Theory in the Margin: Coetzee’s *Foe*
Reading Defoe’s *Crusoe/Roxana*

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For somewhat more than a decade, literary criticism in the United States had been made to pay attention to the representation and self-representation of margins. So much so, indeed, that the President’s Forum at the Modern Language Association annual convention in 1988 had the title “Breaking Up / Out / Down: The Boundaries of Literary Study.” It is also true that, perhaps as a result of these efforts, a strong demand to keep U.S. culture purely “Western” has also been consolidated. ¹ Under pressure of this debate, we tend to monumentalize something we call “margins.” Yet, for the sake of the daily work at the ground level, we must still raise the persistent voice of autocritique.

As we try to shore up our defences, we tend to leave untouched the politics of the specialists of the margin—the area studies, anthropology, and the like. Third World studies, including Third World feminist studies in English, become so diluted that all linguistic specificity or scholarly depth in the study of culture is often ignored. Indeed, works in poor English translation or works written in English or the European languages in the recently decolonized areas of the globe or written by people of so-called ethnic origin in First World space are beginning to constitute something called “Third World literature.” Within this arena of tertiary education in literature, the upwardly mobile exmarginal, justifiably searching for validation, can help commodify marginality. Sometimes, with the best of intentions and in the name of convenience, an institutionalized double-standard tends to get established: one standard of preparation and testing for our own kind and quite another for the rest of the world. Even as we join in the struggle to establish the institutional study of marginality we must still go on saying “And yet . . . .”

Consider Sartre, speaking his commitment just after World War II:

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And, diverse though man’s projects [projects—this word has the general existentialist sense of undertaking to construct a life] may be, at least none of them is wholly foreign to me . . . . Every project, even that of a Chinese, an Indian or a Negro, can be understood by a European. . . . The European of 1945 can throw himself [project] out of a situation which he conceives towards his limits [se jeter a partir d’une situation qu’il conceit vers ses limites] in the same way, and . . . he may redo [refaire] in himself the project of the Chinese, of the Indian or the African . . . . There is always some way of understanding an idiot, a child, a primitive man or a foreigner if one has sufficient information.²

Sartre’s personal and political good faith cannot be doubted here. Yet commenting on such passages, Derrida wrote in 1968: “Everything occurs as if the sign ‘man’ had no origin, no historical, cultural, or linguistic limit.”³ Indeed, if one looks at the rhetorical trace of Rome in “none of [man’s projects] is wholly alien to me” [humani nil a me alienum puto (Terence via the philosophes)], one realizes that the history obliterated here is that of the arrogance of the radical European humanist conscience, which will consolidate itself by imagining the other, or, as Sartre puts it, “redo in himself the other’s project,” through the collection of information. Much of our literary critical globalism or Third Worldism cannot even qualify to the conscientiousness of this arrogance.

The opposite point of view, although its political importance cannot be denied, that only the marginal can speak for the margin, can, in its institutional consequences, legitimize such an arrogance of conscience. Faced with this double-bind, let us consider a few methodological suggestions:

1. Let us learn to distinguish between what Samir Amin long ago called “internal colonization”—the patterns of exploitation and domination of disenfranchised groups within a metropolitan country like the United States or Britain—and the colonization of other spaces, of which Robinson Crusoe’s island is a “pure” example.⁴

2. Let us learn to discriminate the terms colonialism—in the European formation stretching from the mid eighteenth to the mid twentieth centuries—neocolonialism—dominant economic, political, and culturalist manoeuvres emerging in our century after the uneven dissolution of the territorial empires—and postcoloniality—the contemporary global condition, since the first term is supposed to have passed or be passing into the second.
3. Let us take seriously the possibility that systems of representation come to hand when we secure our own culture—our own cultural explanations. Consider the following set:

a. The making of an American is defined by at least a desire to enter the “We the People” of the Constitution. One cannot dismiss this as mere “essentialism” and take a position against civil rights, the Equal Rights Amendment, or the transformative opinions in favour of women’s reproductive rights. We in the United States cannot not want to inhabit this rational abstraction.

b. Traditionally, this desire for the abstract collective American “We the People” has been recoded by the fabrication of ethnic enclaves, affectively bonded subcultures, simulacra for survival that, claiming to preserve the ethnus of origin, move further and further away from the vicissitudes and transformations of the nation or group of origin. “How seriously can we [Africans] take . . . [Alice Walker’s] Africa, which reads like an overlay of South Africa over a vaguely realized Nigeria?”

c. Our current tendency to obliterate the difference between U.S. internal colonization and the transformations and vicissitudes in decolonized space in the name of the pure native invests this already established ethnicultural agenda. At worst, it secures the “They” of development or aggression against the Constitutional “We.” At best, it suits our institutional convenience, bringing the Third World home. The double-standard can then begin to operate.

In the face of the double-bind of Eurocentric arrogance or unexamined nativism, the suggestions above are substantive. Deconstructive cautions would put a critical frame around and in between them, so that we do not compound the problem by imagining the double-bind too easily resolved. Thus, if we keep in mind only the substantive suggestions, we might want to help ourselves by a greater effort at historical contextualization. Yet this too, if unaccompanied by the habit of critical reading, may feed the Eurocentric arrogance in Sartre’s declaration: “there is always some way of understanding [the other] if one has sufficient information.” The critical frame reminds us that the institutional organization of historical context is no more than our unavoidable starting point. The question remains: With this necessary preparation, to quote Sartre again, how does “the European”—or, in the neocolonial context, the U.S. critic and teacher of the humanities—“redo in himself [or herself] the project of the Chinese, of the Indian or the African?”

In the face of this question, deconstruction might propose a double-gesture: Begin where you are; but, when in search of absolute justifications,
To meditate on the wholly otherness of margins, I will look at a novel in English, *Foe*, by a white South African, J.M. Coetzee. This novel reopens two English texts in which the early eighteenth century tried to constitute marginality: Daniel Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe* (1719) and *Roxana* (1724). In *Crusoe*, the white man marginalized in the forest encounters Friday the savage in the margin. In *Roxana*, the individualist female infiltrates nascent bourgeois society. In Coetzee's novel, a double gesture is performed. In the narrative, Roxana begins her construction of the marginal where she is, but when her project approaches fulfilment, the text steps in and reminds us that Friday is in the margin as such, the wholly other.

I use the novel as a didactic aid to share with my students some of the problems of which I have been speaking. For the substantive provision of a historical context, I use Derek Attridge's "The Silence of the Canon: J.M. Coetzee's 'Foe,' Cultural Narrative, and Political Oppression," a much more detailed study than mine. My reading attempts to be a critical supplement to his. It attends to the rhetorical conduct of the text as it stages reading and writing. It is my hope that such a reading points out that a merely historically contextualized interpretation might produce closures that are problematic even as they are reasonable and satisfactory, that "the danger to which the sovereign decision [of the historical critic] responds is undecidability." Since the theory of which my intervention is the consequence is deconstruction in and on margins, I will spend a few moments on it before I turn to Coetzee's novel.

In 1972, Derrida published his *Marges de la philosophie*. I was taken by the caesura in his title. In *De la grammatologie*, Derrida let the title stand by itself. Five years later, a cannier Derrida stuck the word *Margins* before a comparably structured title: *de la philosophie*. The obvious meanings: I, the philosopher, philosophize in the margins; or, philosophy lives in its own margins; or yet, here I philosophize in an unauthorized way, attending to margins. The absent word is *margin* in the singular, the wholly other.

I learned another lesson from it, as follows: if we want to start something, we must ignore that our starting point is shaky. If we want to get something done, we must ignore that the end will be inconclusive. But this ignoring is not an active forgetfulness. It is an active *marginalizing* of the marshiness,
the swampiness, the lack of firm grounding at the margins, at the beginning and end. Yet those of us who “know” this also know that it is in those margins that philosophy hangs out. These necessarily and actively marginalized margins haunt what we start and get done, as curious guardians. Paradoxically, if you do not marginalize them but make them the centre of your attention, you sabotage their guardianship. Perhaps some of the problems with some of what you recognize as deconstructive work has been a fixation with the stalled origin and the stalled end: differance and aporia will do as their names. On the other hand, if you forget the productive unease that what you do with the utmost care is judged by those margins, in the political field you get the pluralism of repressive tolerance and sanctioned ignorance, and varieties of fundamentalism, totalitarianism, and cultural revolution; and, in the field of writing about and teaching literature, you get both the benign or resentful conservatism of the establishment and the masquerade of the privileged as the disenfranchised, or their liberator.

This is marginal in the general sense, no more and no less than a formula for doing things: the active and necessary marginalization of the strange guardians in the margins who keep us from vanguardism. The marginal in the narrow sense is the victims of the best-known history of centralization: the emergence of the straight white christian man of property as the ethical universal. Because there is something like a relationship between the general and the narrow sense, the problem of marking a margin in the house of feminism can be stated in another way. In her influential and by now classic essay “The Laugh of the Medusa,” Helene Cixous writes: “As subject for history, woman occurs simultaneously in several places.” In a minimal way, this can be taken to mean that, in a historical narrative in which single male figures or groups of men are definitive, woman or women as such cannot fit neatly into the established periodizing rubrics or categories. Maximally, as Cixous goes on to point out, this might also mean that the feminist woman becomes part of every struggle, in a certain way.

Proof of this can be found in the increasing interest in marginality in general within feminism in the academy. The exuberance of this interest has sometimes overlooked a problem: that a concern with women, and men, who have not been written in the same cultural inscription, cannot be mobilized in the same way as the investigation of gendering in our own. It is not impossible, but new ways have to be learned and taught, and attention to the wholly other must be constantly renewed. We understand it more easily when folks of the other gender inscription wish to join our struggle. For example, I confess to a certain unease reading a man’s text about a woman.
Yet, when we want to intervene in the heritage of colonialism or the practice of neocolonialism, we take our own goodwill for guarantee.

I am ready to get on with Coetzee’s actual reading of *The Life and Adventures of Robinson Crusoe*. On the threshold stands Marx’s paragraph on Defoe’s novel. Everyone reads it as being about capitalism, but it is exactly not so. The main drift of Marx’s chapter in which this paragraph occurs is that in generalized commodity production, the commodity has a fetish character. It represents the relationship between persons as a relationship between things. When commodities are not produced specifically for exchange, this fetish character disappears. *Time*, not money, is then the general equivalent. Marx chooses four examples, three precapitalist and one post-. Of the three precapitalist examples, Robinson is the first and most interesting because the other two are situations of exchange, although not of generalized commodity exchange. Robinson’s example is of the production of use-values.

Marx’s argument that all human beings perform that structure in exchange which is later expressed as money is not supposed to hold in cases of the production of use-values. But throughout the entire range of his writings, the theoretical fiction of the binary opposition between use- and exchange-value is repeatedly undone. Indeed, this may be the cornerstone of the subterranean text of socialist ethics in Marx which is still to be theorized. The undoing of the use-value/exchange-value binary repeatedly shows that for Marx, the private is defined by and contains within it the possibility of the social. The concrete individual is inherently predicated by the possibility of abstraction, and Marx’s first great example of this is Robinson. And his critique of political economists including Ricardo is that they read it as literary commentators on *Robinson Crusoe* think Marx read it; applying capitalist standards.

Marx is not interested in the novel, and all the English translations hide this by rendering his introduction of Robinson as: “Let us first look at Robinson on his island.” No. For Marx, the character of Robinson is a form of appearance of man in nature, and he introduces him this way: “Let Robinson first appear on his island.” I need not emphasize the importance of forms of appearance [*Erscheinungsformen*] in Marx’s tight argument. In his situation, of man alone in nature, producing use-values, Robinson already of “necessity” thinks abstract labour: “He knows that . . . the activity of one and the same Robinson . . . consists of nothing but different modes of human labour . . . all the relations between Robinson and the objects . . . of his own creation, are here . . . simple and clear . . . and yet . . . contain all the essential determinants of value.” Time, rather than money, is the general equivalent.
that expresses this production. I make this digression before I enter *Foe* because, in my reading, Coetzee’s book seems interested in space rather than time, as it stages the difficulties of a timekeeping investigation before a space that will not yield its inscription.\footnote{15}

*Foe* is more about spacing and displacement than about the timing of history and labor. This is perhaps the result of the colonial white’s look at the metropolitan classic. Just as the Jamaican white Jean Rhys’s rewriting of the nineteenth-century English classic cannot accept *Jane Eyre* as the paradigm woman, so can the South African white’s rewriting of an eighteenth-century English classic not accept Crusoe as the normative man in nature, already committed to a constitutive chronometry.\footnote{16} This Crusoe bequeathes a lightly inscribed space to an indefinite future: “‘The planting is not for us,’ said he. ‘We have nothing to plant—that is our misfortune . . . The planting is reserved for those who come after us and have the foresight to bring seed. I only clear the ground for them’” (*F* 33). The theme of the transition from land to landed capital is, after all, only one important strand of the mission of imperialism.

*Foe’s* Crusoe has no interest in keeping time. Indeed, the narrator of *Foe*, who is not Crusoe, “search[es] the poles . . . but [finds] no carvings, not even notches to indicate that he counted the years of his banishment or the cycles of the moon” (*F* 16). She begs him to keep a record, but he resolutely refuses. Although produced by merchant capitalism, Crusoe has no interest in being its agent, not even to the extent of saving tools. Coetzee’s focus is on gender and empire, rather than the story of capital.

Who is this female narrator of *Robinson Crusoe*? We know that the original had no room for women. There was the typecast mother; the benevolent widow whose role it was to play the benevolent widow; the nameless wife who was married and died in the conditional mode in one sentence so that Crusoe could leave for the East Indies in the very year of the founding of the Bank of England; and last but not least, the “seven women” he sent at the end of the story, “being such as I found proper for service, or for wives to such as would take them,” together with “five cows, three of them being big with calf” (*RC* 237). So who is this female narrator? It is time I tabulated some of the ways in which Coetzee alters Defoe as he cites him.

First, consider the title, *Foe*. We know of course that Foe is Defoe’s proper patronymic. He was born the son of James and Ann Foe. But in restoring this proper name, Coetzee also makes it a common noun. Whose Foe is Mr Foe? I will leave that question suspended for now.
The narrator of *Foe* is an Englishwoman named Susan Barton, who wants to "father" her story into history, with Mr Foe's help. Coetzee has trouble negotiating a gendered position; he and the text strain to make the trouble noticeable. This text will not defend itself against the undecidability and discomfort of imagining a woman. Is that authoritative word *father* being turned into a false but useful analogy (catachresis) here? Or is Coetzee's Susan being made to operate a traditional masculist topos of reversal and making Foe "gestate?" We cannot know. As Attridge points out, there is talk of "free choice" in *Foe*.

At any rate, Susan Barton has written a title, *The Female Castaway*, and a memoir and many letters and sent them to Mr Foe, not all of which have arrived at their destination. "More is at stake in the history you write, I will admit, for it must not only tell the truth about us but please the readers too. Will you not bear in mind, however, that my life is drearily suspended till your writing is done?" (F 63). What happens to *The Female Castaway*? Susan Barton begins the novel with quotation marks, a self-citation: "At last I could row no further" (F 5). This first part—the story of her discovery of Crusoe and Friday, Crusoe's death on board ship on the trip back to England, and her arrival in England with Friday—is her memoirs. As for her history, it is either the book *Robinson Crusoe* or the book *Foe*, we cannot know now. At this point, it is simply the mark of the citation and alteration which is every reading, an allegory of the guardian that watches over all claims to demonstrate the truth of a text by quotation. At the beginning of the text is a quotation with no fixed origin.

Before the story of fathering can go any further, a strange sequence intervenes. It is as if the margins of bound books are themselves dissolved into a general textuality. Coetzee makes the final episode of Defoe's novel *Roxana* flow into this citation of *Robinson Crusoe*. Coetzee's Susan Barton is also Defoe's Roxana, whose first name is Susan. (There are other incidental similarities.)

Because Crusoe and Susan/Roxana are made to inhabit the same text, we are obliged to ask a further question: What happens when the unequal balance of gender determination in the representation of the marginal is allowed to tip?

The male marginal in the early eighteenth-century imagination can be the solitary contemplative christian, earning the right to imperialist soul making even as he is framed by the dynamic narrative of mercantile capitalism elsewhere. The female marginal is the exceptional entrepreneurial woman for whom the marriage contract is an inconvenience when the man is a fool. (A century and a half later, Tillie Olsen will write the poignant tragedy of an
exceptional revolutionary woman married to an ordinary, bewildered, merely “normally” patriarchal man.) Not only because of Defoe’s own patriarchal production but also because of the conventions of the picaresque, his heroine must be a rogue—a social marginal finally centralizing herself through marriage. In this enterprise, she uses the money held by men as aristocrats, made by men as merchants; and she uses her sexuality as labour power.

In the presentation of this narrative, Defoe has at least two predictable problems that raise important questions about principles and the dissimulation of principle as well as about the negotiability of all commitments through the production and coding of value.

First: the relationship between principles and the dissimulation of principles. Defoe cannot make his Roxana utter her passion for woman’s freedom except as a ruse for her real desire to own, control, and manage money:

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    tho’ I could give up my Virtue ... yet I wou’d not give up my Money, which, tho’ it was true, yet was really too gross for me to acknowledge ... I was oblig’d to give a new Turn to it, and talk upon a kind of an elevated strain ... as follows: I told him, I had, perhaps, differing Notions of Matrimony, from what the receiv’d Custom had given us of it; that I thought a Woman was a free Agent, as well as a Man, and was born free, and cou’d she manage herself suitably, may enjoy that Liberty to as much purpose as Men do. (R 147)
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Second: the representation of the affective value of mothering when contrasted with the destiny of female individualism. Susan Suleiman has recently discussed the immense ramifications of this binary opposition in “Writing and Motherhood.” I will add a theoretical explanation of Defoe’s problem of representation: Sexuality used as labour power outside of the institution of marriage (not only in the British early eighteenth century, and not only among the bourgeoisie) produces children as commodities that cannot be legitimately exchanged and may produce an affective value that cannot be fully coded.

I think it is for rather an important reason that none of these issues is quite relevant for Coetzee: *He* is involved in a historically implausible but politically provocative revision. He attempts to represent the bourgeois individualist woman in early capitalism as the agent of other-directed ethics rather than as a combatant in the preferential ethics of self-interest. She is a subject for history. It is therefore she who is involved in the construction of the marginal—both Crusoe (Coetzee’s spelling) and Friday, and herself as character—as object of knowledge. The rhetoric of *Foe*, especially the last
section, shows that as such an agent, she is also the instrument of defence against undecidability. This is the liability of the peculiarly European "sense of responsibility for the human conscience." 20

Thus, for Coetzee, the basic theme of marriage and sexuality, freed on the island from heavy historical determination, becomes a radical counterfactual: the woman giving pleasure, without the usual affective charge, as use-value, in need. Thus also, Defoe's problem of the dissimulation of the desire for liberty as a ruse for control of money is ennobled in Foe into the full if unrecognized, unacknowledged, and undeveloped capitalist agency that we have already noticed: Susan's longing for "freedom of choice in writing her history," Susan's desire to use time as the general equivalent, begging Cruso to mark time, dating her own section of the book meticulously, indeed, at first living on Clock Lane; and, the problem of the representation of the affective value of mothering as opposed to the ambitions of possessive female individualism is dismissed by Coetzee's Susan Barton as Mr Foe's ideas of a woman's dilemma, as merely "father-born."

If we take the open-ended double-value or abyssality of Father under advisement here, a decision is not easy to take. "Without venturing up to that perilous necessity," let us decide that the problem is recast from the point of view of the feminist as agent, trying at once to rescue mothering from the European patriarchal coding and the "native" from the colonial account. 21 From the point of view of an other-directed ethico-politics, in this mother-daughter subplot, Coetzee marks an aporia.

Susan Barton had gone to Bahia Blanca to search for her daughter and had been shipwrecked on Crusoe's island on her way back. (Although Defoe's Roxana is a great traveller in the northwest European world looking forward to the turmoil of the transition from mercantile and commercial capital, she does not venture into the new cartography of the space of conquest.) Now a woman who claims to be her daughter haunts her footsteps and wants to be reclaimed. Susan Barton cannot recognize her as her lost daughter and tries to get rid of her in many ways. She is convinced that this encounter and pursuit are Foe's fabrication. (Attridge clues us into the "historical" Defoe's contribution to this scenario.) We cannot be convinced of this explanation. By everyday common sense, Susan Barton's credibility or sanity would here be thrown in doubt. But what place does credibility or verifiability have in this book, which is a real and imagined citation of Defoe's real book and Barton's unreal one, in a way that resembles the dream's "citation" of waking reality? I am suggesting that here the book may be gesturing toward the impossibility of restoring the history of empire and recovering the lost text of
mothering in the same register of language. It is true that we are each of us overdetermined, part historian, part mother, and many other determinations besides. But overdetermination can itself be disclosed when the condensed rebus in the dream has been straightened out in analytical prose. Because of this dislocation, there can be no politics founded on a continuous overdetermined multiplicity of agencies. It is merely defensive to dress up the strategic desirability of alliance politics and conscientious pluralism in the continuous space opened up by socialized capital in the language of undecidability and plurality. In the middle of Foe, the mysterious expulsion of the daughter can be read as marking this aporia. (In “Shibboleth,” Derrida takes Paul Celan’s citation of the cry from February 1936, the eve of the Spanish Civil War—No pasaran—and translates it, strictly, as aporia. One cannot pass through an aporia. Yet Franco did pass through. Celan’s poem stands guardian, marking the date, 13 February 1936, reminder of a history that did not happen. The main narrative of Foe passes through this obstinate sequence—bits of fiction that cannot articulate as a story.) Susan Barton lures her strange daughter into the heart of Epping Forest and tells her “You are father-born. What you know of your parentage comes to you in the form of stories, and the stories have but a single source” (F 91). Yet this too could be a dream. “What do I mean by it, father-born?” Susan asks herself in the letter in which she recounts this to Foe. “I wake in the grey of a London dawn with the word still faintly in my eyes... Have I expelled her, lost her at last in the forest?” But is a dream contained in a dream citation a loss of authority? This first severing is not neat. Susan writes Foe again: “I must tell you of a dead stillborn girl-child” she unwraps in a ditch some miles out of Marlborough: “Try though I might, I could not put from my thoughts the little sleeper who would never awake, the pinched eyes that would never see the sky, the curled fingers that would never open. Who was the child but I, in another life?” (F 105). I read “in another life” as, also, another story, another register, and pass on to more plausible explanations offered by this text, where plausibility is plural.

We could ourselves “explain” this curious sequence in various ways. We could fault Coetzee for not letting a woman have free access to both authorship and motherhood. We could praise him for not presuming to speak a completed text on motherhood. I would rather save the book, call it the mark of aporia in the center, and teach my students something about the impossibility of a political program founded on overdetermination.

In the frame of this peculiar aporia, the decision to keep or reject the mother-daughter story is presented in terms of the making of narratives. First, Susan is imagined as imagining Foe imagining the history of The Female
Castaway. In my reading, these imaginings may signify no more than Defoe's idea of a woman's dilemma, here thematized as Foe's problem in writing the story. At first, Susan Barton imagines a rejection:

> I write my letters, I seal them, I drop them in the box. One day when we are departed you will tip them out and glance through them. "Better had there been only Cruso and Friday." You will murmur to yourself: "Better without the woman." Yet where would you be without woman? . . . Could you have made up Cruso and Friday and the island . . . ? I think not. Many strengths you have, but invention is not one of them.

_(F 71-72)_

These musings describe Daniel Defoe's _Robinson Crusoe_ as we have it today, without the woman as inventor and progenitor. Yet in Coetzee's story, it is described as a road not taken. The actual is presented as the counterfactual. Defoe's _Robinson Crusoe_, which engenders Foe, does not exist.

Next, when Susan meets Foe, he tries to question her on the details of the plot. It is a long series of questions, and Foe supplies the answers himself and tells her the structure of his storytelling of _The Female Castaway_:

> 'We therefore have five parts in all: The loss of the daughter; the quest for the daughter in Brazil; abandonment of the quest, and the adventure of the island; assumption of the quest by the daughter; and reunion of the daughter with the mother. It is thus that we make up a book: loss, then quest, then recovery; beginning, then middle, then end. As to novelty, this is lent by the island episode—which is properly the second part of the middle—and by the reversal in which the daughter takes up the quest abandoned by her mother . . . . The island is not a story in itself,' said Foe gently. _(F 117)_

We do not read this projected novel in _Foe_. I should like to think that, in terms of _textual_ strategy, Coetzee's text makes (De)foe's book share its own concerns. My previous remarks on the formal peculiarities of the mother-daughter subplot carried the implication that feminism (within "the same" cultural inscription) and anticolonialism (for or against racial "others") cannot occupy a continuous (narrative) space. Here, Mr Foe is made to take a similar decision within his framework of _structural_ strategy. The island is the central story of both the real _Robinson Crusoe_ and this fictive projected _Female Castaway_. In the former, the frame narrative is capitalism and colony. In the latter, it would be the mother-daughter story. The two cannot occupy a continuous space. Susan Barton tries to break the binary opposition by
broaching the real margin that has been haunting the text since its first page. The stalling of that broaching is the story of Foe: "'In the letters that you did not read,' I said, 'I told you of my conviction that, if the story seems stupid, that is because it so doggedly holds its silence. The shadow whose lack you feel is there: it is the loss of Friday's tongue'" (F 117).

In Foe, Friday's tongue has been cut off—by slavers, says Robinson. (Attridge provides the "real" detail of Coetzee's answer to this in an interview, a genre that is generated to bring undecidability under control.) Susan wants to know him, to give him speech, to learn from him, to father his story, which will also be her story: the account of her anguish as Friday grows dull in London; her longing for Friday's desire and her exasperation at herself; the orchestration of her desire to construct Friday as subject so that he can be her informant cannot be summarized. She asks Friday to explain the origin of his loss through a few pictures. She must recognize with chagrin that her picture of Robinson possibly cutting out his tongue, "might also be taken to show Crusoe as a beneficent father putting a lump of fish into the mouth of child Friday" (F 68-69). Each picture fails this way. The unrepeatability of the unique event can only be repeated imperfectly. And then, "who was to say there do not exist entire tribes in Africa among whom the men are mute and speech is reserved to women?" (F 69). Susan is at her wit's end. That too is a margin. When she "begins to turn in Friday's dance," it is not a con-versation—a turning together—for "Friday is sluggishly asleep on a hurdle behind the door" (F 104). But her project remains to "give a voice" to Friday: "The story of Friday’s tongue is a story unable to be told, or unable to be told by me. That is to say, many stories can be told of Friday's tongue, but the true story is buried within Friday, who is mute. The true story will not be heard till by art we have found a means of giving voice to Friday" (F 118). Where is the guarantee of this? Where indeed is the guarantee of Attridge’s conviction that Friday is a metaphor for the work of art?

Contrast this to Defoe’s text. It was noticed rather quickly, after the first publication of Robinson Crusoe, that Defoe kept Friday’s language acquisition skills at a rather low level. It is also noticeable that, at their first encounter, “I began to speak to him, and teach him to speak to me” (RC 161). Like us, Crusoe does not need to learn to speak to the racial other. Of course Crusoe knows the savages have a language. And it is a longstanding topos that barbarians by definition do not speak language. But the contrast here is also between the colonialist—who gives the native speech—and the metropolitan anti-imperialist—who wants to give the native voice. (In the interview cited by Attridge, Coetzee provides the racial difference between Crusoe’s and his own Friday. I ask my students to note it, not to make it the
tool to an unproductive closure.) The last scene in Susan’s narrative stands as a warning to both. Before I read it I want to remind ourselves of the last scene involving Friday in Robinson Crusoe. Friday is not only the “domesticated anti-type,” as John Richetti calls him; he is also the prototype of the successful colonial subject. He learns his master’s speech, does his master’s work, happily swears loyalty, believes the culture of the master is better, and kills his other self to enter the shady plains of northwestern Europe. The footsore company have just escaped from wolves. It is bitter cold, the night is advancing. At this point Friday offers to amuse the company with a huge threatening bear, and Robinson quite surprisingly allows him to do so. Friday speaks to the bear in English. The bear understands his tone and gestures. Like two blood brothers, they dance in the trees. Finally, Friday kills the bear with a gun in his ear. He has reinscribed his savagery. This is an amusement available to the natives. He makes his masters his spectators and replaces the arrow with the gun. He is on his way out of the margin.

Now let us look at the last scene of Friday in Susan’s narrative. Foe asks Susan to teach Friday to write. The discussion of speech and writing between these two European principals is of great interest. Susan thinks it is a poor idea but agrees because she “find[s] it thankless to argue” (F 144). The staging of this errant scene of writing should be examined fully in a classroom reading.

One of the words Barton tries to teach Friday is Africa. This effort is rich in meaning and its limits. The metropolitan anti-imperialist cannot teach the native the proper name of his nation or continent. Africa, a Roman name for what the Greeks called “Libya,” itself perhaps a latinization of the name of the Berber tribe Aourigha (perhaps pronounced “Afarika”), is a metonym that points to a greater indeterminacy: the mysteriousness of the space upon which we are born. Africa is only a time-bound naming; like all proper names it is a mark with an arbitrary connection to its referent, a catachresis. The earth as temporary dwelling has no foundational name. Nationalism can only ever be a crucial political agenda against oppression. All longings to the contrary, it cannot provide the absolute guarantee of identity.

This scene of writing may also be an unfinished thematizing of dissemination, where words are losing their mode of existence as semes. “Friday wrote the four letters h-o-u-s, or four shapes passably like them: whether they were truly the four letters, and stood truly for the word house and the picture I had drawn, and the thing itself, only he knew” (F 145-46).

At this stage the only letter he seems to be able to reproduce is h. H is a strange letter in this book—it is the letter of muteness itself. When Crusoe
had first shown Friday's loss to Susan, "'La-la-la,' said Cruso, and motioned to Friday to repeat. 'Ha-ha-ha,' said Friday from the back of his throat. 'He has no tongue,' said Cruso. Gripping Friday by the hair, he brought his face close to mine. 'Do you see?' he said. 'It is too dark,' said I. 'La-la-la,' said Cruso. 'Ha-ha-ha,' said Friday. I drew away, and Cruso released Friday's hair' (F 22-23). $H$ is the failed echolalia of the mute. All through the book the letter $H$ is typographically raised and separated from the line in vague mimicry of eighteenth-century typeface. It is noticeable because no other letter of the alphabet is treated in this way.

The next day Friday dresses up in Foe's clothes and proceeds to write: a packed series of $o$s. "'It is a beginning,' says Foe. 'Tomorrow you must teach him $a$'" (F 152). This is where Susan's narrative ends, with the promise of a continued writing lesson that never happens. One can of course say that Foe is wrong. It is not a beginning unless one forgets the previous forgetting; and $o$ could conceivably be $\omega$, the end.

We also remember that in Robinson Crusoe "saying $O$" is Friday's pidgin translation of his native word for prayer; and it is around the accounts of praying practices that Robinson shares with us the two negatives of reason. Within natural law what negates reason is unreason. Its example is Friday and his tribe's saying "$O."  Within divine law, reason is sublimely negated by revelation. Its example is the inconstancies of Christian doctrine, naively pointed out by Friday. As Susan confesses that she is not a good writing teacher, so does Robinson confess that he is not a good religious instructor, for he cannot make revelation accessible to the merely reasonable savage. In the light of this, it is particularly interesting to notice what Coetzee stages between the inside margins of the first and second days of the writing lesson. "While Foe and I spoke, Friday filled his slate with open eyes, each set upon a human foot: row upon row of eyes: walking eyes . . . . 'Give! Give me the slate, Friday!' I commanded. Whereupon, instead of obeying me, Friday put three fingers into his mouth and wet them with spittle and rubbed the slate clean" (F 147).

Here is the guardian of the margin. Neither narrative nor text gives pride of place to it: active marginalizing perhaps. This event changes the course of Foe's and Susan's conversation only to the extent that Susan finally says, "How can Friday know what freedom means when he barely knows his name?" (F 149).

Are those walking eyes rebuses, hieroglyphs, ideograms, or is their secret that they hold no secret at all? Each scrupulous effort at decoding or deciphering will bring its own rewards; but there is a structural possibility that they are nothing. Even then it would be writing, but that argument has no place here.\textsuperscript{25}
It is the withholding that is of interest in terms of Susan Barton’s narrative. The night before, Susan had said to Foe: “it is still in my power to guide and amend. Above all, to withhold. By such means do I still endeavour to be father of my story” (F 123). After this Foe and Susan Barton copulate for the first time.

Yet it is Friday rather than Susan who is the unemphatic agent of withholding in the text. For every territorial space that is value-coded by colonialism and every command of metropolitan anticolonialism for the native to yield his “voice,” there is a space of withholding, marked by a secret that may not be a secret but cannot be unlocked. “The native,” whatever that might mean, is not only a victim, he or she is also an agent. He or she is the curious guardian at the margin.

In a recent article in *Oxford Literary Review*, Benita Parry has criticized Homi Bhabha, Abdul Jan Mohammed, and Gayatri Spivak for being so enamored of deconstruction that they will not let the native speak. She has forgotten that we are natives too. We talk like Defoe’s Friday, only much better. Nearly three hundred years have, after all, passed since Defoe’s fabrication of Friday. Territorial imperialism, in the offing then, has given place to neocolonialism. Within the broad taxonomy that I am proposing here, the murderous project of apartheid keeps South Africa caught in that earlier dispensation. In the so-called decolonized context proper, among the migrant population in metropolitan space, the resistant postcolonial has become a scandal.

Postcolonial persons like ourselves from formerly colonized countries are able to communicate to each other (and to metropolitans), to exchange, to establish sociality, because we have had access to the so-called culture of imperialism. Shall we then assign to that culture a measure of “moral luck?” I think there can be no doubt that the answer is “no.” This impossible “no” to a structure that one critiques yet inhabits intimately is the deconstructive position, which has its historical case in postcoloniality. The neocolonial anticolonialist still longs for the object of a conscientious ethnography, sometimes gender-marked for feminism: “where women inscribed themselves as healers, ascetics, singers of sacred songs, artizans and artists.”

I have no objection to conscientious ethnography, although I am forewarned by its relationship to the history of the discipline of anthropology. But my particular word to Parry is that her efforts (to give voice to the native) as well as mine (to give warning of the attendant problems) are judged by those strange margins of which Friday with his withholding slate is only a mark.
Does the book *Foe* recuperate this margin? The last section of the book, narrated by a reader of unspecified gender and date, is a sort of reading lesson which would suggest the opposite. To recover this suggestion, let us turn to Barton and Foe’s copulation.

Coetzee plays the register of legible banality with panache. This is the second take on the misfiring of the mother-daughter story. Susan’s supposed daughter is present earlier in the evening. That scene is put to rest by these noticeably unremarkable words: “Her appearances, or apparitions, or whatever they were, disturbed me less now that I knew her better” (F 136). Foe detains Barton with a seducer’s touch. In bed she claims “‘a privilege that comes with the first night’. . . . Then I drew off my shift and straddled him (which he did not seem easy with, in a woman). ‘This is the manner of the Muse when she visits her poets,’ I whispered . . . ” (F 139).

In the pleasant pause after this musing-cum-fathering, a deliberately staged scene of (future) writing, rather different from Friday’s withheld writing, Susan grows drowsy, and Foe speaks, unexpectedly, of sea monsters and resumes, “to us [Friday] leaves the task of descending into that eye [across which he rows and is safe]” (F 141).

It is this sea monster, an image engendered in the representation of the primal scene of writing but also dredged up from *The Tempest*, a play repeatedly read as a representation of the colonizer-colonized dialectic, that allows the indeterminate reader, the central character of this last section, to descend into “Friday’s home.” In other words, this reading knits itself into Susan’s scene of strange fathering, leaving Friday’s writing lesson apart.

“At one corner of the house, above head-height, a plaque is bolted to the wall. *Daniel Defoe, Author*, are the words, white on blue, and then more writing too small to read” (F 155). We have seen these plaques in London. Defoe is dead and memorialized, but the dates are too small to read.

Under the names of the dead father, we enter and discover Susan Barton’s book, unpublished. The topmost leaf crumbles. Then the reader reads the self-quotation that opens *Foe*, now properly addressed: “Dear Mr Foe.”

The quotation marks disappear, and the reader is staged as filling the subject position, for Barton’s text continues. This is easy reading. Nothing is cited, everything is at once real and fantastic, all the permissive indulgences of narrative fiction in the narrow sense are available to the reader, sole shifter on this trip. The ride is smooth, the trip leads not to Crusoe’s island but to the second wreck, where Susan Barton lies fat and dead. *Robinson Crusoe* has not been written, and *Foe* is annulled, for now Barton will not reach Crusoe’s island. Friday is affirmed to be there, the margin caught in the empire of
signs. "This is a place where bodies are their own signs. It is the home of Friday" (F 157). What is the guarantee of this confidence?

For this end, texts are porous. They go through to wish fulfilment. Yet we also know that Coetzee's entire book warns that Friday's body is not its own sign. In this end, the staging of the wish to invade the margin, the seaweeds seem to sigh: if only there were no texts. The end is written lovingly, and we will not give it up. But we cannot hold together, in a continuous narrative space, the voyage of reading at the end of the book, Susan Barton's narrative, and the withheld slate.

Perhaps that is the novel's message: the impossible politics of overdetermination (mothering, authoring, giving voice to the native "in" the text; a white male South African writer engaging in such inscriptions "outside" the text) should not be regularized into a blithe continuity, where the European redoes the primitive's project in herself. It can, however, lead to a scrupulously differentiated politics, dependent on "where you are." Coetzee's text can be taught as:

1. Correcting Defoe's imagination of the marginal, in comradeship
2. Reinscribing the white woman as agent, as the asymmetrical double of the author. (I think the problems with the figure of "fathering" mark this asymmetry)
3. Situating the politics of overdetermination as aporia
4. Halting before Friday, since for him, here, now, and for Susan Barton, and for Daniel Foe, that is the arbitrary name of the withheld limit.

At first I had wanted to end with the following sentence: Mr Foe is everyone's Foe, the enabling violator, for without him there is nothing to cite. A month after finishing with writing, I heard Jacques Derrida deliver an extraordinary paper on friendship. I suppose I can say now that this Foe, in history, is the site where the line between friend and foe is undone. When one wants to be a friend to the wholly other, it withdraws its graphematic space. Foe allows that story to be told.

It is no doubt because I heard and read Derrida's pieces on friendship and margins and read Bernard Williams's "Moral Luck," that I could work out this didactic exercise. I know that Stanley Fish has no objections to accepting the consequences of reading theory. Theory itself has no con-sequence. It is autosequential rather than automatic. Theory is the production of theory, in presupposition, method, end. It is always withdrawn from that which it seeks to theorize, however insubstantial that object might be. Theory is a bit like Mr Foe. It is always off the mark, yet it is what we undo. Without it, nothing but
the wished-for inarticulation of the natural body: “a slow stream, without breath, without interruption,” betrayed by the spacing of the words that wish it (F 157).

I should hope that my students would keep this duplicitous agent of active marginalizing—theory, our friend Foe—in mind as they read with informed sympathy interventionist writing, both fiction and nonfiction. Mongane Serote’s *To Every Birth Its Blood* is an example of interventionist fiction not “necessarily directed at the elite international readership”—ourselves—“addressed by South African writers such as J.M. Coetzee and Nadine Gordimer.” *Not Either An Experimental Doll: The Separate Lives of Three South African Women* is the “nonfiction” account of the unavoidable thwarting (in the middle of our century, by a metropolitan white anticolonialist activist woman and a successful black colonial female subject, both anxious of help) of the native seeking (rather than withholding) agency, Lily Moya, a poor Christian orphan “Bantu” woman in her teens.33

In a letter to Mabel Palmer, the white anticolonialist activist, Lily wrote her conviction: “We make people believe that civilization came with evil.”34 Less than two years later, after Mabel Palmer sent her a message “of total emotional rejection coupled with her act of generosity in funding Lily to an alternative school,” Lily undid that conviction and wrote: “I was never meant to be a stone but a human being with feelings not either an experimental doll.”35 The stone is (in the) margin.

At a recent conference, Coetzee juxtaposed passages from Mothobi Mutloatse and Nadine Gordimer and commented: “The white writer in South Africa is in an impossible position.”36 He stages the full range of that impossibility by claiming corrective comradeship and complicity with Foe, and Susan Barton. The novel is neither a failure nor an abdication of the responsibility of the historical or national elite.

A colleague unnerved me by suggesting that this book, like all transactions among men, left the woman anonymous. I should not like to discount the suggestion: I would rather use it to repeat my opening cautions. Does “the sign ‘woman’ have no origin, no historical, cultural, or linguistic limit?” Is Friday not a man? Further, said my colleague, “Coetzee has read a lot of theory, and it shows. But . . .” But what? “Theory should lead to practice.” (So much for theory having no consequences.) What should the practice have been in this case? A book that did not show the reading of theory, resembling more “what a novel should be?” Should my colleague have known that her notion of the relationship between theory and practice has caused and is causing a good deal of suffering in the world? If figuration is seen as a case
of theoretical production (one practice among many), could another politics of reading have led her to the conclusion that her desire to help racially differentiated colonial others had a threshold and a limit? "I quite like metafiction, but . . .," she added. For what sort of patafiction of concrete experience must we reserve our seal of approval? The field of practice is a broken and uneven place. The convenient highway of a single issue is merely the shortest distance between two sign-posted exits.

NOTES

This essay is forthcoming in Consequences of Theory: Selected Papers from the English Institute, 1987-88, ed. Jonathan Arac and Barbara Johnson (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP).


6. Various essays written by me in the last few months share some common themes. Some passages occur in more than one of them. The last few paragraphs, for example, are also to be found in "The Making of Americans, the Teaching of English, and the Future of Culture Studies," forthcoming in New Literary History (Autumn 1990).


9. The editions used are Daniel Defoe, Robinson Crusoe: An Authoritative Text/Backgrounds/Sources/Criticism, ed. Michael Shinagel (New York: Norton, 1975) (hereafter cited as RC, followed by page number); and Daniel Defoe, Roxana: The


18. I am referring, of course, to Tillie Olsen, Tell Me a Riddle (New York: Peter Smith, 1986).


23. Although this phrase is not coined by them, the enablement for this program is generally sought in Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe’s most influential Hegemony and Socialist Strategy: Towards a Radical Democratic Politics, trans. Winston Moore and Paul Cammack (London: Verso, 1985).


27. Negotiations with the current conjuncture have led to various internal manoeuvres that are beyond the scope of this chapter. David Attwell of the University of the Western Cape has pointed out to me the existence of the notion of a “colonialism of a special type” in South Africa, a colonialism that did not, by and large, export surplus value. He makes the interesting suggestion that this, too, might explain Coetzee’s Cruzo’s noncommittal attitude toward classic metropolitan interests. I keep to my much less fine-tuned point of territorial presence—though even there, a difference looms. Given the specificity of the situation and its imbrication with the current conjuncture, the white South African claims to be South African, whereas indigenous nationality was not generally the claim of territorial imperialists of the classic period. This makes clear, yet once again, that 1) a taxonomy is most serviceable when not exhaustive, and 2) “the occupational weakness of the new and somewhat beleaguered discipline of a transnational study of culture” is that “conceptual schemes and extent of scholarship cannot be made to balance” (Spivak, “Constitutions and Culture Studies,” *Yale Journal of Law and the Humanities* [forthcoming]). (The Australian, Canadian and U.S. cases are, *in only this respect of course*, something like heterogeneous exceptions to the British case.) The agenda is promise of future work and collective critique.


34. Marks, *Experimental Doll*, 89.

35. Ibid., 42. I have rearranged parts of the sentence in the interest of coherence.
Far too much of South African poetry is unmistakably dull and stale, its true voice stifled by inappropriate literary standards or compulsory political rhetoric.

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