

Migration and the south in J.M. Coetzee's *Jesus* novels

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Abstract:

The first two novels in South African and Australian writer J.M. Coetzee's Jesus novel trilogy offer themselves as studies in migration—studies that explore the ambiguities of crossing over and arriving in a seeming 'new life,' as it is repeatedly called. The Childhood of Jesus (2013) and The Schooldays of Jesus (2016) dramatize this arrival as a one-way experience, with no possibility of return. Moreover, key features of the migrant crossing—contingency, isolation, an inarticulable mystery and strangeness, and repetition—are evoked through what we might term a southern poetics, following Coetzee's own definition of the "one south." This southern framing in turn throws light on the provinciality of the trilogy's settings, on the provisional and derivative nature of the lives lived there, and on the precarity of migrant crossings, not least in the south, including the Global South, today.

Keywords

J.M. Coetzee, Migration, Arrival, Southern poetics

"A white light pouring down from all sides" (*Age of Iron* 85)

This essay is interested in the experience of migration traced in J.M. Coetzee's *Jesus* novel trilogy (2013-19), and focusses on how its southern poetics captures the inarticulable ambiguities of crossing over, not least in the far Southern Hemisphere itself.¹ It explores how the central characters Simón and his

adoptive son David begin to make their way in their “new land,” given that they retain little more than shadowy memories of their past, if that (*CJ* 27-29, 65). Migration in the novels, especially in the first two books *The Childhood of Jesus* (2013) and *The Schooldays of Jesus* (2016), tends to be a one-way experience, ocean-borne at first, with no possibility of return, and hence without obvious benefit or purpose, other than holding onto or having life itself (“The harbour master at Belstar won’t let anyone take the boat back to the old life. He is very strict about that. No return.” *CJ* 261). When, at the start of the trilogy, Simón meets five-year-old David and promises to take care of him and help him find his mother, they have already been made exiles from history, assigned new names and ages, and an unfamiliar new language, Spanish.² But far from attaining the promised ‘new life,’ the ends of their journeys are cul-de-sacs, leading to camps or camp-like institutions, such as Belstar, the relocation centre in Novilla, or the Punto Arenas reformatory school, and finally death in hospital in the case of David, and a slow diminishment of energy and interest in that of Simón.

Some of these salient features of David and his adoptive father Simón’s migrant crossings can be illuminated through a southern poetics, as I will demonstrate with brief commentaries on the closing of *Childhood* and the opening of *Schooldays*. These episodes bookend the moment when the small family of Simón, Inés and David cross the border or “empty landscape” between Novilla and Estrella, and begin yet another “new life”: “*we are looking for somewhere to stay ... to start our new life,*” are the lines on which *Childhood* ends (*CJ* 270, 277; italics in the original).

Featureless southern spaces

My reading begins with the speculation that the dominant migrant pathway at least in *Childhood* is to the south, and movement in the trilogy within the south (though travel from Novilla to Estrella is in fact in a northerly direction). More specifically, Simón and David’s journeys take place within a relatively featureless, culturally depleted space seemingly located in the far Southern Hemisphere, within its

Spanish-speaking regions, not too unlike the countries of the real-life Southern Cone of South America (Ng and Sheehan 83-106). This is significant as, apart from the crossing from Novilla into the new land of Estrella, there is no sense in the novels that migration leads endlessly forward, to a retreating frontier, or better conditions; that there is always somewhere to move on *to*. Migration certainly in *Childhood* is apparently goalless, and is accompanied by little sense of breakthrough, improvement or development, though the young woman Anna in Novilla seems convinced that crossing comes with the benefits of self-reinvention, and of having and retaining life itself (*CJ* 19). But *Childhood* lacks details of the place the migrants are fleeing from, if they are fleeing at all. In *Schooldays*, Estrella provides a safe distance and hence refuge from the threat back in Novilla to send David to the reformatory, but as there are no repercussions leading from the escape, life rapidly settles into a familiarly prosaic and unprofitable groove. In neither space do we encounter migration in the classic North American sense, as famously defined in Frederick Jackson Turner's 1890s thesis.³ Instead, there is unfruitful movement through a reduced, though not dystopian world. To emphasize the point with a geographical correlative, it is salient to recall the predominant peninsular and island forms of the Southern Hemisphere's landmasses. After a certain point their extremities attenuate southwards, then drop away into the sea.

Bar the outlines of these relatively typical though also generic southern features, however, the *Jesus* novels are notoriously cryptic as to geography, and Coetzee notoriously uninterested in setting, increasingly so. This makes it a less than fruitful exercise to try to pinpoint the actual spatial location of the trilogy, though it is nonetheless revealing to do so. Overall, Coetzee's habitual reluctance to invest imaginatively in setting and to "make up" worlds (including, in *Elizabeth Costello*, Australia), is even more to the fore in the post-millennium work than it was in the South African-period fiction, with the *Jesus* trilogy no exception (Boehmer, "J. M. Coetzee's" 202-218). Whereas the semi-desert worlds of *Life & Times of Michael K*, or Magda's stony Karoo farm in *In the Heart of the Country*, were created through the notation of distinct and memorable detail, the Australian-period work is characterized by an extreme sketchiness as to setting. Australia is unmistakably in this sense Coetzee's own land of arrival, one to

which embodied associations and memories do not yet appear to attach. The density of reference and association that accompanies the sense of being in place, not to say at home, is well-nigh absent in these Australian works.

In the *Jesus* novels, if anything, spatial or geographical depletion has been taken to an even greater extreme, perhaps emphasizing once again the lack of association that the new country has for migrants or arrivants like Simón and David. About the *Jesus* world, the most we can say is that its southern climate seems to be relatively dry and warm, even hot; the surrounding space anonymous, featureless, and undifferentiated, perhaps not unlike Patagonia, the broad grasslands country overlapping Argentina and Chile. The sketched-in surroundings—the “rolling scrubland” (*CJ* 261)—certainly bear comparison to the “arid wastes” covered with a “low thicket of grey-leaved thorns” that were influentially brought onto the Anglophone world literature map in Bruce Chatwin’s 1977 travelogue *In Patagonia* (Chatwin 19). They also resemble, of course, the beloved Karoo of Coetzee’s childhood, such as is vividly recalled in *Boyhood*, for example (see Woessner).

As to the trilogy’s southern poetics, the arid setting relates suggestively to the singular South of Coetzee’s terse 2010s meditations on the subject, captured in the meditative yet cryptic “One South” statement given as a speech in Buenos Aires, Argentina, in 2016. The statement suggested that the “one south” was a “unique world” connected by climatic features that seemed, at least from Coetzee’s perspective, to circle the southern subtropics. This South was of the Southern Hemisphere, yet it was not the developmental Global South as it included Australia—a country that is situated beneath or south of the Brandt line yet generally is deemed to lie above it. In these spaces, Coetzee observed: “the winds blow in a certain way and the leaves fall in a certain way and the sun beats down in a certain way that is instantly recognizable from one part of the South to another” (Halford n. p.). Note that the southern zone he sketches refers provocatively, but elliptically, across the Southern Hemisphere to the Australia of which he was, by then, a citizen of long-standing, yet also to the South Africa where he was born. Note also that the sun beats down in a way strikingly reminiscent of the immersive white light of limbo in

Elizabeth Curren's account in *Age of Iron*: "a white light pouring down from all sides" (Coetzee 85; as in this essay's epigraph). Here we might recall Simón's observation early on in *Childhood* that David in Novilla exists "in limbo" (*CJ* 19). And on white light, we might further recall the "huge eruption of light" caused by Señor Daga's gift of magic powder just before the departure from Novilla, that afflicts David with temporary blindness at the crucial moment of crossing (*CJ* 266).

Like the settings of the *Jesus* trilogy, Coetzee's sun-drenched south appears to be provincial, remote from any metropolis, and relatively unpeopled. Its poetics is withheld, careful about detail and particularity. It can only be described in so many unspecific phrases: "in a certain way ... in a certain way ... in a certain way." Furthermore, though this space may not correlate with the geopolitical Global South, the climate and geography insist on south-south lateral connection and comparability, as captured in its "instant" recognizability by southerners across the south.⁴ This feature matches the bridging and intercalation of southern worlds we have seen in Coetzee's other post-millennium fictions. So, for example, in *Diary of a Bad Year*, Alan and Anya from their Sydney perspective pursue a hunch as to JC's Southern Hemisphere identity, first wondering if he is South American but then working out that he comes from South Africa. *Elizabeth Costello*, too, traces several south-south journeys and conversations, most notably the interaction between the Australian novelist, Elizabeth, and her South Africa-located sister, the nun Blanche, in "The Humanities in Africa" essay chapter.

There is more to say about Coetzee's atmospheric and interconnected sub-tropical south (or souths) elsewhere. Its particular point of traction for this commentary is the symbolic resonance that the generic southern setting bathed in a blazing and flattening white light adds to the *Jesus* trilogy's representation of the experience of migration. There are several features here worth remarking upon. First, this relatively unpeopled southern world, old-fashioned and even lost in time (capitalist production is non-existent and electronic technology absent, *CJ* 15), produces highly contingent social and family set-ups, as exemplified most notably in David's adoptive family. In this sense, the southern location exacerbates some of the alienating, unpredictable aspects of the migrant experience. Second, social life here is

relatively isolated and isolating; individuals tend to live solitary lives. Social activities and community life outside of family and school are limited—a feature that, while it seems to be an unremarkable part of life in both Novilla and Estrella, once again highlights the alienating aspects of migration. Third, the references to effulgent light (coupled with the mysterious dancing of numbers in *Schooldays*), introduces the sense, however vague, of a numinous dimension beyond what can be seen—of humanity without god, yet with some residual sense of god existing in the breach. This highlights the *Jesus* migrants' experience of mere and yet miraculous survival, against the odds. It also connects with the suggestion of something marvellous, if contingent, about the father-son bond that Simón and David establish, even despite their reduced circumstances. There is something comparably marvellous about their subsequent adoption of Inés as the boy's mother, and the almost instantaneous relationship she builds with him.

Finally, perhaps most interestingly, day-to-day life including labour and journeying in this unique southern setting is marked by the circular repetition and replication of experiences, habits and ideas rather than onward, linear progression—apart from the experience of crossing the border itself. This circularity is vividly captured in Simon's stevedoring work on the Novilla docks in *Childhood*, transporting heavy sacks of grain off ships, but also, at a more elevated level, in the dancing at Señor Arroyo's academy in *Schooldays*. Experiences of replication and an accompanying sense of being secondary—a lesser or incomplete copy—are of course characteristic of global provinces, countries and cities far from the so-called advanced metropolitan centres of the world everywhere—that is, far from those places where the pace of historical development is dictated. In the south, the conventional linear trajectories of migration running north-south, also become circular and incomplete. But in the *Jesus* trilogy the degree of derivativeness is especially acute. As Cristóbal Perez Barra has observed, in the world of Novilla and Estrella, key European cultural classics, for example, Cervantes' *Don Quixote* (1605) and the works of Bach, though they play a part in the action or serve a symbolic purpose, consistently appear in a reduced, simplified or infantilized mode—in short, less elevated, and not in their original form. To illustrate, David uses “the full story of Don Quixote” “to practice his Spanish reading” and treasures the story of the

romantic knight throughout, until his death, but Cervantes is nowhere mentioned in the trilogy (*CJ* 67).⁵

Lacking is any sense of other cultures that may have generated these works and held them in high esteem; and so of a metropolis or cosmopolitan centre that might stand as a counterpoint to this provincial southern periphery.

In this light, it is necessary to qualify Jennifer Rutherford's reading of *Childhood* as set in a "timeless space of indeterminate history [where] history has been blanked out" (Rutherford, "Thinking" 59-82). In point of fact, Novilla and Estrella appear to be historically belated: they stand in "the waiting room" of history, albeit a very distanced room, though not one outside time (Chakrabarty 15-31). Television is present, for example. Though they lag behind on the time-line of modernity, they do not play compensatory catch-up in the conventional manner of the global provinces, as *any* sense of the modern, northern world is absent. In several ways, therefore, migration in the *Jesus* trilogy is against the conventional grain: it is south, not north; it is towards rather than away from the global periphery (if we can talk about the global at all). And there is no yearning for a metropolitan alternative. At the same time, the salient features of migration—as we have seen, contingency, isolation, movement towards an unknown and perhaps mysterious end, and circularity—are dialled up to a significant degree. To this extent, the worlds of Novilla and Estrella might be said to occupy the "bad infinity" described by Simón's friend Eugenio: that is, an infinite recursion "like finding yourself in a dream within a dream within yet another dream, and so forth endlessly," yet without any sense of a source from which these dreams might come (*CJ* 250). For David the nominalist, the one committed to singularity, this world without origins is a difficult place.

Further migrant crossings in Coetzee

The salient features of southern migration I have so far outlined, recall other processes of migrant crossing and arriving traced in Coetzee's other post-millennium novels, *Slow Man* and *Elizabeth Costello*

as well as *Diary of a Bad Year*. Indeed, all the Australian-period novels interestingly look at or refer to migration and aspects of the migrant condition at some level, though up to *Childhood* and *Schooldays* no character is actually shown migrating. *Slow Man*'s Paul Rayment and Marijana Jokic are migrants from Europe, and share a respect for books as objects of value that is represented as being of the old world. They appear to have little sense of belonging to Australia, yet no special longing for the life left behind. Anya's mother in *Diary of a Bad Year* is from the Philippines and Anya herself has led an internationally peripatetic existence. John, Elizabeth Costello's son in the eponymous novel, has presumably immigrated at some point to the United States. These characters all participate in the determinations of arrival, most notably, the commitment to stay on, but they are not driven away from the old life, or towards the new, in any distinct or obvious way. They are also solitary figures. Far removed from the South African landscapes that alienate those who try to live there, like Magda in *In the Heart of the Country*, in these novels it is especially those who move to whom this sense of isolation attaches.

The mysterious and even numinous dimensions of the process of migrant crossing in the trilogy also call for further comment. In many cultural traditions the process of passing from life into death is seen as a crossing over. We might immediately think of the boatman Charon ferrying the dead across the River Styx on their last journey. Certainly, the emphasis in the *Jesus* trilogy on being washed clean and born into a new life bears such connotations. Crossing also connects to ideas of transcendence, moving into an "existence or experience beyond the normal or physical level" ("Crossing"). David even as a young child is especially worried about some kinds of crossing, such as are involved in counting, or ordering the integers (*CJ* 35, 249). He is anxious about falling through the gaps between the numbers into "the great black sea of nothingness" in which he believes they float like islands (Brits 129-46). Close to the point of crossing from Novilla to Estrella, he goes so far as to ask whether flying is distinct from falling, and at what point the states coincide (*CJ* 259). At the Institute in *Schooldays*, he will be particularly adept at learning to dance or dynamically embody number, briefly transcending (in Simón's eyes) the binary categories of male and female, body and spirit, as he floats through the dance of Seven: "the boy seems to

shed all bodily weight; to become pure light” (*SJ* 246). If this moment of transcendence briefly alludes to the “miraculous” reconciliation of opposed viewpoints that can be achieved through dialogue, as Coetzee writes in *The Good Story* (58), it also suggests that David while dancing temporarily but fully inhabits the singularity that is his chosen medium.

Across the Coetzee oeuvre, and not least in the *Jesus* novels, these moments of crossing and transcendence are also often catalyzed or facilitated, appropriately, through some form of intercession, visitation or sub-divine guidance. Messenger figures such as Marijana or Anya step forward to accompany the one crossing over—figures who, we cannot fail to notice, are themselves often migrants. Anya is the self-appointed angel figure who will help JC cross over into death—that crossing that David Lurie also reflects upon in respect of the dead dogs of *Disgrace*. In *Schooldays*, the transcendent dancing of numbers is guided till her death by the angel-like teacher, Ana Magdalena. Not surprisingly, Simón, Ines and David have a companion in the form of the hitchhiker Juan as they cross from Novilla into Estrella, however short-lived his time with them is. In all these instances, the point of crossing with which the intercessor assists, lacks temporality and as such seems inconceivable, not unlike the gap between the finite numbers that David baulks at. Similar also to birth, the gap defies memory and imagination. Simon’s journey to the Belstar camp has been almost wholly erased from his memory. The crossing from Novilla to Estrella takes place between the first two *Jesus* novels, in the gap between the books. At the end of *Childhood*, the family and Juan approach the border. At the beginning of *Schooldays*, they have arrived: “He was expecting Estrella to be bigger,” runs the first line (*SJ* 1).

But if in Coetzee moments of crossing are seemingly unimaginable, arrival, or beginning a new life, is a different matter. As V.S. Naipaul points out in *The Enigma of Arrival*, arrival has several linked valences: “reaching a destination; landing in a new place; ... establishing a position” (Naipaul 51-2, 91-2; Boehmer, *Indian* 1-22). From the perspective of Coetzee’s migrants, these meanings may lay too strong an accent on finality and resolution, however. For them, arrival rather tends to be unemphatic and low-key; more of an unfinished process than a finite moment. Instead of achieving refuge or safety, arrival often means

beginning a new journey, or involuntary subjection to a new state of being. Far from the founding or making of anything, arrival is provisional, open-ended, insecure. In *Childhood*, Simón and David try to make a new life in Novilla. By the end of the novel, they are off to begin another new life in Estrella. In this sense, arrival is also random, as are all things in a world “not under the eye of God,” as Dr. García observes close to the moment of their departure, while tending to David’s scorched eyes (*CJ* 275). This randomness is then further thrown into relief by the marked lack of geographical specificity of the spaces in which the characters arrive.

To turn to the instances of arrival themselves, both *Childhood* and *Schooldays* open with scenes “on the road” as the characters arrive in Novilla from Belstar, and in Estrella from Novilla, respectively (*CJ* 2). *Childhood* quickly impresses some of the distinctive features of migrant arrival whether in Novilla or elsewhere upon the reader: it means lacking shelter and adequate food; it means not having a key to your door and being treated “like dirt” (*CJ* 2, 4, 8). It also means the necessary acceptance of a one-way direction—“There is nowhere else to be but here,” Simón observes—something that is exacerbated by the washing away of memory, despite Simón’s assurance that David’s will return as soon as he sees his mother (*CJ* 17, 21). Yet from the necessary acceptance of “here,” of this “only world” that exists, a fierce commitment to a new life appears to emerge, even where the means of ascertaining how new this new life in fact is, or whether it is “only a prelude to another life,” are absent (*CJ* 41). The preoccupation with new life extends through *Childhood* to its end, to the point of leaving for Novilla. Across the final two chapters, references to new life and another life are repeated up to ten times, not including the references to new arrivals. The final words of the novel are, in fact, “*new life*,” as we saw (*CJ* 277).

With the crossing from Novilla that occurs in the gap between the two books, comes the *Jesus* trilogy’s second moment of arrival, in Estrella. Perhaps the most noteworthy feature of this arrival is that little about this provincial place appears to be especially surprising or unusual. Not for nothing does Simón almost immediately ask: “Will a new life be possible in Estrella?” (*SJ* 1). All that marks out Estrella appears to be, paradoxically, its complete absence of singularity. Little or nothing distinguishes the

“sprawling, provincial town surrounded by hills and fields and orchards” from any other in a warm, dry southern climate. It has a main street with all the standard features one might expect, “the marketplace, the administrative buildings, the modest museum and art gallery” (*SJ* 2). The third-person narrator’s descriptive language, such as it is, reinforces the effect of a stripped-down, indeterminate yet also out-of-the-way world. Adjectives are infrequent; the quantity of generic description leads at several points to overstatement and tautology: the surrounds are “a veritable cornucopia;” “Farmers always need farmhands;” “I will do my share ... Neither less nor more.” The orchards behave in the same way as orchards in like terrain elsewhere with “the orange season followed by the apple season followed by the grape” (*SJ* 1). The new land will seemingly not be unlike the old new land left behind; in short, not very new at all. The family’s travel companion Juan soon heads off to work on the ubiquitous surrounding fruit farms, and they follow his example, though he, true to his intercessor character, will not be seen again. Within a few pages David will witness a duck die from a boy’s careless act of cruelty, just as he did towards the end of *Childhood* at Punto Arenas (*CJ* 244; *SJ* 6-7). For one such as he, as obsessed with singularity and the revelation of his real name as he was before, this will be a limbo land indeed (*SJ* 3).

In *The Childhood of Jesus* and *The Schooldays of Jesus*, Coetzee imagines migration under a southern sun to draw out some of its defining features: contingency, isolation, an inarticulable mystery and strangeness, and circular repetition. Developments in *The Death of Jesus* only underscore these features, most prominently of course the shocking and yet anti-climactic death of David himself from a wasting disease, alone in a hospital bed. He dies wondering what the message of his life might be, as Simón does, too. By the end of the novel, how much closer is he or are we as readers to understanding David’s mission or purpose? Migration in the south has brought only anti-climax. There has been no revelation, no transcendence; there is, likewise, little to no prospect of change or improvement. The new life the migrants sought remains cruelly unavailable.

The south—migration in *extremis*

In closing, I want to reverse the proposition I have explored so far—that a southern location sheds light on what it is to migrate—and to turn to consider southness as itself a particularly acute migrant condition, and the south a place of migration *in extremis*. In other words, I want to ask whether the key features that the discussion has highlighted could be considered as characteristic of southern and indeed south-south migration *in particular*. In the south, might all of these features appear in a harsher, more exaggerated form? In point of fact, might these elements relate especially to (non-)migration to Australia, the great but walled southern land and its outlying prison islands?

As we have seen, the state of migrant being that Coetzee presents in the *Jesus* trilogy, entails inhabiting an essentially derivative and generic world, yet one that is also very distant and in this sense singular in its southness. As a possibly relevant aside, Bruce Chatwin, too, in *In Patagonia*, and the later *Songlines*, both studies of human beings as nomads, characterised both Australia and the very southern extremity of South America, Tierra del Fuego, as places inhabited by those who in ancient times walked or migrated the farthest. For Chatwin, the south comprised the regions of the most distanced and hence challenging migration possible. Although his south-south links have an instinctive validity, this allusion to Chatwin is tentative, however. This is first because his scholarship is now seen to be makeshift and bowdlerized, even if imaginatively evocative; and, second, on the grounds of deeply felt Aboriginal claims that they have always lived in Australia; they did not migrate to the continent from Africa.⁶ Closer to the present-day, if Coetzee's Novilla and Estrella are considered to be or to resemble South American countries, the journeys of the migrants Simón and David correlate with those of Welsh, Irish, German and Italian immigrants from the late nineteenth century to make a new life in countries that were far distant from old Europe, like Argentina and Chile—a Europe to which, due to acculturation and poverty, they rarely returned.

Linda Mannick and others observe that, since the millennium, increasing immigration from the Global South to places like the European Union and other rich countries worldwide, including Australia, has turned migration into an ever more contested political issue, with governments and media “using a language of securitization that frames migrants as a threat” (Mannik 2-9). This official dissuasion has not withheld migrants from attempting to traverse national and maritime boundaries, however. Far from it. Indeed, migrants seem ever more willing to take ever greater risks to achieve an increasingly small measure of success. We might think of Ines’ impulsive determination to leave Novilla, no matter the cost. In respect of Australia, the island continent, where, for one, land bridges and even “stepping-stone” islands for would-be migrants are absent or fairly distant, and where, for another, the state is hyper-protective against migration, these risks are perhaps especially clear-cut.⁷ Coetzee himself puts it in a factual nutshell: Monash University’s “Australian Border Deaths” database estimates a total of “some two thousand refugee drownings” in the ocean between Indonesia and Australia “since the year 2000” (Coetzee, “Australia’s” 2-4).

By situating the migration story of the *Jesus* trilogy in the south, the ocean-dominated hemisphere (81% to the northern hemisphere’s 61%), Coetzee not only emphasizes that migration is a southern issue as well as a northern, as we have already seen (see Samuelson and Lavery 37). He also underscores, subtly but incisively, another key element—a geopolitical one. He points out that the difficulty, not to say precarity, of migration in a space that is predominantly maritime is incalculably scaled up when the territory to which the migrants seek to cross—the island continent Australia—throws up unbreachable if invisible barriers in the ocean itself. In the excoriating review essay, “Australia’s Shame,” responding to Behrouz Boochani’s *No Friend but the Mountains* (2019), his migration memoir about imprisonment on Manus Island, Coetzee develops the point bitterly and bluntly. For most refugee migrants and aspirant asylum-seekers trying to make it to Australia, no matter how motivated by the desire to “make a new life” they may be, migration means de facto incarceration on a detention island—Manus, Christmas. Deaf to their pleas, the island nation’s hypervigilant authorities pick up those attempting to cross from their

unseaworthy vessels and fly them to these outstations or “camps” “in the remote Pacific run by the Commonwealth of Australia,” yet without UN-recognized identity, and leave them there. They are officially cast into limbo. Christina Twomey’s poignant memoir-essay about the prison islands, also 2019, helps to sharpen the critique still further. Australia’s exclusive island continent identity depends upon hyper-protection, walled exclusion and terror, she writes: “Extraterritoriality in the form of islands has bequeathed the Australian state the capacity to practise terror in the name of its citizens” (Twomey n. p.).

Coetzee’s disgust at the official Australian response to refugees and would-be migrants was already clear in *Diary of a Bad Year*: “Today’s refugees find themselves in much the same boat as yesterday’s transported” (Coetzee 111-13). But at the close of the 2010s decade, with “Australia’s Shame” following in short order after the completion of *Jesus* trilogy, his condemnation has become even more open, fierce and unsparing. For boat-borne asylum-seekers to Australia, he observes, the very act of seeking refuge is met with punishment—“punishment [that] will be and is meant to be as harsh as possible, visible for all the world to see” (“Australia’s” 2). Their migration does not bring any kind of arrival, only indefinite detention as “illegal non-citizens.” Their hoped-for crossing-over is permanently suspended. There is no key to the nation’s door for these people, and the door, unlike that to Simón and David’s windowless room in *Childhood*, is shut against them in perpetuity. The camps, Boochani’s book shows, are “unhealthy, dangerous, and destructive not only of their psychic stability but of their very humanity” (“Australia’s” 7). Prisoners cry for pasts left behind, though many fled their countries of origin in fear of their lives (“Australia’s” 10). They also lack intercessors—other than perhaps writer-advocates like Coetzee himself. How much better compared to this, we might be tempted to think, is the stolid, provincial world of Belstar and Novilla, and certainly fruitful Estrella, in which memories—whether of bad or good—have been swept clean? How much better, too, is the messy though more humane situation facing migrants in South Africa, as Coetzee writes—in that other familiar country of his south (“Australia’s” 12-13)?

The at once southern and migrant status of David and Simón allows Coetzee in the *Jesus* trilogy to expose and condemn, if obliquely, experiences of refugee non-arrival and of migration withheld: in short, Australia's style of migration, in which asylum-seekers are held not at a border but in an extra-territorial no man's land, to which, moreover, hundreds keep on coming.⁸ Or as the officer Anna in *Childhood* says, there are "thousands of entries, hundreds of thousands, more than you can count," whilst also pointing out that "there is a reception centre in every city" (*CJ* 19). The southern poetics of the *Jesus* novels brings the reality of migration into the present of the south, however belated that present might be, allegorically highlighting its dead-end precarity and cruel, existential absurdity. As for the never-ending limbo that is Australia or at least off-shore Australia for refugees, all the features of migration we have observed apply—contingency, isolation, mystery in the guise of absurdity, repetition—all in a cruelly intensified form. (Non-)migration here means interminable waiting, to such a degree as to put any new life—that hope for which all refugees set sail—forever out of reach.

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1 Page references to the first two *Jesus* novels will appear in-text with the abbreviations *CJ* and *SJ*.

2 For a succinct plot summary, see McClay.

3 The classic theory of the ever-receding and hope-filled American frontier was advanced in Frederick Jackson Turner's thesis, *The Frontier in American History* (1897).

4 See Fiddian-Qasmiyeh and Daley (2018) for extensive analytic treatment across multiple interdisciplinary essays of link-ups and comparisons across southern worlds. See also Samuelson and Lavery (2019) for their valuable critical insights into what they call the "oceanic south" in which they track "a drift into the Southern Ocean in the fiction of J. M. Coetzee" (37, 38).

5 See Cristóbal Perez Barra, "J.M. Coetzee in the Hispanophone world."

6 However, if, following this theory, Australia, too, might be regarded as a cradle of humankind, like southern Africa, this gives us yet another provocative linkup across the Southern Hemisphere to contemplate.

7 Stepping-stone islands such as we find in the case of Europe with, say, the Mediterranean islands, Lampedusa and Lesbos.

8 Doug Saunders's *Arrival City* (2011) explores the failed arrival or non-arrival of African migrants to Europe, represented by the immigrant enclaves that exist on the edges of European cities like Lisbon. See also: Johny Pitts (2019).