



J.M. Coetzee &
the Limits of
Cosmopolitanism

Katherine Hallemeier



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First published in 2013 by PALGRAVE MACMILLAN® in the United States—a division of St. Martin's Press LLC, 175 Fifth Avenue, New York, NY 10010.

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ISBN: 978-1-137-35254-5

Hallemeier, Katherine, 1982–

J.M. Coetzee and the limits of cosmopolitanism / by Katherine Hallemeier.

pages cm

Includes bibliographical references.

ISBN 978-1-137-35254-5 (hardback : alk. paper) 1. Coetzee, J. M., 1940—Criticism and interpretation. 2. Cosmopolitanism in literature. I. Title.

PR9369.3.C58Z666 2013

823'.914—dc23

2013024526

A catalogue record of the book is available from the British Library.

Design by Scribe Inc.

First edition: November 2013

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

For my parents

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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I am profoundly grateful to those mentors and friends who guided me through the writing of this book. My first thanks go to Rosemary Jolly, whose vision of what literary studies can be continuously inspires. I am thankful to Chris Bongie for his generous and incisive reading of my work. Thanks to Imre Szeman, Sam McKegney, and Julie Salverson for asking hard questions. I owe Asha Varadharajan, Vee Blackburn, and Rose Casey my gratitude for their perspective and advice. My thanks to Ann Smailes; to the staff at the National English Literary Museum; to Meg Samuelson, Lucy Graham, and Kizito Muchemwa; and to Mike Marais, Dan Wylie, and Dirk Klopper: all supported my research through patient conversation and great hospitality. I thank Adam Frank and Sneja Gunew for their teaching. I am grateful for the collegial support of faculty in the Department of English at Oklahoma State University. I alone am responsible for the book's arguments and errors.

I also thank Cara, Laura, Jaime, Taryn, Jess, and Fraser for bearing with me and Azim, Nermeen, Sarah, and Abhishek for bearing me up. I am thankful to JG for a center and to Akhi for his rooftops.

The book expands on and revises my article "Sympathy and Cosmopolitanism: Affective Limits in Cosmopolitan Reading," published in *Culture, Theory and Critique* 54.1 (2013): 88–101. I gratefully acknowledge financial support from the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada, the Canadian Graduate Scholarship—Michael Smith Foreign Study Supplement, and the Ontario Graduate Scholarship Program.

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INTRODUCTION



COSMOPOLITANISM AND FEELING

At an academic luncheon in J. M. Coetzee's *Elizabeth Costello* (2003), a young scholar offers an impassioned defense of his discipline: “[I]t is the humanities and the humanities alone, and the training that the humanities provide, that will allow us to steer our way through this new multicultural world” (129). The humanities, the scholar maintains, provide a means of conceiving a singular human history that yet encompasses “hundreds of other cultures, each with its own language and history and mythology and unique way of seeing the world” (129). The humanities, in other words, afford an opportunity to apprehend “humanity” in all its constitutive varieties.

The scholar's commitment to his discipline appears to be sincere. Yet his suggestion that he is engaged in discovering what humankind is and, as such, what “humankind is capable of being” occurs in a text that also asks whether there may be “[s]omething wrong with placing hopes and expectations on the humanities that they could never fulfil” (128, 125). All parties at the luncheon illustrate through their comfortable dining that the study of the humanities can be understood, less grandly than the young scholar envisions, as a “way of earning a living” (123). From this perspective, the study of the humanities stands as a job carried out within a capitalist system characterized by material inequalities and injustices. Whether the humanities facilitate the apotheosis of human potential remains an open question.

Likewise inconclusive is a closely related argument about the study of literature, which is proffered earlier in the text by another academic. John—whose mother, the eponymous Elizabeth Costello, is a famous novelist—flirts with one of his mother’s more astute critics, Susan Moebius. While doing so, he makes a case for reading novels that resonates with the young scholar’s defense of the humanities in general: “Isn’t that what is most important about fiction: that it takes us out of ourselves, into other lives?” (23). Reading, in this view, enables an encounter with “others” that is somehow “important.” Coetzee’s text, however, once again challenges, even as it invokes, the elevation of reading. Susan Moebius suggests that although Elizabeth Costello may imagine herself into the lives of others, she yet “inhabits her characters as a woman does, not a man” (23). Fiction, Moebius implies, may obscure, rather than illuminate, human difference.

These opening vignettes foreground a question that this project identifies as central both to Coetzee’s later fiction and to contemporary cosmopolitan thought: is it possible to apprehend “humankind” without eliding the distinctiveness of “other lives”? At the same time, the scenes provide a starting point for describing two key ways in which Coetzee’s fiction differs from and qualifies contemporary cosmopolitan discourse. First, *Elizabeth Costello* highlights the limited potential of the young scholar’s passion for furthering humanity. Much contemporary work on cosmopolitanism, in contrast, consistently upholds feeling as a means by which the individual recognizes others’ humanity and thereby becomes cosmopolitan. Second, the conversation between John and Susan foregrounds the centrality of gender to debating universality and difference. Many contemporary cosmopolitan thinkers, however, marginalize the category of gender, even as it subtends the models of feeling upon which their theories of cosmopolitanism implicitly depend.

A concern with better understanding the relation of cosmopolitanism to feeling on the one hand and the gendering of purportedly cosmopolitan feelings on the other impels this study. Although it focuses especially on debates about the

cosmopolitan potential of literature, this project demonstrates that the tendency to equate supposedly cosmopolitan feeling with cosmopolitan practice persists in a wide cross section of cosmopolitan scholarship that extends beyond literary criticism and theory. Within this scholarship, feelings of sympathy and shame, especially, are frequently reified as emotions that forward a cosmopolitan ideal, and these two feelings consequently become central to my analysis. Arguing that Coetzee's later fiction suggests how models of cosmopolitan sympathy and shame both produce and are conditioned by gendered hierarchies that position some bodies as more or less emotional than others, this book undertakes to describe cosmopolitanism in terms that acknowledge the ethical limitations of feelings, howsoever "human" or "humane" they may appear to be. Both sympathy and shame prove inadequate for instantiating cosmopolitanism in practice. The book concludes that Coetzee's work, by delinking cosmopolitan practice from the exercise or cultivation of seemingly cosmopolitan feelings, invites the reimagining of cosmopolitanism, particularly as it might be performed through the reading of literature.

In this introduction, I outline the critical promise of analyzing cosmopolitanism in relation to questions of feeling and the writing of J. M. Coetzee. I offer a working definition of the capacious term *cosmopolitanism* and illustrate this definition by surveying the work of two different cosmopolitan thinkers. I go on to summarize how the relation between cosmopolitanism and feeling has been conceived thus far and how this book aims to contribute to current debate. I then review scholarship that has read Coetzee's work in cosmopolitan terms in order to delineate my approach to his fiction. I conclude with a summary of the critical work and structure of the project as a whole.

COSMOPOLITANISM

Categories of "cosmopolitanism" have proliferated in the last two decades in political philosophy, the social sciences, cultural theory, and literary criticism. Recent classifications include: "inclusionary" and "exclusionary" cosmopolitanism (Anderson); "cosmopolitan internationalism" (Atack); "new

cosmopolitanism” (Beck; Malcomson; Fine); “vernacular cosmopolitanism” (Bhabha); “cosmofeminism” (Breckenridge et al.); “hybrid cosmopolitanism” (Cheah, *Inhuman*); “postmodern cosmopolitanism” (Douzinas); “cultural cosmopolitanism” (Held); “weak” and “strong” cosmopolitanism (Miller); and “actually existing” cosmopolitanism (Robbins, “Introduction”). The list is by no means exhaustive. As Dorothy Driver has noted, Robert J. Holton’s *Cosmopolitanisms: New Thinking and New Directions* (2009) lists nearly 150 “instances” and “types” of cosmopolitanism.

Although varied within and across disciplines, cosmopolitan scholarship is arguably united in its commitment to envisioning a common humanity without eliding its constitutive multiplicity.¹ As Kwame Anthony Appiah argues in his influential *Cosmopolitanism: Ethics in a World of Strangers* (2006), cosmopolitanism bridges two “ideals” that potentially “clash”—namely “universal concern and respect for legitimate difference” (xv). At the same time, different strains of cosmopolitanism tend to foreground the recognition of either universality or difference. As Rosi Braidotti, Patrick Hanafin, and Bolette Blaagard remark in *After Cosmopolitanism* (2013), and as I will discuss and develop at length in subsequent chapters, within contemporary cosmopolitan theory there is a tension between “universalistic, rationalist Neo-Kantian transcendental cosmopolitan models, on the one hand,” which I suggest generally prioritize the equal recognition of human dignity, and “the multi-faceted, affective cosmopolitics of embodied subjectivities grounded in diversity and radical relationality, on the other,” which I suggest generally prioritize the equal recognition of difference (2). Brief summaries of the work of two differing cosmopolitan thinkers illustrate both the unity and tension characteristic of cosmopolitan discourse as well as clarify the location of my own intervention in conversations about cosmopolitanism.

Identifying similarities among advocates of cosmopolitanism as different as Mica Nava and Seyla Benhabib, who are concerned with imagining cosmopolitan practice at the individual and national level, respectively, supports Appiah’s claim for a degree of unity within the diversity of contemporary cosmopolitan

thought, while also exemplifying the tension between universalistic and affective cosmopolitan models discussed by Braidotti, Hanafin, and Blaagard. In *Another Cosmopolitanism* (2006), Benhabib calls for the incorporation of cosmopolitan norms into the laws of democratic states. Cosmopolitan norms, which Benhabib defines largely in terms of human rights and a Kantian notion of universal hospitality, will best be institutionalized as a democratic *demos* becomes convinced of the validity of those norms. Nava, in contrast, eschews an aspirational, universalistic cosmopolitanism to analyze how and why cosmopolitanism manifests in specific relations between specific bodies. Exploring cosmopolitanism at the level of the individual in *Visceral Cosmopolitanism: Gender, Culture, and the Normalisation of Difference* (2007), Nava turns to psychoanalysis (and its gaps) in her project of “[m]aking sense of the frequently unconscious dynamic underlying some people’s positive and inclusive perceptions of others and ‘elsewhere’—sometimes in the face of widespread racism and xenophobia” (63). Nava suggests that “committed opposition to racism and a deeply felt sense of connectivity to others,” such that one will act against “dominant political and representational regimes,” “is also often rooted in non-rational unconscious factors” (64). Although representatively different in their methodologies and understandings of the locus of cosmopolitan practice, these two thinkers associate cosmopolitanism with the recognition of both transcultural concern and real differences, whether cosmopolitanism is composed of “inclusive perceptions,” universal hospitality, or, more generally, attentiveness to the breadth of forces that shape individual subjectivity.

While Appiah’s characterization of cosmopolitanism, along with the identification of two main strains of cosmopolitan thought, helps me to structure my argument, the final goal of this project is neither to proffer an authoritative definition of cosmopolitanism nor to argue for privileging one strain of cosmopolitan philosophy over another. Rather, I am concerned with analyzing the fact that, in both universalistic and relational branches of cosmopolitanism, the mechanism for instantiating cosmopolitanism frequently remains ambiguous and that this

ambiguity creates a theoretical space that is often implicitly or explicitly filled by appeals to feeling. As Robert Post notes in his concise introduction to *Another Cosmopolitanism*, Benhabib does not theorize why we might expect *demoi* to internalize cosmopolitan norms: although Benhabib refutes Jeremy Waldron's argument that mundane daily contact with transnational others will abet the acceptance of cosmopolitanism, she offers no alternative (5). The mechanism by which an efficacious cosmopolitan practice might be propagated among citizens of a democracy remains opaque, and the question of whether cosmopolitanism would be available to citizens living outside a democracy, or a functioning state, remains unresolved. The strong suggestion that a particular model of statehood would need to be universally adopted for cosmopolitanism to flourish, however, offers potential, troubling support to imperial projects that seek to export so-called democratic values and institutions. Concomitantly, Nava's understanding of how unconscious factors become cosmopolitan is, she admits, "tentative and embryonic" (Nava 71). Neither Nava nor Benhabib concisely dictates how cosmopolitanism is, or might be, engendered.

As I will show in coming chapters, within cosmopolitan theory, feeling emerges to fill this gap between vision and practice: it is imagined to contain the potential to shape and reshape the unconscious, to transform national values, and to reorient the relation between individual and national identity. Cosmopolitan thought, in other words, tends to invoke feeling as that which leads a subject to transcend narrow modes of identification and, concomitantly, as that which at the very least is a necessary precondition for the realization of a just cosmopolitan world. Cosmopolitan theory persistently assumes that some feelings, such as sympathy and shame, are inherently human or humane and therefore inherently cosmopolitan.

Cosmopolitan theory's reliance on feeling has thus far been the subject of compelling but limited critiques. As I detail in Chapter 1, prominent scholars of neo-Kantian cosmopolitanism have argued that feeling for another's "humanity" is abstract and, finally, ineffectual (Bhabha; Brennan). Other critics have argued that transnational feelings closely associated

with affective, relational cosmopolitanisms are not necessarily “cosmopolitan” in character (Nowicka and Rovisco). Such work has debated whether or not feeling *can be* cosmopolitan in scope. This project works to one side of this debate insofar as it focuses on how both proponents of cosmopolitanism and their critics conceptualize feeling itself. Rather than asking whether it is possible for feeling to originate cosmopolitanism, I analyze how theories of cosmopolitanism model feeling, as well as how purportedly cosmopolitan feelings potentially produce effects that exceed those prescribed by cosmopolitan theory.

FEELING

Given that my project is concerned with teasing out assumptions about feeling within cosmopolitan theory, it is important at this early juncture to identify some of my own assumptions about feeling. While my project questions the ethics of purportedly cosmopolitan feelings, it does so by deploying a particular understanding of the relation between feeling and language, as well as a particular understanding of feeling’s critical potential. These conceptions of what feeling is and what feeling does are informed by my engagement with affect theory, a diverse body of scholarship that spans the humanities, social sciences, and cognitive science and that seeks to untangle the cultural, biological, and political import of feelings. My application of affect theory to this project is one that emphasizes the imbrication of physical and psychological aspects of feeling, the difficulty of precisely identifying and describing emotional experiences, and the contingency of a given feeling’s ethical effects.

Within affect theory itself, even such basic terms as “feeling” and “affect” are admittedly fraught. As Anna Gibbs, among others, notes, “emotions” can mean something different from “affects,” and “affect” has several meanings in cultural studies alone (335). “Feeling” can mean something else altogether. Throughout the following chapters, however, I use the term “affective” and “affect” in accordance with the definitions propounded by Silvan Tomkins (1962–1992), whose work has become seminal to affect theory after being edited by Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick and Adam Frank as *Shame and Its Sisters* (1995).

Tomkins argues that affects are inextricable from—are nodal points of—both feeling (generally described as sensation) and emotion (generally associated with cognition).² Similarly, when I use the term “feeling,” I echo Rei Terada’s definition of the term, wherein feeling “is a capacious term that connotes both physiological sensations (affects) and psychological states (emotions)” (4). “Emotion,” concomitantly, “usually means a psychological, at least minimally interpretive experience whose physiological aspect is *affect*” (4). In sum, whether I refer to “feeling,” “affect,” or at times, “emotion,” I intend to denote an experience that is simultaneously psychological and physiological. Throughout this work, I follow Gibbs in resisting the possibility that “feelings” and “emotions” can be “substantially divorced from the materiality of the body” (337) any more than unconsciously registered sensations can be substantially divorced from cognitive processes.³

The slipperiness that I assert exists between physiological sensations and psychological operations informs my analysis of the assumptions underlying definitions of feeling within cosmopolitan theory. This analysis, in turn, suggests another fraught aspect of writing about feeling, to wit: in important ways, the experience of feeling exceeds attempts to define that experience. If feeling is understood as encompassing the physiological and psychological, the subjective and the social, then a particular feeling, such as “shame,” may manifest differently across cultures, among individuals, and within a given individual subject. There is a temptation in writing about feelings to attempt to establish a one-to-one correlation between terminology and affect; or alternately, to assume that one can define a feeling by identifying its various components (to claim that annoyance combines contempt and anger, for example). I take it for granted, however, that my account of particular cosmopolitan feelings is necessarily imprecise.

This inexact approach to the language of feeling differentiates this project from other studies that examine feeling as culturally constructed and politically charged. Such studies tend to distinguish and trace the political import and shifting meaning of specific emotions, such as compassion (Garber) or

envy (Ngai). To some extent, I mirror this methodology in my mapping of sympathy and shame within cosmopolitan thought. At the same time, however, the experiences designated by the two feelings central to my analysis of cosmopolitanism, “sympathy” and “shame,” vary. On the one hand, my use of the same two words to describe what is arguably a much broader range of different feelings reflects how affective terms are diversely invoked within cosmopolitan theory. On the other hand, a potential criticism of the current project is that I use the term “sympathy” or “shame” when another term, be it “empathy,” say, or “guilt,” would arguably be more suited for identifying the feeling that I seek to describe. For example, one might plausibly assert that “empathy” would be a more concise word for describing the cosmopolitan feeling discussed throughout Chapter 2. This chapter analyzes a mode of feeling for others that resists the loss of self-control. As Lauren Wispé claims, in empathy, “the self is the vehicle for understanding, and it never loses its identity,” while “sympathy . . . is concerned with communion rather than accuracy, and self-awareness is reduced rather than enhanced” (79). I use the word “sympathy” in Chapter 2, however, both because the cosmopolitan theory under consideration often prefers that term to “empathy” and, more important, because “sympathy” and its cognates, including empathy, compassion, and pity, signal affective experiences that might be as usefully analyzed together as teased apart.

By rudely grouping synonymous feelings rather than finely distinguishing among them, my approach to feeling is inspired by Silvan Tomkins, whose identification of biological, “primary affects” perhaps intuitively clashes with an approach to emotion that highlights its cultural composition. Tomkins suggests that feelings can be understood in terms of different intensities of eight (or nine) core affects: interest-excitement, enjoyment-joy, surprise-startle, distress-anguish, fear-terror, shame-humiliation, contempt-disgust, anger-rage, and, sometimes, “dis smell” (Tomkins 74).⁴ As Sedgwick and Frank note in their introduction to Tomkins’s work, “[y]ou don’t have to be long out of theory kindergarten to make mincemeat of, let’s say, a psychology that depends on the separate existence

of eight (only sometimes it's nine) distinct affects hardwired into the human biological system" (2). Sedgwick and Frank's anticipation of critiques of Tomkins's theory of affect has proven prescient. Ruth Leys, for example, has recently argued that Tomkins's notion of "affect programs" is "seriously flawed and the theory underlying the paradigm is incoherent" (439).⁵ Although reductive and essentializing (albeit provisional [Tomkins 74]), Tomkins's identification of primary affects is, I suggest, also critically useful in its attentiveness to likeness among emotional experiences. According to Tomkins,

[s]hyness, shame, and guilt are not distinguished from each other at the level of affect, in our view. They are one and the same affect. This is not to say that shyness in the presence of a stranger, shame at a failure to cope successfully with a challenge, and guilt for an immorality are the same experience. Clearly they are not. The conscious awareness of each of these experiences is quite distinct. Yet the affect that we term shame-humiliation, which is a component of each of these total experiences, is one and the same affect. (133)

Feelings that are cognates of each other—shame and guilt, sympathy and empathy—can usefully be imagined as more similar than different. The resultant theory is one that endeavors not to offer definitive accounts of particular emotional experiences but to describe how those accounts involve shared components of experience.

As this analysis of feeling within cosmopolitanism unfolds, its identification of sympathy and shame as central to accounts of cosmopolitan feeling is inspired by Tomkins's approach to affect. I presuppose that arguments upholding the cosmopolitan potential of shame, guilt, humility, and humiliation, variously defined and described, share a similar affective dynamic, which Tomkins posits is distinguished by "the incomplete reduction of interest or joy" in another (134). Feelings like shame, in other words, acknowledge the limitations of one's connection with others. Similarly, I presuppose that arguments upholding the cosmopolitan potential of sympathy, empathy, compassion, and pity, variously defined and described, share an analogous

affective dynamic. This dynamic might be understood in terms of Tomkins's delineation of interest-excitement, which enables one's "acquaintance" with others to be "enriched and deepened" (79). It might also be understood in terms of what Ian Woodward and Zlatko Skrbiš have discussed as a cosmopolitan orientation of "openness" toward others (128). "Sympathy" in this text, like "shame," potentially encompasses a range of felt experiences but also denotes a shared component among those experiences. While this project does not offer a finely tuned taxonomy of cosmopolitan feelings, it traces how cosmopolitan theory imagines cosmopolitan potential in adopting attitudes toward others that might generally be described in terms of sympathy and shame.

In cautioning against identifying these feelings as inherently cosmopolitan, I am not arguing that feelings are never cosmopolitan in their effects or that feelings can never enhance one's sense of others' human difference. Feelings may undoubtedly contain formidable critical potential for challenging extant inequalities. Alison M. Jaggar, for example, delineates how "outlaw emotions" may be foundational to critical work: "Women may come to believe that they are 'emotionally disturbed' and that the embarrassment or fear aroused in them by male sexual innuendo is prudery or paranoia. When certain emotions are shared or validated by others, however, the basis exists for forming a subculture defined by perceptions, norms, and values that systematically oppose the prevailing perceptions, norms, and values" (61). Notable of Jaggar's account of "embarrassment or fear" is the insight that these feelings may either perpetuate or subvert a patriarchal culture, depending on the context in which they are felt. In articulating models of feeling implicit to contemporary cosmopolitan theory, I draw especially on contributions to the "affective turn" that have challenged the ideology that emotion translates easily into ethics. Sara Ahmed, Lauren Berlant, and Sianne Ngai, among others, have articulated the limited potential of feeling for inaugurating virtuous social transformation. As Ahmed succinctly states in *The Cultural Politics of Emotion* (2004), "[j]ustice is not simply a feeling" (202).

The same body of scholarship that enables my critique of the supposed cosmopolitan character of feeling generally also enables my critique of the supposed cosmopolitan potential of sympathy and shame specifically. I challenge the reification of sympathy as distinctively cosmopolitan by invoking arguments within feminist theory, cultural studies, and literary criticism that demonstrate how sympathy can impede ethical relations (Ahmed; Berlant; Hinton; Rai; Ratcliffe). As Amit Rai succinctly maintains, sympathy can promote “the project of colonialism” as easily as the “justice in abolitionism” (xiv). Similarly, by drawing on feminist scholarship that attends to how experiences of shame are gendered (Biddle; Jolly; Kathleen Woodward), I develop an argument against the elevation of shame as an ethical, distinctively cosmopolitan response to difference. I draw on scholarship such as Kathleen Woodward’s, which demonstrates that shame may enhance the moral knowledge of masculine subjects, while perpetuating the subjugation of feminized and racialized subjects (213). Feelings of sympathy and shame, I contend, might be understood as cultural flows that are shaped by the political economies that cosmopolitan theory often imagines them to oppose. Cosmopolitan practices defined by feeling, rather than always offering new or distinct ways of relating to difference, potentially reinscribe a status quo that associates difference (or “otherness”) with feeling. Neither sympathy nor shame, I argue, necessarily produces the equal recognition of humanity and difference that cosmopolitan theory imagines. Without denying the ethical and critical potential of feeling, the argument of this project is that this potential is not inherent to particular feelings; seemingly cosmopolitan feelings may as easily undermine cosmopolitan goals of the equal recognition of humanity and human differences as advance them.

While affect theory inspires my delinking of feelings such as sympathy and shame from cosmopolitan ethics and practices, the later fiction of J. M. Coetzee allows me to develop my argument by suggesting how the close, mutually constitutive relation between sympathy and shame renders both feelings inadequate bases for cosmopolitanism. Before summarizing my own argument about how Coetzee’s fiction intersects with contemporary

cosmopolitan theory, I provide a summary of how scholarship has read Coetzee's work in terms of cosmopolitanism.

J. M. COETZEE AND COSMOPOLITAN FEELING

By focusing on the ambiguous effects of feeling in a globalized world, my project differs significantly from previous research that has read Coetzee through a cosmopolitan lens. This scholarship has tended to uphold Coetzee's fiction as exemplarily cosmopolitan in its potential to foster a better understanding of humanity in its manifold differences. Homi Bhabha famously lists Coetzee as an author whose writing "enjoin[s] the international community to meditate on the unequal, asymmetrical worlds that exist elsewhere" (*Location* 5). More recently, Robert Spencer argues that Coetzee's works "strive to galvanize their readers, to provoke them into purposeful introspection, and potentially to interpellate them as more self-conscious, more critical and more broad-minded citizens of the world" (3). Katherine Stanton, in *Cosmopolitan Fictions* (2006), argues that *Age of Iron* (1990) and *Disgrace* (1999) demonstrate how South Africa is a product of global histories and attachments and that this imbrication must shape our understanding of obligation, debt, and restitution to the "racial other." While Bhabha and Spencer argue that Coetzee's fiction highlights a moral imperative to engage with "distant" nations and cultures, Stanton argues that the fiction draws attention to existing transnational connections, which in turn demand that political and ethical actions be situated in a global context. Regardless of whether these critics conceive of cosmopolitanism as marking transnational mutuality or transnational differences, they read Coetzee's writing as espousing the cultivation of a more equitable cosmopolitan community. In contrast to studies of Coetzee that proceed by identifying his literature as commendably cosmopolitan, I invoke Coetzee in a study of cosmopolitanism because so much of his writing challenges, through its representation of feeling, the very basis for much cosmopolitan theory.

I focus in subsequent chapters on the recent fiction of J. M. Coetzee: namely, those major works of fiction beginning with *Boyhood* (1997).⁶ I read these fictions as engaging more

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