

**“Guidance in Perplexity”:  
Recasting Postcolonial Politics in  
J. M. Coetzee’s *Elizabeth Costello*  
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In recent years postcolonial studies has come under increasing scrutiny, more for its institutional successes than its failures. The May 2007 issue of *PMLA* featured a roundtable discussion, provocatively titled “The End of Postcolonial Theory?” in which participants from both inside and outside the Western academy (Sunil Agnani, Fernando Coronil, Simon Gikandi, and Susie Tharu to name a few) debated whether postcolonial studies’ entrenchment within the university, its widely disseminated methodologies and familiar objects of inquiry, evidenced the ossification of a once thriving and oppositional discourse (Agnani, Coronil, Desai, Dilouf, Gikandi, Tharu and Wenzel 633–651). Two years earlier, the collection *Postcolonial Studies and Beyond* provided a thorough state of the discipline with speculations on its future “beyond” analyses of the nation-state, borderlands, and other well-trodden geographies. In seeking to reinvigorate a field which may be resting on its laurels, they suggest that postcolonial studies engage with such up-and-coming discourses as environmentalism and Black Atlantic studies as well as reframe its central questions to contend with the complexities of contemporary globalization and American hegemony (1–38).

Of course, a collection which stresses the “beyond” should orient itself toward the future, and *Postcolonial Studies and Beyond* is forward-looking in its attempts to chart new pathways for postcolonial studies. However, the collection’s intriguing final essay is an important exception. Neil Lazarus’ “The Politics of Postcolonial Modernism” looks backward to an unlikely source for both postcolonialism’s indictment and its rejuvenation—European modernism. At first, Lazarus argues that modernism offers an important analogue to postcolonial studies, in that its critical practitioners authorized an extremely narrow body

of texts as “modern,” thus eclipsing a great many works whose aesthetics and politics differed from their preferred paradigms. He complains that postcolonial literary studies are guilty of the same crimes of omission, the steep penalties for which are “leadenly reductive” readings of a “woefully restricted and attenuated corpus of works” (424). This corpus, or canon, reinforces a specific set of scholarly interests in liminality, hybridity, subalternity, and multiculturalism as the universal criteria for postcolonial literature. While Lazarus’ essay (including its allusive title) is clearly indebted to Raymond Williams’ analysis of the ideological underpinnings of modernism as institution, his position should not be mistaken for a wholesale rejection of modernism as art. Indeed, he professes faith in the “*ongoing* criticality of modernist literary practice” whose protocols inflect postcolonial writing’s most important tasks: refusing the “integration, resolution, consolation, and comfort” of the ideological systems that would strip literature of its provocations (431, italics in original). In Lazarus’ formulation, the modernist legacy of critical restlessness inherited by postcolonial literature offsets the ossifying institution of postcolonial modernism. To expand the boundaries of postcolonial critique then, restlessness must become an enduring facet of its institutionalization.<sup>1</sup>

J. M. Coetzee’s *Elizabeth Costello* is a novel that speaks of restlessness and institutionalization in the same breath. By evoking the tensions between institutions and art, metropolitan power and subversive politics, it fruitfully explores aporias relevant to postcolonial studies’ own within the academy including the discomfiting paradox of benefiting from authorization and prestige while striving to give offense. The novel’s unorthodox form and its eponymous protagonist’s<sup>2</sup> enigmatic and often antagonistic behaviour in the public sphere respectively test the grounds of membership within a literary canon, intellectual community, and political collectivity. *Elizabeth Costello* further offers readers the opportunity to explore a postcolonial politics different from those of the fractured migrant lens or the difficulties of cultural translation—perspectives which are certainly indicative of postcolonial experience, but yield few unfamiliar insights. The novel’s politics take shape instead through Elizabeth’s public and private displays of logical perversion,

communicative failure, and intimate identification. Perversion, failure, and identification are under-explored keywords in postcolonial studies’ critical idiom and have the potential to generate fresh reading methods and objects of inquiry for the discipline. Together, they provide alternative inroads into postcolonial subjectivity and may facilitate the recognition of texts whose “postcoloniality” is not immediately signaled by the currency of a Coetzee or Rushdie or reinforced by the optics of subalternity and multiculturalism.

One cannot discuss *Elizabeth Costello* without briefly mentioning the proclivities of its author. Coetzee is undoubtedly a canonical postcolonial figure; he has, however, consistently dismissed the logic that would equate his artistry with expertise on colonialism and apartheid and his celebrity with license to speak authoritatively on such issues. Accordingly, he presents a particularly rich but recalcitrant figure for discussing the intersections and tensions of institutions and art, the postcolonial intellectual and the postcolonial writer.<sup>3</sup> Long refusing to regard himself as a “public figure, a figure in the public domain” (*Doubling the Point* 65), Coetzee argued for the demise of the writer as public intellectual only one day after winning the Nobel Prize:

In its conception the literature prize belongs to days when a writer could still be thought of as, by virtue of his or her occupation, a sage, someone with no institutional affiliations who could offer an authoritative word on our times as well as on our moral life.... The idea of writer as sage is pretty much dead today. I would certainly feel very uncomfortable in the role. (Attwell Interview)

In reflecting upon the origins of the literature prize, Coetzee identifies artistic autonomy (“someone with no institutional affiliations”) as the necessary grounds for a writer becoming a sage. Although Coetzee claims that “the idea of writer as sage is pretty much dead today,” he later reveals to David Attwell that he is “being peppered with invitations” to share his wisdom on ethical aporias and political crises the world over. As evidenced by *Elizabeth Costello*, which is composed in large part of his public addresses, he has not declined them all.<sup>4</sup>

Coetzee's response to his fraught positionality as writer-sage reflects an impulse to remain oppositional to any apparatus that would require subordinating his views to a cause. His public lectures and interviews confound the forums in which they unfold, providing a very different model of the postcolonial intellectual than say that of the late Edward Said whose candid critique of American hegemony in the Middle East garnered admiration from postcolonial literary scholars for boldly crossing into the political public sphere. Coetzee too crosses into the public sphere, but not without an ethical ambivalence and rhetorical detachment often maligned for political quietude. Yet, as Coetzee repeatedly distances himself from the public position that he inevitably holds, his politics aligns itself with the "ongoing criticality" that Lazarus attributes to modernism's legacy within postcolonial literature. His evasive maneuvers unsettle the very rituals, discourses, and contracts which allow contemporary democracies to ignore their unfulfilled promises of open dialogue among equals.

Coetzee's strategic indirection is most apparent in *Elizabeth Costello* when he fictionalizes the writer-sage's relation to the public sphere as a way of holding together detachment and participation, artistic autonomy and institutional politics.<sup>5</sup> Elizabeth's forays into the public sphere most often unfold in university settings where, much like Coetzee, her literary successes accord her the authority to speak on matters of the world. Coetzee's depictions of Elizabeth's poorly received lectures reveal less about the putative subjects of discussion than they do about the rules of argumentation and debate that Elizabeth routinely perverts. After listening to a rambling talk entitled "The Philosophers and the Animals" in which Elizabeth takes her audience through associative meditations on Kafka's fictional ape Red Peter, the laboratory ape Sultan, Indian mathematician Srinivasa Ramanujan, the sympathetic imagination, and finally an indicting comparison of meat consumption with the Holocaust, her son John muses, "A strange ending to a strange talk . . . ill-gauged, ill-argued. Not her *métier*, argumentation. She should not be here" (*Elizabeth* 80). John's suspicions that Elizabeth does not belong in the university arena prove true when a questioner asks her to "clarify" her target issues in terms of particular modes of activism and prescrip-

tion, and she opaquely replies, “I was hoping not to have to enunciate principles” (81–82).

Elizabeth’s refusal to enunciate, to “just come out and say what she wants to say” ironizes the Habermasian ideal of rational-critical debate that is fundamental to the working of a democratic public sphere, institutional progress, and the constitution of European bourgeois political subjectivity (82). While Habermas’ argument relies heavily on the distinction between the world of letters and the political public sphere (51–56), Coetzee’s university settings in which literature and politics converge complicate this initial paradigm. “On the basis of her reputation as a novelist,” Elizabeth is invited to speak on a number of topics in and beyond literature, blurring the boundaries between rational and poetic discourse (*Elizabeth* 60). Specifically, in the “Poets and the Animals,” Elizabeth participates in a debate with philosophy professor Thomas O’Hearne overseen not accidentally by a Dean with the surname of Arendt. As O’Hearne advances each of three tightly constructed theses on the animal rights movement, Elizabeth recedes farther away from logical argumentation, relying instead on speculative propositions, historical contingencies, and sympathetic identification with animals. Her most powerful statement professes affiliation only with the “living flesh” that philosophy historically devalues and poetry electrifies (110). Her performance culminates in a public refusal to “share reason” with her opponent, lending “acrimony, bitterness, and hostility” to the proceeding (112).

Elizabeth’s dismissal of the productive potentialities of rational communication challenges the institutional domains into which she is invited and by which she is accorded the legitimacy to speak. Her entry into the public sphere and mockery of its principles illustrate a position that is both inside and outside the realm of authority—a position that is also indicative of her identity as a Commonwealth writer invited to the university and awarded a prize “only because 1995 had been decreed to be the year of Australasia” (*Elizabeth* 8). When considered in these terms, Elizabeth’s unwillingness to share reason with her opponent takes on a postcolonial political valence. Her enigmatic and embarrassing behaviour registers a protest of dialogues that assume equal access to

and determination of the language of reason, which European imperialism historically denied colonized peoples and still attempts to bestow only by invitation. In the course of her speech, Elizabeth declares that “reason is the being of a certain spectrum of human thinking,” a spectrum which she actively resists when declining to share in the *lingua franca* of the public sphere (67). By refusing to “speak reason,” however, Elizabeth does not spurn public discourse altogether. Rather, she expresses the need for different spectrums of thought such as affect, sympathy, and embodied identity to (re)form the knowledge yielded within institutional domains.

Elizabeth’s attempts to dislodge reason from the public sphere divert attention not only to alternative analytic faculties like the sympathetic imagination, but also and more importantly to the poetic or “world-making” aspects of public discourse. In assuming the character of Elizabeth in his own public lectures and in having Elizabeth resist the codes of public dialogue, Coetzee militates against the reified contexts and expectations that regulate the public sphere. Instead, he attempts to fashion a new kind of public based on the poetic rather than the rational potential of language. As Michael Warner argues, when exploring the poetic potential of public discourse, it is important to call attention to the “contradictions and perversities inherent in the organization of *all* publics, tensions that are not captured by critiques of the dominant public’s exclusions or ideological limitations” (113, italics mine). Yet, postcolonial critique has traditionally concentrated on just such exclusions, working to reinstate colonized peoples as active agents within narratives of national and global development and only recently beginning the difficult project of provincializing Eurocentric logic (Chakrabarty 3–23). The distinction between deconstructing the “organization of *all* publics” and critiquing the “dominant public’s exclusions or ideological limitations” nicely reflects the shift in postcolonial reading practices for which I am advocating. Rather than instrumentally attending to the binaries of dominant and subaltern, inclusion and exclusion according to the usual categories of analysis (that is, caste, class, or nation), critics must examine the communicative strategies that underlie the creation of such categories. *Elizabeth Costello* provides an opportunity for this

sort of hermeneutics by staging various instants of communicative success and failure and disrupting the very modes of address and response which underlie the creation of all body politics—be they universities or nations.

The novel’s persistent interrogation of the institutional codes, public discourses, and intellectual legitimacies that sustain centers of power offers apt foci for postcolonial scholars who are now more than ever self-reflexively contending with our own methodologies, institutional security, and narrow canonical purview. While expanding the postcolonial canon with new texts is of course crucial to its revitalization, so is realizing that ideological insularity is the result of our failure to engage with other literary canons. *Elizabeth Costello* demands such engagement from the careful reader through its deeply ironic sense of literary allusion. Specifically, it necessitates looking beyond postcolonial studies’ usual frames of reference to the tradition of the American reform novel:

In the spring of 1995 Elizabeth Costello traveled ... to Altona College to receive the Stowe Award. The award is made biennially to a major world writer, selected by a jury of critics and writers. It consists of a purse of \$50,000, funded by a bequest from the Stowe Estate, and a gold medal. It is one of the larger literary prizes in the United States. (2)

Casting Elizabeth as the winner of the fictional Stowe Award allows Coetzee to draw a sardonic parallel between Elizabeth, a “major world writer” in the conglomerate year of Australasia, and Harriet Beecher Stowe, American author of the classic novel of social reform, *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* (1852).<sup>6</sup> *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* became a bestseller in the United States, Europe, and Asia, and was translated into over sixty languages—a testament to its success as a work of world literature. Its depiction of the evils of slavery mobilized support for the abolitionist cause at home and abroad, launching Stowe to international celebrity as a writer-activist though not a master novelist.<sup>7</sup> Stowe’s novel, described by George Orwell as “the supreme example of the ‘good bad’ book” (qtd. in Rothstein), provides a historical foil to *Elizabeth Costello*, which aspires

to be a “bad” reform novel that expositis by undoing the “Lessons” its Table of Contents purports to teach.

As Elizabeth prepares to accept the Stowe Award, she resists locating herself in the literary tradition of which the prize’s namesake is so emblematic. Indeed, in a radio interview, she makes a point of *not* speaking out on the many social issues to which the interviewer links her: “All in all, he [John] judges, listening in, a workmanlike performance . . . leaving only a few minutes to skirt the questions that begin ‘What do you think . . .?’ What does she think about neoliberalism, the woman question, Aboriginal rights, the Australian novel today?” (*Elizabeth* 10). Elizabeth skirts the interviewer’s demand for a political position by curtly replying, “My message? Am I obliged to carry a message?” (10). Such a response consummates her position as (to reverse Orwell’s phrase) a “bad good” reformist and in fact aligns her (and Coetzee) with a novelist very different from Stowe, that is Virginia Woolf.

To examine Elizabeth as a descendant of Woolf requires a brief interlude on the feminist classic “A Room on One’s Own.” Woolf compiled the text from two university lectures which she expanded for publication, and it begins with a direct address to her audience in which she explains her failure to discuss the topic on which she was invited to speak: “Women and Fiction.” Woolf publicly contemplates the ideas that should be expressed under this heading, dismissing both the obvious—remarks about famous women novelists—and the complex—a theory of women, the fiction they write, and their representation in fiction—on the grounds that her thoughts would only be inconclusive: “I should never fulfill what is, I understand, the first duty of a lecturer—to hand you after an hour’s discourse a nugget a pure truth to wrap up between the pages of your notebooks and keep on the mantelpiece for ever” (4). Woolf’s tongue-in-cheek assessment of the lecture as genre anticipates Coetzee’s equally wry replacement of *Elizabeth Costello*’s chapters with “lessons.” Both indict the authority accorded them as speakers/writers and push against the contexts that simultaneously confine and privilege them.

While Coetzee’s lectures (compiled and expanded in *Elizabeth Costello*) compel readers to shuttle back and forth between himself as writer and



Elizabeth as character of writer, Woolf’s lecture/essay encourages us to see her as a writer channeling other women’s voices (“Here than was I [Woolf] (call me Mary Beton, Mary Seton, Mary Carmichael) (5) ... Here, then, Mary Beton ceases to speak” (103)). Both Coetzee and Woolf thus strategically distance themselves from their enunciations in the public sphere in order to make larger claims for invented (Elizabeth for Coetzee, Shakespeare’s sister for Woolf) and historical women (the aforementioned “Marys”) transforming what we assume to be the realm of “the real.” When Elizabeth, not Coetzee, enters into the public sphere in “The Philosophers and the Animals,” she amplifies Woolf’s digressive, allusive style by embedding herself in the stories of others—recall Kafka’s fictional ape Red Peter, the lab ape Sultan, and the historical figure Ramanujan—to extend visions of collectivity beyond an anthropomorphic lens. She resists humanism and the logic which conditions it just as Woolf resists patriarchy with a feminist vision of collectivity articulated in narrative strategies that question “the customs and conventions, social and psychological, that control what can be seen and what can be said” (Walkowitz 83).

Elizabeth’s eschewal of acceptable forms of argumentation while in the public sphere reflects Coetzee’s impulse to write a novel whose characters and narrative strategies dismantle their formal containers: Elizabeth’s lectures/lessons satirize the communicative procedures of the university; her radio interview skewers the pedagogic role assigned post-colonial writers speaking to a metropolitan audience; *Elizabeth Costello*’s refusal to endorse a coherent political or pedagogical position through its eight lessons tests its allegiance to the reform novel genre. These strategies, by which the novel and Elizabeth stand simultaneously within and apart from the locations that they occupy, form the crux of Coetzee’s politics by offering the reader “guidance in perplexity” (*Elizabeth* 127) as opposed to “nuggets of pure truth” on the proper convictions to hold, actions to take, and loyalties to abide.

In generating such a politics, Coetzee provocatively employs evasion as the necessarily (in)appropriate response to confrontation. This is a tactic which many in postcolonial studies might find uncomfortable and even disingenuous; Coetzee’s reticence, however, is more an inter-

rogation of duplicity than an expression of it. Elizabeth's often irritatingly oblique maneuvers in the public sphere manifest Coetzee's own suspicion of and resistance to the false intimacy of public dialogue and the arrogance of "lessons learned," especially in their contemporary mediated forms. Indeed, *Elizabeth Costello* depicts the public sphere as, first and foremost, not a space of "real" dialogue or institutional openness, but a realm of theatricality whose proceedings are suffused with the language of performance. In "Realism" Elizabeth dons her "blue costume" (3) before speaking at university events; in "The Novel in Africa" she gives a talk that has been recycled so often that it takes on a "worn, unconvincing air" (39); in "At the Gate," a Kafkaesque meditation on entering the afterlife, she recognizes that a "performance will be required of her; she hopes she can pick up the cues" (198).

Coetzee's distaste for and distrust of the theatrical are best understood through Walter Benjamin's important earlier assessment of politics and the public sphere in "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction":

The change noted here in the method of exhibition caused by mechanical reproduction applies to politics as well.... Radio and film not only affect the function of the professional actor but likewise the function of those who exhibit themselves before this mechanical equipment, those who govern. Though their tasks may be different, the change affects equally the actor and the ruler. The trend is toward establishing controllable and transferable skills under certain social conditions. This results in a new selection, a selection before the equipment from which the star and dictator emerge victorious. (247)

While Benjamin's emphasis here is on the dangerous and revolutionary potential of technology, his equation of "the actor and the ruler" as symptomatic of modern politics provides the backdrop against which he explains the theatrical rituals of fascism in 1930s Europe. Benjamin asserts that the transformation of the public sphere into a sphere of "exhibition" made wider by radio and film compels a certain order of "selection" from which the dictator will emerge victorious. This order

of selection, based on the cult of personality arising around an individual orator, is not so different from the one envisioned by Coetzee in “The Novel in Africa” where Emmanuel Egudu’s “effortlessly booming voice” (*Elizabeth* 36) and seductive pronouncements on the “true African novel” (45) overshadow Elizabeth’s tepidly delivered speech on the future of the novel.

Egudu, a Nigerian writer who travels the international lecture circuit, indulges in his minor celebrity. He and Elizabeth, briefly lovers years ago, meet again on a cruise ship where they are both resident lecturers. Egudu’s lecture style foils Elizabeth’s, capitalizing upon his position as both native informant and exotic other while also deconstructing that very reception of himself by his wealthy, exclusively white audience. Egudu’s self-reflexivity ultimately satisfies more than unsettles his audience when he promotes a singular and definitive model of the African novel as both oral and embodied and the African writer (again a monolithic construction) as able to communicate “these qualities as no one else can because we have not lost touch with the body” (45). His speech does not develop the complexities of orality and oral tradition in African fiction as much as essentialize them in order to preserve the cultural difference and distance which Western readers desire from exotic fiction (see Huggan). Thus, Egudu’s lecture entitled “The Novel in Africa” becomes a treatise on the “African novel,” a category that subjects the novel to an identity politics. This category further undermines Egudu’s important explanation of the “Tutuola phenomenon,” which exposes Western packaging of certain forms of language and literature as authentically African by suggesting that an inaccessible authenticity nonetheless exists (46).

Egudu’s pronouncements on Africanness as an impossibly other way of being (“a special identity, a special fate” 41) affirm the forms of complacency on which his talk’s success and his audience’s pleasure rely, that is the familiar figuration of Africans as exotic others whose novels serve more anthropological than literary purposes. In overtly politicizing the African novel’s orality (he claims it is partially the result of Africa being “beggared by our political-industrial imperialism” 45), Egudu adopts a manner of address and self-exhibition that bears identification

with Benjamin's account of the "star and dictator." Like them, Egudu "emerges victorious" in the public sphere because he has perfected "controllable and transferable skills" of performance including his self-aestheticization as an African exotic. His willingness to conflate literary form with continental identity, that is to instrumentalize "the novel in Africa," represents the kind of politics which Coetzee condemns implicitly in *Elizabeth Costello* and explicitly in his 1988 essay "The Novel Today" where he declared that a "story is not a message with a covering, a rhetorical or aesthetic covering. It is not a message plus a residue, the residue, the art with which the message is coated" (4). To view a story's artistic elements as merely "residue" is, according to Coetzee, to strip it of its poetic faculties, its ability to speak outside discourses of power that would otherwise harness it in perpetuation of an ideology. We would do well to remember that postcolonial studies' own order of selection, its canon, is not immune to this critique.<sup>8</sup>

Elizabeth's weak performances, when considered in light of Benjamin and "The Novel Today," become acts of resistance to the theatricality of the public sphere as public stage and the appropriation of art for instruction, conversion, and even disciplinary consolidation. By continually placing the enervated, ineffectual Elizabeth in the public sphere as a writer-sage, Coetzee aligns himself with Theodor Adorno's radical aesthetics wherein "language rattles the cage of meaning" with the "shock of the unintelligible" (78). Elizabeth's unintelligibility "uncages" the public sphere as do Coetzee's fictional strategies which take the form of political opposition when they illuminate the fallacies and absurdities of modern forms of government and institutional consensus. In driving meaning to the limits of public comprehension, and then exceeding those limits through Elizabeth's communicative failures, Coetzee offers a politics of discomfort and irresolution in place of heroic redemption.

Coetzee's emphasis on public withdrawal and failure opens new doors for postcolonial critique whose dominant models of political subjectivity and agency have classically been agonistically theoretical (see, for example, Bhabha) or antagonistically materialist (see, for example, Parry). By subjugating political interventionism to the devices of fiction, specifically the interiority of the novel, Coetzee invites scholars to think

more creatively about postcolonial discourses of the political which have yet to sufficiently grapple with affective experience, intimacy, and disarticulation.<sup>9</sup> These irreducible forms of expression challenge the abstractions of theory and the sociological impulses of materialism with highly individualized encounters designed to circumvent the disembodiment of discourse and the cold facticity of historical claims. Instead, as Leela Gandhi puts it following Dipesh Chakrabarty, they offer an “erratic agency of ‘vision’ and ‘imagination’” which works toward “restoring semantic plenitude to the category of ‘the political’” (147).

Expanding hegemonic conceptions of political agency then requires recognizing alternative expressions of political commitment that jar with what modern political philosophy deems rational and visible. Agency can no longer refer solely to dramatic, imminent, and public acts of protest and revolt, but must also include those individual affective responses and intimacies that unfold in the private sphere. This understanding that affect not only be taken seriously, but politicized is valuable for extending *Elizabeth Costello*’s politics beyond a negative critique of the public sphere into an explication of the novel’s unique capacity for imagining new modes of political agency. Coetzee offsets Elizabeth’s public failures to communicate with cautiously successful, private moments of identification with radically different others. Such moments fall outside historical comprehension, public witnessing, and officially regulated experiences by transgressing the bounds of the human to foster conversation and sympathy amongst humans.

An exemplary instance of identification transpires between Elizabeth and two albatrosses:

The albatross regards her steadily and so it seems with amusement. Sticking out from beneath it is a smaller version of the same long beak. The fledging is more hostile. It opens its beak, gives a long, soundless cry of warning. So she and the two birds remain, inspecting each other. *Before the fall*, she thinks. *This is how it must have been before the fall. I could miss the boat, stay here. Ask God to take care of me.* (*Elizabeth*, 56 original emphasis)

As Elizabeth imagines a prelapsarian moment in which she and the albatrosses close the chasm which separates their existences, she is compelled to breach a comparatively smaller gap between herself and the nameless Russian singer who is Egudu's current lover. Coetzee describes their encounter in the presence of the albatrosses as a moment of intimacy that verges on "the rude," yet whose utter singularity excuses the usual formalities between strangers (56). Crucially, Elizabeth's exchange with the Russian unfolds in neither woman's native language, troubling the public sphere notion that conversation is easily achieved. The foreign dimension of the women's intimacies is important because it acknowledges the differences which estrange them and the translation work that must be done to overcome the barriers between them. Such labour is missing from the ideology of public discourse whose faith in disembodied reason jars with the realities of postcolonial difference.

For Coetzee, every identification is tinged with wariness, and the weakness of such transient moments of intimacy does not go unacknowledged by the narrative. Elizabeth's identification with the albatrosses is tainted by the animals' "amusement" and "hostility"; her conversation with the Russian culminates in only "what is perhaps the beginning of a smile" (57). Grudging as the language may seem, recognizing the tentativeness with which reciprocity occurs is, in Coetzee's terms, an act of generosity and responsibility that exceeds the political possibilities attendant to intersubjective communication in the public sphere. This private display of uncertain emotion remains outside the discourse of history. Its externality or autonomy signifies the potential of literature to rival history by drawing attention to the particular and the fleeting so that the consensus of the powerful is not mistaken for an understanding of the powerless.

The reparative moments of affective identification in *Elizabeth Costello* are political without being programmatic. They are examples of the novel's particular "paradigms and myths" (Coetzee "The Novel Today" 3), which offer literary critics the opportunity to dislodge a narrowly instrumental view of the political and replace it with a larger set of constitutive gestures that incorporate perversion, communicative failure, intimacy, and identification into postcolonial political expression. The recogni-

tion of these gestures in Coetzee’s writing should provide something more than guidance in perplexity for revitalizing postcolonial studies. It should change our theorization of terms like “political,” “agency,” and “resistance” within postcolonial critique, engender new readings of literary texts as well as new conversations across literary canons (such as the triangulated colloquy of Coetzee, Stowe, and Woolf), and finally it should generate more flexible and expansive accounts of postcolonial subjectivity.

## Notes

- I am grateful to Rebecca Walkowitz and ARIEL’s anonymous reviewer whose valuable comments and suggestions have helped me to improve this essay.
- 1 For one model of “institutional restlessness,” postcolonial studies could look to comparative literature, which issues a “state of the field” report every ten years in efforts to take stock of its disciplinary approaches and monitor the effects of turning reading into a method. For the latest report, see Saussy.
  - 2 For clarity’s sake, I use only the first name Elizabeth when referring to the character, and *Elizabeth Costello* when referring to the novel.
  - 3 For an extensive discussion of Coetzee as public intellectual, see Poyner.
  - 4 In addition to the famed 1997–98 Tanner Lectures at Princeton from which “The Lives of Animals” (Lessons 3 and 4 of *Elizabeth Costello*) are reproduced, Coetzee delivered lectures entitled “What is Realism” (Lesson 1) at Bennington College in 1996, “The Novel in Africa” (Lesson 2) at the Townsend Center for the Humanities at the University of California-Berkeley in 1998, and the “Humanities in Africa” (Lesson 5) at the Carl Friedrich von Siemens Stiftung in Munich in 2001. He also gave a talk at the Nexus Conference on “Evil” in Tilburg, Holland in 2002 in which he discussed Elizabeth Costello’s participation in a conference on the same theme (Lesson 6). See Attridge 194–195.
  - 5 In giving primacy to politics in my essay, I depart from recent critical trends in reading Coetzee and *Elizabeth Costello* through a primarily ethical lens. For examples of such work, see Attridge; Coetzee, *The Lives of Animals*.
  - 6 My thanks to Rebecca Walkowitz for guiding me to think about this connection.
  - 7 *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* reached a circulation of over one million copies in England only eight months after its publication in the United States. Social reformists in England extended its argument from emancipation of the slaves to include white labourers (Klingberg 543).
  - 8 Ramazani makes this point well with respect to poetry, which with the exception of Derek Walcott’s *Omeros* is often glaringly absent from the postcolonial canon. He explains poetry’s scholarly neglect through postcolonial studies’ valuation of texts that promise insight into the histories and practices of non-Western cul-

tures. Such interests yield a dearth of literary criticism on poetry whose formal density uneasily serves the ideologies of the field. As Ramazani writes, poetry is “a less transparent medium . . . harder to annex as textual synecdoche of the social world” (4). Of course, Coetzee’s entire prose oeuvre also resists the transparency of language and the conventions of realism, making him a more controversial (if still canonical) postcolonial figure than his often cited South African counterpart Nadine Gordimer.

- 9 It is important to note how strongly Coetzee’s latest work *Diary of a Bad Year* continues in this vein of disarticulation. In “As a Women Grows Older,” a coda to *Elizabeth Costello*, Elizabeth claims that she has “not yet descended to hawking my opinions around. *The Opinions of Elizabeth Costello*, revised edition” (13). However, *Diary*’s protagonist Señor C devotes his time to just such a project. He articulates his political and intellectual positions for a book called “Strong Opinions” only to have them disarticulated by his own suspicion of their permanency, the disruptive force of sexual desire for his secretary, and the fictional frame of the novel itself.

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