not only due to the disappearance of the idyllic (and highly idealized) greenwoods in which Forster trusts, but also because that road –the road of individual seclusion and hiding– has already been tried by the LGBTQIA+ community and is no longer effective or appealing. As Rosario Arias claims: 'disorientation happens when one's frame of reference collapse' (2021, p. 72), which implies that *Alec* needs to recur to a new, more contemporary frame of reference in order to orient its readers towards hope.

Di Canzio's addition of a 'coming out' scene in which a group of people come together to form a new type of family is, tentatively, a more appealing ending in a period in which Covid-19, its socio-sanitary consequences, and the tumultuous political scene of the twenty-first century, have contributed to alter many traditional frames of reference. This sense of community as a contemporarily hopeful alternative to Forster's original ending is reinforced with the fact that the characters depart for New York where 'for better and worse, a new age is being born' (Saso, p. 2021). In conclusion, it is possible to see how Di Canzio's adaptation of *Maurice* prioritizes its original message of hopefulness rather than providing a literally or historically accurate revision of Forster's novel. While Forster acknowledges 'the negative, shameful and difficult feelings' (Love 2007, p. 127) that accompanied queer experience during his period, he nonetheless orients readers towards different ways of living that could lead to social change and upheaval. In contrast, Di Canzio's *Alec* offers the reader a vision of same-sex desire during the early years of the 20th century that can be considered anachronistic but that nonetheless effectively gives readers grounds for a process of recognition with the characters that may orient them towards feeling the same hopefulness that Forster intended for his novel to transmit. In other words, I suggest that the novel is attuned to the current critical interest in intersectionality, which also gives it a contemporary sense.

In an age in which both hope and collective support seem eminently important, Di Canzio's novel, whatever his historic or literary shortcomings, manages to pay homage to Forster's original intentions by pervading the narrative with a sense of hopefulness and an ending that promises new beginnings and the arrival of the 'Happier Year' to which *Maurice* is dedicated. After all, and as Judith Butler claims, this is an age in which 'reproductive justice, the rights of women, the rights of trans and non-binary people, gay and lesbian freedoms, and all efforts to achieve gender and sexual equality and justice' are under

attack from many sides of the political spectrum (2024, p. 9). After considering this point, I believe that *Alec* offers an interesting *locus* from which to ask ourselves broader questions that could lead to interesting new venues of research such as how the relationship between contemporary literature and older texts may lead to inspiring hope in contemporary readers. After all, whether Forster's 'Happier Year' has arrived or failed to materialize, there is still much need for hope as the world keeps changing and new social challenges, consequently, emerge for us all.

Notes

1. For the purposes of this essay, it is important to understand that although *Maurice* was in fact published in 1971 (as per Forster's wish that it be published only after his death), it was originally completed in 1914, although the original manuscript – circulated among Forster's closest friends and confidantes – was subjected to many alterations of both form and content throughout the 20th century (Moffat 2011, pp. 6–8).
2. The prosecution of sexual acts between men became much fiercer in the United Kingdom after the passing of the Criminal Law Amendment Act of 1885. Under the infamous Labouchère Amendment, which permitted the criminalization of any *suspected* acts of 'gross indecency' between men both in public and in private, queer men felt a sense of paranoia and unsafety quickly spread (Fize 2020, p. 5). The trials of Oscar Wilde in 1895 under this same law inaugurated an even stronger period of danger for queer men as a rage 'unleashed by the 1895 trial sought to demonize Wilde and to purge his kind out of the system' (Haralson 2003, p. 19).
3. As stated in the previous note, the conditions contemplated by the Labouchère Amendment for the prosecution of queer men in Britain were both extremely unforgiving and dangerously encompassing. Thanks to the 'loose definition of the crime' (Fize 2020, p. 5), any act considered slightly unsettling for heteropatriarchal morals could be brought forward before a court of law.
4. It is relevant for the purposes of this essay to consider that these scenes also contribute to the sense of alignment between Maurice and Alec. In Forster's novel there are some fragments in which the lovers' corporeality is closely associated with desire and sexual pleasure, although in a much more veiled way (Forster 2005, p. 203).

Author contributions

CRediT: **Manuel Hueso-Vasallo**: Conceptualization, Formal analysis, Investigation, Methodology, Resources, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing.

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Data sharing is not applicable to this article as no data were created or analysed in this research.

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