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Signs Tell Their Own Stories

Rethinking the Status of Writing and Speech in J.M. Coetzee's *Foe*

ABSTRACT

The present study examines the unique treatment of native history in J.M. Coetzee's novel *Foe*. The novel questions the status of both speech and writing as the only means of telling history in the European tradition. By having two European characters reveal their perception of the truth of the silent Friday as they try to teach him to speak and then to write, Coetzee succeeds in demonstrating that both phono- and logocentrism fail to encompass the life and stories of ex-colonial subjects like Friday. If, in the case of Friday, we cannot wholly trust written books nor depend solely on spoken language, then an alternative means of narration must be found. Signs will speak for the speechless and carry their stories to the world.

Introduction

THE TELLING OF STORIES FROM THE PAST made for a point of great interest to postcolonial novelists and critics in the 1970s and 1980s owing to the many functions these stories have for ex-colonial subjects. The writing and rewriting of colonial and postcolonial stories are important because a) they counter colonial voices in the European novel; b) they fill gaps in the history of colonialism; c) they often set the tone, at least within the space of the novel, for future relations with the colonial countries; and d) they revive and honour native cultures that were deemed pagan and primitive in colonial fiction.

The present essay aims at examining the unique treatment of colonial stories in J.M. Coetzee's novel *Foe*. Coetzee questions the validity of both speech and writing as the only means of writing history in the European tradition. In doing so, he deconstructs Derrida's deconstruction of the Western tradition, which, according to Derrida, has evolved from an oral to a contractual tradition. Coetzee (by having the two European characters reveal their

perception of the truth of the silent Friday as they try to teach him to speak and then to write) manages to deconstruct Derrida's preference for writing over speech as the vessel for truth. Derrida's theory of a grand shift in the Western tradition from phonocentrism to logocentrism fails to encompass Friday's story. For a tongueless Friday, what is the means for telling his story when he lacks mastery of any language?

Signs will tell their own stories in the case of Friday. Coetzee, though he uses its own strategies, very elegantly demonstrates that Derrida's more inclusive discourse still excludes the life and stories of ex-colonial subjects like Friday. Coetzee's treatment of centrism in *Foe* provides a strong basis for re-evaluating approaches to logo- and phonocentrism in viewing the history of the natives.

Foe in the Eyes of Its Critics

These natives are represented in colonial novels as primitive and illiterate savages. Often they are not present at all, in whatever shape or form.¹ Many Third-World postcolonial writers have made it their responsibility to give these marginal voices their spaces to speak, and to let them narrate their history from their own perspective.² One means by which they have done so is to focus on the unconscious of the colonial history as represented in the eighteenth- and nineteenth-century novel and in the travel literature of the same period.

Coetzee is presented by critics as a postcolonial writer who has contributed much to this revisionist approach. Dana Dragunoiu has explained the relation between the original Crusoe and Coetzee's Cruso by pointing out the complete reversal of roles for the colonial hero as painted by Coetzee.³ Along the same lines, Ayo Kehinde argues that Coetzee is rewriting the canon by foregrounding African presence and constructing an African version of his-

¹ As confirmed by, among others, Edward Said in *Culture and Imperialism* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1993).

² Cf. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, "Can The Subaltern Speak?" in *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture*, ed. Lawrence Grossberg & Cary Nelson (Urbana: U of Illinois P, 1985): 271-313.

³ Dana Dragunoiu, "Existential Doubt and Political Responsibility in J.M. Coetzee's *Foe*," *Critique* 42.3 (Spring 2001): 309-26.

tory beyond any hegemonic European voices.⁴ Kehinde concludes that, for Coetzee, history does not exist, and cannot be told, as a sequence of events. Europe equates knowledge, modernity, and civilization with itself, while it views the Third World as the opposite of all these qualities. However, history cannot be narrated from one side, because, for the story to become more balanced, there is a gap in the historical record as handed down by European narrators, a gap that only African voices could fill.

For this to happen, one option Laura Tansley highlights is the shift from male to female voices in the colonial narrative space.⁵ She sees *Foe* as a novel that gives voice to the voiceless by handing narration over to a strong woman who insists on telling the whole truth. But the story is not only hers but also that of Crusoe and Friday. Susan Barton accords Friday centre stage when she concludes that his silence is more interesting to storytellers than Crusoe's speech. Susan's voice is usurped by Coetzee at the climax of the story when she plunges to the bottom of the ocean to recover the history of the wrecked ship and to discover the history of Friday there.

A second necessary option for Africa to become vocal is that Coetzee must free himself from the authority of European authors and narrative techniques, a thing which, as Susan Maher indicates, he does masterfully in the dialogues between Susan and her editor, Mr. Foe.⁶ Maher asserts that this authorial independence is achieved more beautifully towards the end when the novel slides into the space of metafiction to narrate history from the unconscious.

More importantly, Coetzee has, as will be indicated in this essay, to free narration from the authority of the spoken and the written word that provide the basis for the European perception of historical truth. We briefly identify, describe, and reflect on the value to postcolonial theory of the alternative strategies adopted by Coetzee in telling about situations to which neither orality nor scriptology applies. Signs fashioned from material evidence will make

⁴ Ayo Kehinde, "Postcolonial Literatures as Counter-Discourse: J.M. Coetzee's *Foe* and the Reworking of the Canon," *Journal of African Literature and Culture* 4 (2007): 32–57.

⁵ Laura Tansley, "To speak or not to speak: An encounter with J.M. Coetzee's *Foe*," (2009), www.forumjournal.org/site/sites/default/files/09/Tansley.pdf (accessed 9 November 2011).

⁶ Susan Naramore Maher, "Confronting Authority: J.M. Coetzee and the Remaking of *Robinson Crusoe*," *International Fiction Review* 18.1 (1991): 34–40.

room for counter-stories about the history that is left out of the European novel.

Writing versus Speech and the Place of Friday

Derrida, in his famous Johns Hopkins disquisition "Structure, Sign, and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences," spoke of history with a small h. Derrida believed that deconstruction will necessarily place History between brackets and will take away from the reliability enjoyed by historians in the pre-modern times.⁷ In the same set of reflections, as well as elsewhere in his canonical deconstructive oeuvre, he spoke favourably of the transition in the Western tradition from an oral to a contractual tradition: i.e. from speech to writing. Thus, from Nietzsche onward, Derrida wrote, writing seemed to enjoy a privileged place in the Western tradition. The written word became more reliable than the spoken.

In a similar comment on the power of the written word, Gayatri Spivak revealed her own beliefs about the inferiority of speech when confronted with the power of writing.⁸ According to Spivak, when one speaks, s/he has power and control as long as s/he is speaking; but this power shifts to the scribe once words are put on the page in writing. As a result of this act of writing, the one who speaks will lose the power s/he has enjoyed over the words at the moment they come out of his/her mouth. Spivak agrees with Derrida that writing is superior and more important than speech in industrial and post-industrial societies.

Obviously, Spivak is perfectly aware of the fact that the written texts of history are by no means innocent in their representation of the Self and the Other. She argues in "Can the Subaltern Speak?" that the discourse of Indian women went unheeded by others. No matter how loudly they spoke and how active they were, their voices were of no importance in a space dominated by the male voice. They were treated like slaves whose sole role is to serve the Indian male.

⁷ Jacques Derrida, "Structure, Sign, and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences" (1966), in Derrida, *Writing and Difference*, tr. Alan Bass (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1978): 278–94.

⁸ Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, "Strategy, Identity, Writing," in Spivak, *The Post-Colonial Critic: Interviews, Strategies, and Dialogues*, ed. Sarah Harasym (New York: Routledge, 1990): 35–49. (Interview with John Hutnyk et al.) Originally published in the *Melbourne Journal of Politics* 18 (1986): 44–59.

George Lamming, in "The Occasion for Speaking," reflected on the role and effect of writing in the context of colonial subjects.⁹ According to Lamming, the knowledge that the English have about West Indians is taken from books of history that were written by the English themselves. In the same way, the knowledge that West Indians have about their culture is also acquired from the same books written by people who are strangers and outsiders to the social and historical experience of the Caribbean. Europeans wrote these books according to their own interests; they are far from being reliable accounts of history.

The postcolonial novel represents Friday as a young black man who got used to the idea of being a slave, a silent figure who learned of language only as much as he needed, or as much as his master wanted him to learn. Coetzee describes Friday as a helpless and defenceless child shaped and reshaped by his master:

Friday has no command of words and therefore no defence against being reshaped day by day in conformity with the desires of others. [...] Therefore the silence of Friday is a helpless silence. He is the child of his silence, a child unborn, a child waiting to be born that cannot be born.¹⁰

Friday can neither speak nor write any European language; thus, he is doomed to silence and absence – at least, as far as the Western tradition (which equates presence and being with speech and/or writing) is concerned.

If Friday is "the child of his silence," then he can never be heard unless he has the power to use words to tell his story to the world, or so says the logic of logocentrism. However, what makes Friday unique is his being the child of silence, to whom the logic of logocentrism does not apply. His excised tongue means that he is physically unable to use language or that he has no command of the colonial language, and is thus condemned to remain eternally absent from the English novel. 'How can we make a tongueless man speak?' becomes Coetzee's most interesting question in the novel. From part II onward, this is the dilemma that both Susan and Foe fail to resolve because they work on Friday with the preconception that, to tell his story, he has to subscribe to the European logic of phono- and logocentrism or he will not speak at all.

⁹ George Lamming, "The Occasion for Speaking," in Lamming, *The Pleasures of Exile* (London: Michael Joseph, 1960): 23–50.

¹⁰ J.M. Coetzee, *Foe* (1986; Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1987): 121, 122. Further page references are in the main text.

In the case of *Friday*, Coetzee acknowledges, challenges, and moves beyond these qualities of writing and speech. On the one hand, written books are not always true, since they are written by those who have power. On the other, as Spivak argues, speech will die out, go to dust; nothing will remain to record the past but written books. However, since, in the case of *Friday*, we cannot wholly trust written books or depend on spoken language, we need another means that is neither writing nor speech. Signs can speak for the speechless and carry their stories to the world.

Foe as a Practice in Deconstruction

Coetzee's *Foe* follows deconstructive strategies almost strictly in dealing with the founding father of colonialism, Daniel Defoe. The first crucial slippage in *Foe* occurs on the opening page when the traditionally masculine space is invaded by a female voice. With this introduction of the female voice into Crusoe's island kingdom, Coetzee raises his first 'what if' question: What if narration slips from a masculine into a feminine voice? Will that change much in the story of *Friday*?

However, to challenge a voice of authority like that of Crusoe, what is required is a strong female who does not give up easily. Part I of the novel gives us a series of encounters between Susan and Crusoe. Following each encounter, Susan proves to be as tall as Crusoe.¹¹ She is not afraid when he shouts; she is not prepared to follow the rules he sets; and she questions the veracity of his stories about Europe and Africa. By the time we get the end of the section, not only has Susan claimed her right to speak, but she has usurped Crusoe's voice, and now acts like his mother/nurse. The phallogentric space of colonial narratives has given way to the powerful, independent voice of Susan Barton. As a teller of the story of the island, Susan promises to tell the truth and only the truth of what she saw or heard: "What I saw, I wrote. I saw no cannibals; and if they came after nightfall and fled before the dawn, they left no footprint behind'" (54), she writes.

¹¹ For example, recounting making love athwart Crusoe on board the *John Hobart* after leaving the island and before he dies of fever, she writes: "He is a tall man, I a tall woman" (44). By the same token – that of empowered female equality – she adverts, in her written reconstruction of her long one-sided dialogue with *Friday*, to her stature as a "tall woman" (86) arisen from the sea and wonders if she ever kindled sexual desire in the mute black.

Susan revises colonial history by raising obstinate questions and by persistently seeking answers to those questions, especially when they have to do with Friday's life story, his silence, and the means to make him speak. By raising so many questions about almost everything she sees and says, and about anything Cruso or Foe says, Susan fills the air around the reader with questions, to the extent that she and the reader breathe in doubt. Is Cruso truly who he says he is? Are Foe's stories fact or fiction? Who cut out Friday's tongue? How did it happen? Why did Friday submit to Cruso's rule when he might easily have slain him? Who is the girl who claims to be Susan's daughter? Is Susan herself the shadow of her own stories? Can the tongueless Friday speak? How can we have him speak?

This constant stress on uncertainty and open questions – “I am doubt itself” (133), Susan tells Foe – has a triple function. For one thing, it questions the truth of travel literature, its authors, and its narrators. As a consequence, the authority of Defoe and Cruso as, respectively, father of novels and founder of a (mini-)colony crumbles. Susan's Cruso is both desperate and passionless, and Foe, her editor, wants to please his readership: i.e. he lies to sell his books and to earn money. The second function has to do with Susan's narration. When she doubts the truth even in the face of material evidence, she is questioning the truth in colonial archives. Colonial historical documents become untrustworthy. History exchanges places with fiction, fiction with history. One more turn of the screw, and eurocentrism crumbles, too. If not only colonial novelists but also colonial historians are implicated, then the scene is already set for another version of history to be told. Friday must speak and render his own version. Now the centre slips one more time, but this time it moves from Susan to Friday. He is the hole in the narrative, the lack, the page left blank. His absence becomes the utmost presence. With this yet incomplete final move, an alternative has already been introduced; afrocentrism replaces eurocentrism.

Up to this point in the story, Coetzee seems to be applying the rules of deconstruction to the reading of colonial history. He questions colonial truths, deconstructs colonial authorities, erases and replaces colonial centres, and comes up with an alternative system that is both feminine and afrocentric. “On the sorrows of Friday, I once thought to tell Mr. Foe, but did not, a story entire of itself might be built; whereas from the indifference of Cruso there is little to be squeezed” (87), Susan declares.

Manuel Almagro Jiménez says that Susan turns Friday into something even more mysterious because she sounds surprised to find out that Friday

may, she writes, have “‘a spirit or soul’” (32). Almagro Jiménez argues that Susan doesn’t understand him and that she uses the wrong approach in teaching him language.¹² Susan is concerned with cultural issues, whereas Friday’s condition is all a matter of signification. She wonders if he knows the meaning of death (45), but she should, rather, wonder whether he understands the meaning of her English words “‘“Your master is dead, Friday”’” (44), as Almagro Jiménez claims.¹³ Susan is wrong again in her attempts to make ‘the subaltern speak’. However, her erroneous approach is highly significant in terms of postcolonial theory because it brings to light situations in which the past cannot be told in speech or writing. It is here that Coetzee departs from Derrida’s logic on writing and speech, although he continues to use the tools of deconstruction to upset the comfort zone from which European narratives view being and non-being, presence and absence.

The Fall of Phono- and Logocentrism

Now that Friday occupies the centre of the narrative, he becomes its main puzzle. Susan thinks that he is full of stories and that only he can tell his own history: “‘Yet the only tongue that can tell Friday’s secret is the tongue he has lost!’” (67). Susan applies one theory after another to move memories inside Friday, but he continues to be unresponsive to her logic. Thinking like a European, she wants to teach him to speak. She fails to get from him more than a few words that Crusoe had taught him to recognize. “‘“How many words of English does Friday know?” I asked. ‘As many as he needs,’ replied Cruso. ‘This is not England; we have no need of a great stock of words’”” (21). Susan then tries to teach him writing. If he cannot speak, then he could learn to write, she thought. But again, all she gets is a series of the letter O like those formed by a child who is learning to write for the first time.

However, one good question to ask that Susan did not ask is: why should the subaltern speak? A quick, but not so thoughtful answer would obviously be: they speak in order to be heard by Europeans; to let the victimizers know that the colonial experience was not a glorious victory for humanity. Furthermore, they speak for reasons of accountability, so the criminals will be held responsible for their inhuman acts, if not in the courts of justice, then at least in the chronicles of history. They also speak to document their stories, so that,

¹² Manuel Almagro Jiménez, “Father to My Story: Writing *Foe*, De-Authorizing (De)Foe,” *Revista Alicantina de Estudios Ingleses* 18 (2005): 13.

¹³ Almagro Jiménez, “Father to My Story,” 13.

when the winds of history change and it is the right time to ask for their rights, they can claim those rights. Speaking for the subaltern is, finally, important in what is commonly known as the talk-therapy situation. Speaking about painful memories is therapeutic for those who experienced the traumas of history. If Friday has so many memories to tell to humanity, and if to recount the history of Africa but leave Friday out is, in Susan's words, "'like offering a book for sale with some pages in it quietly left empty'" (67), it remains to be acknowledged that, in order to tell Friday's story, what is required is to move beyond phono- and logocentric assumptions and to enter into new spaces where signs would tell their own stories.

Susan and Foe enter into a philosophical debate over the power of speech and writing. A close look at their exchange will show that their reasoning, though beautifully and brilliantly constructed, is irrelevant to someone like Friday who has no command of English. Since Friday's silence remains a puzzle, and since he is the missing link in the history of Africa as produced by European novelists, Foe and Susan try to find that missing link. Susan did that out of a genuine interest in Friday's life, but Foe was chatting with Susan without developing any real interest in the life or personality of Friday. Regardless of who has a genuine interest and who does not, from their conversations emerge very significant philosophical comments on being and non-being, presence and absence, fiction and history.

Here are samples of these crucial exchanges between two Europeans about how to make Friday speak. Thinking like a European, Susan initially whispers words in Friday's ear to trigger his memories: "'It is enough to hope that if I make the air around him thick with words, memories will be reborn in him which died under Cruso's rule'" (59). Foe suggests teaching Friday to write:

'Have you shown him writing?' said Foe.

'How can he write if he cannot speak? Letters are the mirror of words.' (142)

A few lines down, Foe sums up the European attitude towards truth and being or the truth of being:

'We are accustomed to believe that our world was created by God speaking the Word; but I ask, may it not rather be that he wrote it, wrote a Word so long we have yet to come to the end of it? May it not be that God continually writes the world, the world and all that is in it?' (143)

Foe is commenting on the power of language (rooted in the Christian Logos of Creation and, implicitly, in the notion of the God-given centrality of Man) to make truth in the European tradition. To be is to be able to talk and to have

mastery over writing. As much as Foe is echoing European assumptions about making history and the documentation of it, his words also imply that the one who lacks mastery over speech or writing will be condemned to eternal silence/absence.

Is there a place for Friday in this ordering of existence and non-existence? Susan's efforts to get Friday to speak bear no fruit, as she admits:

'All my efforts to bring Friday to speech, or to bring speech to Friday, have failed [...]. he utters himself only in music and dancing, which are to speech as cries and shouts are to words.' (142)

Susan does not consider dancing and music as means of expressing one's self and feelings without words. To her, dancing and music are as incomprehensible as cries and shouts. Yet, the level of intensity and the moments of trance Friday invests in his singing and those dances make them, at least to him, and maybe to us, more than cries and shouts. They are signs rich with meaning. Susan cannot not fathom what matters to Friday and what does not as means of self-expression. Put simply: Susan fails to recognize that the logic that applies to Friday is a different kind of logic.

If Susan is taken by the power of the spoken word, Foe is much taken by the magic of the Logos:

'Is Friday learning to write?' asked Foe.

'He is writing, after a fashion,' I said. 'He is writing the letter *o*.'

'It is a beginning,' said Foe. 'Tomorrow you must teach him *a*.' (152)

The system of *phonos* and *logos* is so deeply rooted in the two characters' consciousness that they cannot imagine the world made any other way. Friday's case does not accord with this system. Whenever it is forced on him, he avoids and evades it with signs and gestures. At this time, his sign is the letter O, which Foe fails to fathom, too. Foe treats him like a child who is learning to write and showing little progress. According to Foe's method of linear reasoning, by the time Friday gets to the letter Z, it will be too late to make full words, not to say full sentences or paragraphs or, more significantly, narratives.

When things come to a definitive (or open) end, it is time to introduce a third possibility. It is at this moment that Coetzee's nameless narrator takes back the narrative voice from Susan, declaring:

But this is not a place of words. Each syllable, as it comes out, is caught and filled with water and diffused. This is a place where bodies are their own signs. It is the home of Friday. (157)

Here, in the home of Friday, there is no need for either speech or writing. Reality talks for itself to let the world see the truths that can only be told through the signs that were so strictly edited by the European writers.

Thanks to Susan, Friday has become the centre of the story, yet Susan has missed the one thing that stands as proof of everything that has happened to Friday – Friday's body, and the signs left on and around it. All the way through, Susan has been looking for the story in written or spoken narratives. Her mind-set has blinded her to the truth moving right before her own eyes. By stepping in at the conclusion to focus the light on Friday's body, Coetzee has marked the bankruptcy of phono- and logocentrism as markers of truth in the stories of colonial subjects.

Signs Tell Their Own Stories

The ending is the time to tender answers to the many questions Susan has already raised but has not answered. The answers can be given only through the use of signs that are so replete with meaning that it takes much skill and knowledge to unpack their associations. Without adding possible interpretations to Susan's and Foe's erroneous readings, these signs will remain unintelligible.

The most significant sign is the letter O that Friday manages to produce after so much labour invested by Susan in training him how to write. If we are to read it horizontally, O is one of the few letters that a child learning to write can master so quickly. Foe thinks that Friday has succeeded in learning one letter and is ready to move on to the next one. But if we decide to read a bit more vertically, the letter O comes in the shape of a circle, which in turn makes a hole, and a hole is a gap, and that gap is Friday himself. European novelists have always spoken on his behalf; he never spoke for himself. Thus Friday has given one side of his life story in one sign (a colo+nized voice). One other way to interpret the letter O is by imagining the whole page full of the letter, signs tightly packed one next to the other. OOOOOOOO is how it will look on the page, and that is the chain of slavery. Friday has given another side of his life story in one and the same sign (a colonized body). O can also be the shape the mouth assumes in cases of extreme pain. What else but pain can we read on the face of a boy hunted down and enchained by

slavers? With the letter O, Friday's life circle is complete: he was robbed of his childhood and, his tongue cut out, he was condemned to a life of eternal silence.

His posture and the scar on his neck tell much the same history:

Friday, in his alcove, has turned to the wall. About his neck – I had not observed this before – is a scar like a necklace, left by a rope or chain. (155)

He learned on the slave ship and in colonial barracoons and prisons that he must face the wall when he wants to sleep. The unimaginably horrific experiences he has been through have turned him into a creature full of fear. To look his master in the eye, to say no, to act as he wishes, to say what he wants, and/or, like Caliban with Prospero, to rebel against Cruso – these are all punishable acts under colonial law. How can he trust people or language any more? Probably his tongue was not cut out! (There is only Cruso's word to go by, and Susan never attains certainty either way when she attempts to look inside Friday's mouth.) Possibly he has decided not to speak because words will bring him ropes and chains or, in the best-case scenario, a failure of communication, as when Susan sees him doing things and misreads his actions.

The third of Friday's signs is the flower petals he scatters on the surface of the water:

'After paddling out some hundred yards from the shelf into the thickest of the seaweed, he reached into a bag that hung about his neck and brought out handfuls of white flakes which he began to scatter over the water.' (31)

Twice Susan offers her interpretation of this act, and on both occasions she proves to be wrong. She thinks that he was either baiting fish or offering a sacrifice to the god of the sea. To be able to read this act, Susan has to quit her comfort zone of European cultural superiority and stop regarding Friday's acts as primitive and pagan practices. For this to happen, she has to exit the space of realism in the European colonial novel and enter a space of meta-realism in which it becomes possible to bring back to the surface suppressed stories from the history of Friday.

In a kind of transcendent dream-vision, Coetzee has his first-person narrator enter the 'history' both of the preceding narrative and, glancingly, of Daniel Defoe's scriptural reality. Failing to reach Cruso's island in a rowing-boat that threatens to drift into the southernmost latitudes, the narrator slips overboard in the exact place where Friday scattered his petals. At the bottom of the ocean, entering a black hole (an 'O') in a wreck from the Middle Pas-

sage “greater than the leviathan” (156), he (?) finds not only the drowned, bloated corpse of Susan Barton but also Friday’s body surrounded by the bodies of other slaves who perished on the way to the New World. Friday’s petals become a memorial act for family members or his whole enslaved and transported clan. Now the narrator – in our present world and for Susan three centuries before – can open Friday’s mouth, and out comes a “slow stream [...] that] runs northward and southward to the ends of the earth” (157). Friday speaks last despite the fact that he does not use words. The final word is, most appropriately, given to Friday.

Conclusion: Why Do Signs Matter in Postcolonial Theory?

Coetzee has successfully challenged the authority of the founding father of the colonial novel on such key issues as being and non-being, silence and speech, absence and presence, fact and fiction, centre and periphery. The mere presence of Friday as the main enigma of the narrative serves to question the seeming oppositionality between these structures and to have them converge at crucial moments in the story. By the time we get to the end of the novel, fact has become fiction; the absent is present; the silent speaks; and those on the margins occupy the centre. For this reordering of things and relations to happen, we must hear Friday’s voice. However, the widely accepted rules of narrating history in the European tradition do not apply to Friday. Friday can speak only through signs or, surrealistically, from the unconscious.

Why do signs matter in postcolonial theory? It is because logo- and phono-centrism become irrelevant in postcolonial situations where much of the colonial history is lost, and where, if colonial stories go untold, many of the rights of ex-colonial subjects will be lost as well. Friday was enslaved as a child and never learned to speak or write English. He has his memories, but he lacks the means to tell the world of those memories. In his case, his memories equal his existence and the existence of stories that, when told, will bear witness to his suffering and misery under the rules and laws of colonialism. If his past cannot be expressed in words or letters, he has a body of signs and a history which is preserved in his unconscious. Before he dies, and his memories are buried with him, he must show them to the world, or Coetzee must find a way to point the way to their articulation amidst the currents of sea-change.

Like Friday, descendants of the victims of exodus, war, occupation, and trauma have no more than the signs left by their ancestors. Their only link to that past is through symbols and signs. Signs make their memory and history

and their right to return to their land, to prosecute their tormentors, to leave behind testimonies before their memories die and, with them, all the rights of the victims of the colonial project. Chains, scars, house ruins, ruins of villages, keys, clothes, portraits, and street names will tell their stories and preserve their rights.

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