The aesthetics of minor intimacy: precarious attachments and queer feelings in the autobiographical fiction of J. M. Coetzee

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ABSTRACT

This essay offers a new perspective on the queerness of the encounters between self and other in Coetzee’s autobiographical fiction. It attends to the dynamics of openness and reservation, immediacy and mediation, desire and longing played out between Anya and Señor C in Diary of a Bad Year (2007) and John and his female cousin, who is represented by the characters Agnes in Boyhood: A Memoir (1997), Ilse in Youth (2002), and Margot in Summertime (2009). Building on Lauren Berlant’s notion of minor intimacy—which asks us to pay attention to encounters without a canon and to desires too elusive for heterosexual conventions—it offers a framework for uncovering modes of attachment in Coetzee’s autobiographical fiction that do not obey the strictures of the couple form. I draw on queer studies on intimacy and phenomenological studies on emotions and embodiment to explore the modes of attachment between self and other.

KEYWORDS

J. M. Coetzee; minor intimacy; emotions; autobiographical fiction; queer; phenomenology

Introduction

Heterosexual dynamics are the dominant form of sexuality explored in J. M. Coetzee’s writing, which often is focalized through the lens of privileged older men who desire younger, unattainable women. Although it critically dissects the politics and ethics of white male desire, his oeuvre does not readily lend itself to a queer reading. This essay offers a new perspective on the queerness of the encounter between self and other in Coetzee’s writings. It especially focuses on body, feelings, and affective intensities motivating the encounter between self and other. Inspired by Lauren Berlant’s concept of minor intimacy, this new interpretation looks to uncover the modes of attachment that flourish in the shadow of heteronormative intimacies. Drawing on Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari’s work on minor literature, Berlant coined the term minor intimacy to explore intimate, affective relations beyond the couple form. For Berlant, those minoritized “desires for intimacy that bypass the couple or the life narrative it generates...
have no alternative plots, let alone few laws and stable spaces of culture in which to clarify and to cultivate them.”

Not governed by the heteronormative logic that rules marriage, kinship, or patriotism, minor intimacy appears too amorphous and obscure to grasp. Nevertheless, it is by virtue of its fleeting, subversive nature that minor intimacy finds affinities with the queer project. Lauren Berlant and Michael Werner note:

Making a queer world has required the development of kinds of intimacy that bear no necessary relation to domestic space, to kinship, to the couple form, to property, or to the nation. These intimacies do bear a necessary relation to a counterpublic – an indefinitely accessible world conscious of its subordinate relation. They are typical both of the inventiveness of queer world making and of the queer world’s fragility.

Looking at Coetzee’s works through the lens of minor intimacy brings expression not only to the trajectory, language, norms, and forms of those attachments, which are discredited and obscured by heteronormative conventions, but also to a distinctly queer vision of J. M. Coetzee. This essay delves into the vicissitudes of distance and proximity, openness and reserve, immediacy and mediation, and desire and longing that are played out between Anya and Señor C in *Diary of a Bad Year* (2007), Agnes and John in *Boyhood* (1997), Ilse and John in *Youth* (2002), and Margot and John in *Summertime* (2009); it also explores John’s uneasy attachment to the Karoo in *Summertime*. I treat these relationships as queer encounters not because sexual desire is queered in them, but because these encounters cannot be recuperated into the heteronormative dictates of intimate life, belonging, and care. With the fresh perceptions of intimacy they produce, Coetzee’s autobiographical fiction gestures toward “the inventiveness of queer world making and of the queer world’s fragility.”

My argument is informed by critical trends in queer studies that extend the scope of queer theory beyond sexual encounters and sexual orientation. Instead of merely carving out a sphere for a sexualized subculture, some queer scholars have shifted toward studying heteronormativity, a system that fundamentally affects not only those who identify as gay, lesbian, and bisexual, but everyone. Studies in this vein demonstrate how things apparently unrelated to sexuality such as temporality, space, social structures, and life narratives are all deeply imbricated with and implicated in heterosexuality. As Berlant and Warner explain:

Contexts that have little visible relation to sex practice, such as life narrative and generational identity, can be heteronormative in this sense, while in other contexts forms of sex between men and women might not be heteronormative. Heteronormativity is thus a concept distinct from heterosexuality.

The distinction between heteronormativity and heterosexuality makes the queer potentials of Coetzee’s text markedly discernible. Building on a queer approach, this essay attends to the intimate attachments and engagements of the selves who do not inhabit the heteronormative life trajectory in which one is expected to marry, have children,

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4Berlant, “Intimacy,” 285.
5Berlant and Warner, “Sex in Public,” 558.
6Ibid.
7See for example, Sedgwick, *Epistemology of the Closet*; Halberstam, *In a Queer Time and Place*; Ahmed, “Orientations.,”
8Berlant and Warner, “Sex in Public,” 548.
and rely on family for care and love. As queer scholar Judith Halberstam notes, a queer temporality enables us to apprehend “the potentiality of a life unscripted by the conventions of family, inheritance, and child rearing.”

It is in this spirit that I approach Coetzee’s autobiographical fiction, which reveals a plenitude of modes of intimacy not oriented toward coupledom/family and reproduction, belonging, and the futures that these seem to secure. My analysis draws on feminist and queer literatures on intimacy, on phenomenology’s insights on emotions and embodiment, on Jacques Rancière’s concept of aesthetics, which seek to reframe the field of perception through an intervention into what is visible/invisible and thinkable/unthinkable, and on Pierre Bourdieu’s notion of symbolic violence, which is developed to illuminate how social hierarchies are maintained less by physical force than by forms of symbolic domination, especially through mental schemas and cognitive patterns.

I focus exclusively on Coetzee’s autobiographical fiction, a term reserved primarily for those books, including Boyhood, Youth, Summertime, Diary of a Bad Year, and Scenes from Provincial Life, books where main protagonists share strikingly similar traits with the author J. M. Coetzee, books that also subvert the unity and stability of the autobiographical self. The reason for this focus on autobiographical fiction is twofold. First, autobiographical fiction as a form of inventive writing fully realizes the distinctiveness of minor intimacy. Inventiveness, according to Derek Attridge, “opens new possibilities of meaning and feeling” and its novelty “cannot be apprehended by the old modes of understanding.” Inventive writing thus sabotages the conventions of a form “by destabilizing them, heightening their internal inconsistencies and ambiguities, exaggerating their proclivities, and exploiting their gaps and tensions, in such a way as to allow the otherness implicit in these materials.”

Likewise, autobiographical fiction subverts the conventions of the autobiography in terms of a contradictory simultaneity of intimacy and strangeness, openness and reserve, immediacy and mediation so as to draw out the intricacies of self-disclosure. Such an endeavor has remarkable implications for our understanding of intimacy. The term intimacy, originating from the Latin intimus – pointing to the innermost and the deepest – evokes feelings of love, trust, and familiarity, and is associated with caring, sharing, self-disclosure, privacy, and informality. Maybe more than any other literary form, autobiographical fiction promises to make the author’s most personal and innermost thoughts and desires accessible to the reader, while at the same time confounding this very promise by destabilizing the boundaries between story and personal history as well as fiction and memoir, truth and story. Unlike conventional autobiographical writing, a genre that allegedly draws out the essential truth about the self, autobiographical fiction complicates the depiction of self-representation, featuring a self split into author, narrator, and protagonist. Secondly, autobiographical fiction produces a distinct sense of intimacy that can serve as a template for the relationship between the author and readers. It is through autobiographical fiction, the author gestures toward self-disclosure and openness. The author’s efforts to open themselves to the reader, albeit significant,
remain elusive, since autobiographical fiction ruptures and undermines those efforts, simultaneously creating effects of intimacy and distance, as well as immediacy and mediation.

**Heteronormative intimacy and the self in J. M. Coetzee’s autobiographical fiction**

The autobiographical self Coetzee’s texts introduce escapes a conclusive truth about the self. Indeed, the self in Coetzee’s autobiographical fiction resists the representative conventions of the truth. As such, the complicated relations between the main protagonist John and J. M. Coetzee as well as between different Coetzee characters such as John in *Scenes from Provincial Life* and JC in *Diary of A Year* undermine the assumptions that the author and the autobiographical subject are identical and that the author occupies an epistemically privileged position to represent the truth about the autobiographical self, a truth believed to be anchored outside the text. Instead, divergent and conflicting accounts of the main protagonist proliferate by the introduction of different points of view, which flattens the traditional hierarchy between the author and the character. By positing the author alongside other point of views in accounting for the autobiographical self, Coetzee’s text magnifies the invented nature of the self.

Like Coetzee, queer thinkers complicate and challenge straightforward understandings of the self. Those queer scholars who locate intimacy at the intersection of subjectivity, intersubjectivity, and society emphasize that the making of selves and subjectivities are predicated upon assumptions about heteronormative intimacy. Elizabeth Povinelli, for instance, suggests that it is people’s ability to form intimate relationships that determines their position in society. One belongs to society, is recognized as a socially viable being, and becomes worthy of respect through her capacity and her record of heteronormative intimacy. The latter grants a sense of validity and normalcy to members of society and enhances individuals’ sense of self-worth, endowing them with personal authenticity and a sense of having lived a life worth living. Since the construct of society itself is assembled through narratives of intimacy, marriage, coupling, family, and kinship, intimacy – functioning like a criterion of sociopolitical membership – has a built-in authority to draw boundaries between insiders and outsiders. “Those who don’t or can’t find their way in that story – the queers, the single, the something else – can become so easily unimaginable, even often to themselves,” writes Laurent Berlant, describing the power that heteronormative intimacy exerts on how the self is recognized, either as a subject, a legible self, or as the other, as the outsider.

In *Summertime*, one can readily identify descriptions of otherness delivered through tropes of heteronormative intimacy. *Summertime* probes into the character of a lately deceased author named J. M. Coetzee. In the book, we learn about John Coetzee after his death through the filter of other people’s memories in interviews with Vincent, an English academic working on the biography of the deceased novelist.

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13 See for example, Berlant, “Intimacy”; Stoler, *Carnal Knowledge*; Wilson, “Intimacy.”
14 Povinelli, *Empire and Love*, 191.
15 Berlant, “Intimacy,” 286.
J. M. Coetzee. The four women Vincent interviews frequently speak of John’s oddity as a man. Of all the characteristics that make John appear out of place – his vegetarianism, artistic aspirations, his engagement with manual labor, and his status as an unemployed intellectual – it is his capacity for attachment, or perhaps his lack thereof, that marks his alterity most starkly. “He struck me at once, I can’t say why, as célibataire. I mean not just unmarried but also not suited to marriage, like a man who has spent his life in the priesthood and lost his manhood and become incompetent with women,” says Adriana Nascimento, a Brazilian dance instructor, recounting her first impression of John.16 Julia Frankl, a psychotherapist, characterizes John as a “loner” and “socially inept.”17 His lone existence raises doubts among John’s kinfolk too. “Why isn’t he married? Is he homosexual, do you think? Is he a moffie?” Carol asks her sister Margot when talking about their cousin John.18 Margot does not think that John is a moffie, yet she is puzzled that John “has no woman.”19

These fragmentary reports are interposed between entries from John’s diary that capture scenes from John’s life in the early 1970s. What emerges from all this is an elusive sketch rather than a definitive biography. The intricately superimposed layers from different sources – including interviewees, the biographer Vincent, John as a character, J. M. Coetzee as an author – create a complex narrative that makes it difficult to pin down John. Despite the fact that this narrative evades and contests simplified classifications of John’s character, women constantly draw on heteronormative tropes about intimacy to write him off as an odd man. In these descriptions, sexual desire, or the lack of it, often presents itself first and foremost as a symptom of John’s incapacity for sexual and emotional intimacy. In her account, Julia Frankl remarks that John’s gaze lacks “pressure,”20 a conventional measure of male desire that Julia often experienced in the presence of white South African males, with John Coetzee being the only exception. Furthermore, John’s sexual conduct, which Julia describes as “autistic,”21 has less to do with feelings and more to do with a mechanical aptitude. Julia finally suggests that “John wasn’t made for love, wasn’t constructed that way – wasn’t constructed to fit into or be fitted into. Like a sphere. Like a glass ball. There was no way to connect with him.”22 She further draws on metaphors associated with things as diverse as Chinese philosophy and electronic devices. “For real love you need two full human beings, and the two need to fit together, to fit into each other. Like Yin and Yang. Like an electrical plug and an electrical socket. He and I didn’t fit,” she says to Vincent, the interviewer.23

Both Yin and Yang and the electrical plug and socket are heteronormative tropes, with the principles of Yin and Yang – female and male, respectively – evoking a certain form of intimate connection between self and other based on complementarity: the idea that men and women have different but equally attuned bodies, feelings, and proclivities, so that the two together create a unit. Likewise, the electrical socket (female, with the plug being male) conjures overt images of heterosexual intercourse, the
heteronormative manifestation of the idea of complementarity. Thus, when taken as symptoms of underlying norms rather than in their own terms, the women’s interpretations of John seem to be less determined by John himself and more by what Judith Butler calls the “heterosexual matrix.” Women acting and living in this normative gender framework tend to equate expressions of desire with a specific form of masculine comportment, which constitutes the basis for judging John’s capacity to be intimate and sexual. It is against this heterosexual matrix that John’s mode of being seems to exhibit a certain queerness, an experience of inhabiting the world as a “minoritized subject,” as somebody whose life and attachments appear out of place.

The consensus on John’s incapacity for intimacy notwithstanding, the women interviewed by Vincent also recall moments when John was affectionate. Julia was surprised to see John have a surge of feeling after she ostensibly proposed to him. “Never before have I seen him in the grip of emotion. So I asked myself in some wonderment, does this cold fish have feelings after all?” she says. Likewise, Margot was dumbfounded when John confessed that he was in love with her when they were children, and claims that she “set the pattern” of John’s love for women. What to make of these moments in which John seems to elude the habitual interpretation of John Coetzee as an oblique man? Are these moments really just aberrations? Or do they offer glimpses into John’s specific style of intimacy?

### The aesthetics of minor attachments

Obscured and trivialized by heteronormative conventions, minor intimacy faces the problem of tangibility, visibility, and even perceptibility. Minor intimacy also lacks structure, can easily fall into obscurity, and fails to acquire significance. “What happens to the energy of attachment when it has no designated place? To the glances, gestures, encounters, collaborations, or fantasies that have no canon?” Berlant contends that “As with minor literatures, minor intimacies have been forced to develop aesthetics of the extreme to push these spaces into being by way of small and grand gestures.”

Lauren Berlant’s framework of minor intimacy foregrounds the inextricable relationships among feelings, attachment, and aesthetics. The glances, gestures, encounters, and tensions between the self and the other, at times solidifying the self-other divide and at other times promising to dispel it, generate an aesthetics of attachment, suffused with affective energies, evolving into a particular narrative. Of course it is not only the emotional orientations and feelings that accentuate this affective forces; the etymology of the word emotion that derives from the Latin *emovere*, meaning to move, to stir, which in acting as an incitement to action also accentuates this power of affect, perhaps even more so.

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24Butler, *Gender Trouble*, 35.
25Berlant, “Intimacy,” 285.
26Coetzee, *Scenes from Provincial Life*, 344.
27Ibid., 360.
28Berlant, “Intimacy,” 285.
29Ibid., 285.
30Ibid., 285.
I here turn to Coetzee’s autobiographical fiction, texts that richly illustrates the distinct aesthetics of minor intimacy. The aesthetics of attachment that Coetzee articulates is founded on a mode of making sense of inchoate and obscure attachments as well as their aesthetic worthiness without relying on familiar sensibilities and tropes of heteronormativity. By pushing obscurity and discontinuity of these attachments at their limits and by heightening the lack of mutuality as well as the failure of reciprocity embedded in minor intimacies, J. M. Coetzee’s autobiographical fiction generates a distinctive aesthetics that “invents ways of being, seeing and saying, engenders new subjects,” which is what aesthetic practice achieves, according to Jacques Rancière.31 This understanding of aesthetics Rancière espouses resonates well with Derek Attridge’s view of inventiveness, since both scholars regard the capacity of artwork to bring a wholly new thing into existence that eventually alters the cultural matrix as well as the frames of perception as key to grasping the specificity of art. For, Rancière in particular, aesthetic practice, to the extent that it suspends the common sense that ordinarily regulates human situations, constitutes “a form of dissensus, a dissensual re-configuration of the common experience of the sensible.”32 Coetzee’s aesthetics, in a similar way, produce new ways of making sense of intimacy and reconfigures the common experience of attachment, innovatively breaking up with heteronormative sensibilities. Coetzee’s engagement with glances, gestures, encounters, attachments, longings, and fantasies, which draws out unconventional sensibilities, gestures of openness, melancholic proclivities, and embodied encounters, advances into eloquent plots for otherwise misinterpreted intimacies. The childhood intimacy between John and his cousin, Agnes, featured in Boyhood, the cousins’ later encounters, tinged with estrangement and weariness, in Youth and Summertime, and the unconventional intimacy between Anya and Señor C in Diary of a Bad Year are all minor intimacies that deviate from heteronormative expectations of love, commitment, gender roles, the good life, and fulfillment that characterize the narratives of the marriage plot and nation-state. Instead of erotic desire, minor intimacy is animated by melancholy. Unlike heteronormative love, minor intimacy does not produce socially recognized forms of attachment but complex combinations of detachment and attachment. In contrast to the vigor of life that heteronormative intimacy celebrates, minor intimacy pensively gestures to life’s fleetingness as well as to human vulnerability, acknowledging its own fragility.

This fragility exposes minor attachments to a very specific form of violence, that is, symbolic violence. Coined by the sociologist Pierre Bourdieu, symbolic violence denotes a form of violence that manifests itself primarily through the act of misrecognition. Exerted through perception and comprehension, mostly operating below the threshold of consciousness, misrecognition denies the fullness of the other’s being.33 In the zone of intimacy, the heteronormative gaze exerts symbolic violence, through which minor intimacies are either willingly or inadvertently misrecognized. Perhaps because of this, minor intimacies in Coetzee’s autobiographical fiction are perpetually subjected to interpretations by others whose life-worlds are colonized by a heterosexual matrix.

31Rancière, Dissens, 7.
32Ibid., 140.
33Bourdieu, Masculine Domination.
While these interpretations vary depending on the priorities and perspectives of interpreters, the heteronormative plots in which these interpretations are generated remain unaltered. In *Diary of a Bad Year*, Alan, Anya’s partner, tries to convince Anya that her relation to Señor C amounts to nothing but a clichéd erotic plot, in which an old man with vulgar and obscene fantasies makes sexual advances on a young, exotic, good-looking woman. In *Summertime*, Carol accuses her sister, Margot, of flirting with John: “He is flirting with you. Anyone can see it. And you are flirting back. You, his cousin! You should be ashamed of yourself.”

Later, Vincent, the biographer of the deceased author Coetzee, converts Margot’s interviews into coherent narratives by manufacturing sentimental details such as “a flowering jacaranda” or a lovemaking scene that features Margot and her husband Lukas, the couple laying on bed, “in each other’s arms,” the bed creaking.

The complex narrative structure of *Summertime*, nevertheless, offers a layer of meaning that highlights the inventive space minor intimacies inhabit. Invention, as Derek Attridge suggests, is concerned with production of “ideas and emotions, or conceptual possibilities that had hitherto been impossible – impossible because the status quo (cognitive, affective, ethical) depended on their exclusion.”

Coetzee’s autobiographical fiction, in particular, signals new possibilities of attachment that cannot be achieved in heteronormative intimacies, through the incompatibility of heteronormative and minor intimacies. For John, it is the incompatibility of erotic love and openness that hints at a new sphere of intimacy. Contemplating his feelings for his cousin Agnes, John in *Boyhood* realizes that “they cannot fall in love and get married.” This comes as a relief rather than a bitter realization, because John recognizes that “he is free to be friends with her, open his heart to her.”

Later on, Margot, his cousin, in *Summertime*, comes to appreciate her childhood relation with John for the unique closeness it afforded, a kind of intimacy that she knows she cannot have with her husband Lukas: “Unlike Lukas; yet there are things she shares with John that she can never share with Lukas. Why? Because of the childhood times they spent together, the most precious of times, when they opened their hearts to each other as one can never do later, even to a husband.”

For Anya, in *Diary of a Bad Year*, it is the incompatibility between secretiveness and openness that signals the significance of her relation with Señor C. In a letter to Señor C she writes: “We had a good relationship, honest. We were not honest with Alan. You can’t be honest in a marriage-type relationship where you live together, not absolutely honest, not if you want it to last. That is one of the down things about marriage.”

I highlight the incompatibility between heteronormative intimacy and minor intimacy because it supplies a lucid language for describing the distinctive aesthetics of attachment Coetzee develops. This incompatibility showcases not only the fragility of minor intimacy but also its inventiveness, a type of fragility that cannot be assimilated.
into or absorbed by heteronormative intimacies. Coetzee magnifies the inventiveness of minor intimacy by integrating an aspiration for intimacy into his narrative, which uncouples intimacy even further from the conventions of heteronormativity. As such, the narrative features an encounter between self and other, where the two participate in a conversation with their whole beings, a conversation that fosters a radical openness between them. The episode from John’s childhood in *Boyhood*, where he goes walking together with his cousin, Agnes, in the Karoo around the Voëlfontein farm can be understood in terms of this treasured intimacy one can aspire to, which, at the same time, accords with what Martin Buber called the I-Thou encounter:

> She went barefoot; she did not even own shoes. Soon they were out of sight of the house, in the middle of nowhere. They began to talk. She had pigtails and a lisp, which he liked. He lost his reserve. As he spoke he forgot what language he was speaking: thoughts, simply turned to words within him, transparent words. What he said to Agnes that afternoon he can no longer remember. But he told her everything, everything he did, everything he knew, everything he hoped for. In silence she took it all.  

All the features that animate this episode highlight the unalloyed immediacy of the I-Thou encounter. Childhood is aptly relevant here, because child-consciousness mirrors consciousness in its most immediate and simplest mode, a mode that the self acquires during the I-Thou encounter. The phenomenological immediacy John experiences as a child reveals itself with an unexpected shift in his verbal capacity, with his ability to speak his own language, and with the effortless way in which he is able to communicate when talking to his cousin, Agnes. This immediacy of intimacy, for Coetzee, cannot be stripped of corporeality. Consider for example, the moment John drops his habitual guard when talking to Agnes, who affects him in an unusual way. Nothing alters his consciousness more swiftly than Agnes’s embodied presence. It seems that her hair, her faltering speech, and most notably her bare feet – that is, her embodied mode of being – awakens something that enables John to transcend his habits of consciousness, at least momentarily. This episode that directs our attention to the body does not necessarily call upon a particular competency or a capacity of the body. It is rather the embodied existence, the primary point of contact one has with the world as well as with the other that seems to prefigure and make possible the intimacy.

That the embodiment of self in Coetzee’s writing evinces philosophical significance is something that scholars have attended to before. To hold an embodied notion of self is to emphasize the idea that humans cannot extract themselves from the body so as to rise above what the embodied life entails, and the embodied life, for Coetzee, entails that one is open to the world and others by virtue of one’s own body. The openness that an embodied notion of self entails offers a profound insight into the human condition.  

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42Coetzee’s vision of intimacy that embrace the idea of sharing of one’s innermost self is firmly rooted in what Martin Buber called the I and Thou encounter, an intimate connection between the self and other, through which each becomes visible to the other in her wholeness and unique individuality. Intimacy that reveals itself, to be an I and Thou relation, however is an aspiration and a promise of fulfillment rather than a common aspect of human relation, and is contrasted with I-It relation. In the world, where I-It relation guides human conduct, I is isolated and Thou objectified and human beings are oriented toward the world instrumentally adopting a pragmatic and practical approach.

43Coetzee, *Scenes from Provincial Life*, 387.

44See for example, Anker, “Embodiment, and the Limits of Rights,” and May, “J.M. Coetzee and the Question of the Body.”
Judith Butler expresses this insight by referring to the self’s openness as the “primary human vulnerability.” \(^{45}\) “[T]he skin,” she writes, “and the flesh expose us to the gaze of others, but also to touch, and to violence,” \(^{46}\) all of which form the basis of human vulnerability, a universal condition common to all, not just a particular category of the human. Embodiment, in this sense, generates a catalogue of possibilities, in which self is open and exposed to the other. Coetzee’s writing, from the outset, explores carefully the potentials as well as the perils of embodiment, which exposes self to gaze, to touch, to attack, to violence, to loss, as well as to care and compassion.

Coetzee’s aesthetics of attachment aligns the domain of intimacy with the sphere of human vulnerability, with minor intimacy containing the possibility of attachment that stems from corporeal openness. To be sure, corporeal openness, far from entailing intimacy, might either incite or inhibit further openness to the other. It is, more precisely, one’s awareness of and tender engagement with primary human vulnerability that nurtures intimacy. Consider John in Boyhood again, who in the presence of the other “feels like a crab pulled out of its shell, pink and wounded and obscene.” \(^{47}\) In response to his own embodied openness, he assumes a posture of invulnerability, appearing cold and detached. As a timid and a self-conscious body, and a body clearly at odds with the cultural and affective world of Afrikaners, in which his body is firmly rooted, John is always vigilant and guarded. Unlike other Afrikaner children, who were brought up in a barefoot tradition, he is not used to going barefoot, “dreads baring his feet,” \(^{48}\) and wears shoes all the time. His soft feet and his tendency to keep his feet covered become visceral expressions of his primary vulnerability and his revolt against it. Unlike him, Agnes does not even own shoes and exists in the world barefoot, laying herself open to the world and the other. Her corporal mode of being provokes a shift, radically reversing John’s prereflective way of being and his most deeply ingrained pattern of relating to the other, while her openness, her natural ability to be completely present without guarding her vulnerabilities, comes as a generous gift, startling John into a quiet intimacy. Befuddled, he asks himself: “Is this love – this easy generosity, this sense of being understood at last, of not having to pretend?” \(^{49}\)

In Youth, however, embodiment, or more precisely John’s engagement with his own embodied vulnerabilities, does not increase the intimacy between him and the other, but rather simply destroys any prospects for it. A young man trying to break away from the oppressiveness of South Africa and his family, John strives to achieve autonomy and independence more than anything, even though he is aware that “Something of the baby still lingers in him.” \(^{50}\) In this perturbed quest for transcendence, his bodily needs and vulnerabilities are left at the threshold of his conscious life. Furthermore, the life of the mind, the ideal of transcendence he is so dedicated to, serves to reinforce his willful ignorance of body. Almost anything that entails the body stiffens him. When forced to dance, for instance, he remains “rigid with resistance.” \(^{51}\) As for sexual intimacy with women, he succumbs into “depths of coldness, callousness, caddishness.” \(^{52}\) Perhaps even worse is that he denies himself what

\(^{45}\)Butler, Precarious Life, 28.  
^{46}Ibid., 26.  
^{47}Coetzee, Scenes from Provincial Life, 128.  
^{48}Ibid., 10.  
^{49}Ibid., 80.  
^{50}Coetzee, Youth, 3.  
^{51}Ibid., 89.  
^{52}Ibid., 131.
embodied life might bring: openness and a prospect for intimacy. Upon learning that his cousin, Ilse, whom he opened his heart to as a child, is planning to visit England with a friend, he balks at the idea of meeting a “farm girl.”\textsuperscript{53}

That the earlier childhood episode has in fact an ordering effect on John’s psyche, setting the pattern for his love for women, is something we learn later in \textit{Summertime}, when John, speaking of the day they spent in the Karoo as children, tells Margot, his cousin: “And ever since then, being in love with a woman has meant being free to say everything on my heart.”\textsuperscript{54} This childhood episode takes on a new meaning in \textit{Summertime} in the form of the narrative of aspiration, which reveals the extent to which it shapes John’s deep feelings about what he considers to be intimacy and love.

Minor intimacy, however, is organized around the scenes of failure, scenes that expand the affective vocabulary of the aesthetics of attachment to reflect the foundational moments of detachment and discord. John’s encounter with Ilse in \textit{Youth}, with Margot in \textit{Summertime}, and Señor C’s encounter with Anya in \textit{Diary of a Bad Year} gradually evolve into scenes of failure that flesh out the vagaries of intimacy: a moment of deep connection punctuated by moments that convey extreme detachment, a longing for openess countered with a fierce urge to hold back, caring and affection warped by acrimony and bitterness. In \textit{Youth}, John seems to acknowledge the elusive desire he feels for his cousin Ilse when he asks himself: “What is it about his girl cousins, even the idea of them, that sparks desire in him?”\textsuperscript{55} Their short-lived encounter in England, however, does not grow into any kind of intimacy. It rather abruptly comes to an end, when John, instead of working toward forging bonds with his cousin, has sex with her travel companion, Marianne, and behaves, as John himself puts it, “like a cad”\textsuperscript{56} afterward, which gives rise to even more discord between John and Ilse.

Such an interaction is enabled by but not reducible to hegemonic ideologies and constructions of gender. In these narratives, gender tropes appear at first as evident markers of orientations that are incompatible: in John’s case, masculinity is identified with intellectualism and femininity with practicality. Here, it is worth noting that J. M. Coetzee, especially when articulating the gendered subjectivities, lapses into stereotypical portrayals of femininity with female figures appearing like practical philistines. Women in \textit{Diary of A Bad Year} and \textit{Summertime} embrace commonsense, while blatantly disregarding intellectual life. Anya, who regards herself “as quite a practical person,”\textsuperscript{57} has an unwavering faith in commonsense and dismisses Señor C’s remarks on terrorism lightly, saying: “you are a bit up in the clouds. A bit idealistic. A bit unrealistic.”\textsuperscript{58} In \textit{Summertime}, Julia Frankl contrasts herself with John, stating that “he ran his life according to principles, whereas I was a pragmatist.”\textsuperscript{59} Margot regards John’s ideas as “idle longings”\textsuperscript{60} and obstreperously insists on remaining unreflective in response to John’s gestures of intimacy. John opens up to her, confesses the love he felt for her as a child, and tells the story of older baboons, the melancholy that appear in

\begin{thebibliography}{1}
\bibitem{53} Ibid., 132.
\bibitem{54} Ibid., 358.
\bibitem{55} Coetzee, \textit{Youth}, 26.
\bibitem{56} Ibid., 130.
\bibitem{57} Coetzee, \textit{Diary of a Bad Year}, 205.
\bibitem{58} Ibid., 73.
\bibitem{59} Coetzee, \textit{Scenes from Provincial Life}, 333.
\bibitem{60} Ibid., 382.
\end{thebibliography}
baboons’ eyes as they watch the sunset in the Karoo, while Margot follows the references to Eugène Marais.\(^{61}\) the awareness of mortality, and baboons rather literally, without reflecting on the meaning these things might have for John. “Is that what the sunset makes you think of – mortality?” she asks, suggesting the absurdity of his remarks.\(^{62}\) It is through practicality, an attitude which she handles like a sword to slay John that Margot belittles his intellectual preoccupations and questions the usefulness of his pursuits. “What is the point of speaking Hottentot if no one else does?” she asks, after finding out that John wants to learn Khoi languages.\(^{63}\)

Margot’s dogged practicality, her willful disregard for the intellectual, alludes to her underlying resentment, which calls forth a need to grasp emotional registers through the positioning of the body experiencing these emotions. For the body affected by resentment, the world appears not as a realm of possibilities, but as a place populated with restrictions, limits, and blockages, which instill a sense of powerlessness, a sense of incapacity to act independently of social and cultural restrictions. The bodily experience of powerlessness, in this regard, cannot be isolated from underlying social hierarchies, which molds the feminine mode of being in Coetzee’s autobiographical fiction. Margot, living amid heightened racial tensions, is left with meager resources due to the changes in farming business, and faces unchosen conditions that offer her only grim prospects for a decent and happy family life with children and financial security. Overwhelmed by enmeshed feelings of incapacity, frustration and intimidation, she avoids direct confrontation with her husband – who is a “good husband but close with his feelings”\(^{64}\) – about their childless marriage. She also avoids conflict with her sister, who moved into “a circle of German and Swiss expatriates who came to South Africa during the 1960s to make quick money and are preparing to abandon ship now that the country is going through stormy times.”\(^{65}\) Neither is she able to confront her own family or the larger society about the grim life she finds herself living in South Africa. After all, in order to “help make ends meet she has had to go back to work, as a bookkeeper this time, at the one hotel in Calvinia. Four nights of the week, Monday through Thursday, she spends at the hotel.”\(^{66}\)

Her simmering frustration and resentment, stirred by the conversation she has with John, is displaced onto John, the family’s scapegoat. To be sure, there are times when she pauses to ask herself, “Why does she feel so bitter toward John?,”\(^ {67}\) although these pauses are rather brief and followed by her denigration of the ethical and intellectual values John upholds. Most of the time, she wishes to nullify hierarchic differences between the two in order to achieve a false equality.

Margot’s position in the social universe is brought about by gender inequalities and makes her prone to injury, powerlessness, and thus resentment. The characterization of Margot allows us to grasp operations of gender in Coetzee’s autobiographical fiction. Gender is not what it seems at first, not just a descriptive device employed to flesh out two protagonists with incompatible orientations, nor an essentialist

\(^{61}\)In *The Soul of the Ape* first published in 1969, Eugène Marais observed behaviors of baboons around the sunset and concluded that baboons, like human beings, suffer from “evening melancholy.” Marais, *The Soul of the Ape*, 105–106.

\(^{62}\)Coetzee, *Scenes from Provincial Life*, 358.

\(^{63}\)Ibid., 358.

\(^{64}\)Ibid., 362.

\(^{65}\)Ibid., 353.

\(^{66}\)Ibid., 362.

\(^{67}\)Ibid., 372.
discourse that assigns fixed orientations to women and men, but a signifier of power relations, a social and political condition under which primary human vulnerability becomes easily exploitable, a power relation in which a feminine self is caught and suffers vicious violations.

Human vulnerability that opens one to violence and attacks is universal but it is also particular, can be mitigated or, conversely, intensified by categories of class, gender, and race. The possibility of injury and harm varies with one’s positionality within a web of economic and social relationships. Gender hierarchies, for instance, intensify the risk of assault and injury for women, pushing them to live in a constant state of peril. Such a predicament, in Coetzee’s autobiographical fiction, presupposes a psychic cost for women, a severely refracted capacity to be open to the world, possibly precluding an authentic connection to or intimacy with the other. This predicament finds its expression through Margot and Anya, both of whom have been pushed, physically as well as emotionally, to develop guarded and frustrated modes of being in the world. In Summertime, Margot has long lost her natural openness and her unmistakable receptivity: “She grew up; and as she grew up she grew stiff.” It is significant that she says to John: “Give me a minute to put on proper shoes,” right before they set off for a walk in the Karoo, a place she used to freely wander barefoot as a child. In Diary of a Bad Year, the sexist world evinces its cruelty against the feminine with Anya’s experience of sexual violence, with the ruthless way in which her embodied openness is damaged. Gang-raped by three men while on a cruise in the Caribbean with a female friend years ago, Anya is acutely aware that she has to strategize her way in a sexist world to be able to guard her primary vulnerability. Following common-sense gender stereotypes, she employs a strategy of self-sexualization and banks on her “feminine charm” when vying for financial or romantic positions in life. Often she acts like a pundit in matters of sex. “Always keep a man guessing” she writes in her diary, as if writing a sex advice column for a glossy women’s magazine. Suspecting that Señor C is just a regular man with a stash of pornography somewhere in his apartment and that his gallantry operates as a façade, hiding his sexually base motives, she notes in her diary: “My guess is he unbuttons himself when I am gone and wraps himself in my undies and closes his eyes and summons up visions of my divine behind and makes himself come.”

Amid fractured interactions of gendered selves, moments of intimacy flash, as when John in Summertime, who had learnt from his cousin Agnes to be open to the world, reenacts this gesture of openness to reconstitute a lost intimacy, which was never secure to begin with. His gesture, although having been greeted by silence, is able to evoke a recognition of what Margot had lost: “Her own special talent: meegvoel, feeling-with,” her ability to sense people’s feelings. In a sense, these gestures open gaps in Margot’s own story, the story through which she sees the world, and for an interval, she comes to

68Coetzee, Scenes from a Provincial Life, 358.
69Ibid., 383.
70Coetzee, Diary of a Bad Year, 83.
71Ibid., 37.
72Ibid., 40.
73Coetzee, Scenes from Provincial Life, 358.
see things differently, appreciating John’s deviant, oblique character: “If he makes a practice of it, of opening his heart, then he is unusual: men, in her experience, find nothing harder,” she thinks to herself.⁷⁴ In Diary of a Bad Year, Señor C’s gestures of openness affect Anya profoundly. Señor C’s revelations about himself in the second diary he gives to Anya and his graceful comportment toward Alan, who plotted day and night to exploit Señor C’s vulnerabilities, shift the keystone that supports Anya’s story of the world. After the dinner party where Alan unleashes a deluge of rage at Señor C, Anya sees him in a completely different light: “In the bright light from above, Alan’s jowls sagged. He looked at that moment like what he was: a surly, dissatisfied, half-drunk, middle-aged white Australian.”⁷⁵ Heartened by Señor C’s openness to the world and to herself, she makes an ethical decision, once Alan reveals his scheme to steal Señor C’s money, and leaves Alan, refusing to enter into an agreement to become complicit in his moral wrongdoings.

**Affective forces of minor intimacy**

Emotions, as Lauren Berlant suggests, figure prominently in the aesthetics of minor intimacy. Furnished with the energy of generating aesthetics of attachment, they offset the dynamics of distance and proximity, openness and reserve, immediacy and mediation playing out between self and other. Which emotions draw the self and the other closer in Coetzee’s autobiographical fiction? Where does the affective energy of attachment come from in minor intimacies? And how are these emotions different than those driving normative intimacies?

To address these questions, it is necessary to think more carefully about the contrast between normative and minor intimacies. The foundational emotion that animates normative intimacies is erotic love. In its classical sense, Platonic Eros encompasses a desire for closeness, a consuming yearning for bonding, a passion for possessing, and ultimately a search for oneness.⁷⁶ An affective force that propels bodily intensities of verve and vigor, a force that enlivens the body, erotic desire operates as a vital emotion: a life-affirming force that animates, mobilizes, and generates. Through erotic desire, the couple comes alive in society, assumes a life worth living; a life sustained and protected collectively through marriage and family law, and spaces of domesticity. The couple is assumed to possess a creative power, namely, the capability to generate a new life through reproductive sex. To the extent that fertility and generational extension allow them to maintain an inner sense of continuity, the couple, at the level of the symbolic order, establishes a tie to the future and in a sense even enjoys the possibility of immortality.

The vitalism underlying heteronormative intimacies favors the idea of becoming over being, movement over stillness, vigor over vulnerability. Neglected in this understanding are the limits of the human, a fact that vitalists refuse to acknowledge. Coetzee’s writing, in contrast, posits a conceptualization of the body outside of vitalism, pondering a body that adumbrates mortality and vulnerability.

⁷⁴Ibid., 361.
⁷⁵Coetzee, Diary of a Bad Year, 218.
⁷⁶For a concise discussion of three types of love, corresponding to the Greek concepts of eros, philia, and agape, see Comte-Sponville, Small Treatise on the Great Virtues, 222–290.
Vulnerable bodies, bodies composed of affections and orientations that echo the precariousness of life, impress the encounter of self and other in distinct ways. Consider John and Señor C, neither of whom attempts to possess or approximate the other, but who maintain a quiet distance, treasuring a contemplative participation in the beautiful. Their encounters with the other are marked by a distinct melancholy. Melancholy is what Señor C feels in *Diary of a Bad Year* when he for the first time sees Anya in the laundry room:

As I watched her, an ache, a metaphysical ache, crept over me that I did nothing to stem. And in an intuitive way she knew about it, knew that in the old man in the plastic chair in the corner there was something personal going on, something to do with age and regret and the tears of things. Which she did not particularly like, did not want to evoke, though it was a tribute to her, to her beauty and freshness as well as to the shortness of her dress. 

Later in the book, Señor C again mentions the ache “of a metaphysical or at least post-physical kind.” Induced by Anya’s alluring presence, the ache has to do with Señor C.’s aging, physical frailty, and sexual decay, but it also has to do with something more existential, something about “the tears of things.” This ache mixes with the feeling that moves John in *Summertime* and the older baboons Eugène Marais observed in the Karoo. In all these instances, melancholy is evoked by the sight of something beautiful and marked by a sense of loss: both John as well as Señor C nurture a pensive melancholy about loss and corporeal freight; the sight of Anya fills Señor C with melancholy, while the sunset awakens the melancholy in the older baboon. This is also what the Karoo does to John: moves him into melancholy’s hold.

Unlike desire, melancholy is not a vitalist emotion, but is rather part of the human vulnerability that Coetzee explores. It lacks the vigor and vital energies of life that erotic love affirms. As such, melancholy is in close resonance with loss, generating only tenuous bonds that do not allow John, in *Summertime*, to establish a tie to the future, let alone to immortality. Nevertheless, melancholy bears a specific mode of appraisal, one of an affective kind, and implies a particular way of being in the world, a pensive way of being attuned to the reality of one’s life in the world. As for John, the melancholy reminds him of the epistemological certainty about the impermanence of life: “Just one life and then never again. Never, never, never,” he says, elucidating his melancholic awareness of mortality. 

In fact, both in *Summertime* and *Diary of a Bad Year*, melancholic modalities arise not only in response to an actual loss, but also to human vulnerability to loss. John, in *Summertime*, a man in his mid-thirties, faces his father’s aging and physical decay, a fact that contributes strongly to an awareness of his own finitude. No longer able to deny death like he used to when he was a child, he

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77 For an alternative interpretation of melancholy in relation to temporality in *Scenes from Provincial Life*, see Van der Vlies, *Present Imperfect*, 51–74.
78 Coetzee, *Diary of a Bad Year*, 7.
79 Ibid., 13.
80 Ibid., 7. This passage in which Señor C gazes at Anya makes pointed allusions to Virgil’s Aeneid. In Book I of Aeneid, Aeneas, upon seeing the illustrations of the Trojan War, says “There are tears for things and mortal sorrows touch the heart.” Virgil, Aeneid, 462.
81 Coetzee, *Scenes from Provincial Life*, 361.
acknowledges his mortality with unbridled awareness and attunes to his ephemeral existence through melancholy.82

The Karoo, through the absence of everything which might pronounce life and vigor, unfurls an immense capacity to elicit melancholy, while, at the same time, communicating the entire emotional burden John has to bear. An arid land that barely sustains life, the Karoo as an affective landscape invites one to contemplate death, futurelessness, and loss. In fact, the image of the Karoo as a dry, barren, and inexpressive landscape connects in many ways to the different layers of loss and non-belonging articulated in Coetzee’s writing. To elaborate these dimensions, I juxtapose the image of the Karoo with that of the ocean. It is interesting to contemplate how little ocean imagery there is in Coetzee’s writing. Rather, the ocean is characterized by its conspicuous absence. By contrast, in the Cape Peninsula, the ocean’s physical presence is so strong, vast, and sublime that it imposes itself, even if one does not want to be aware of it. This makes the absence of the ocean more noticeable than any presence, and calls for analysis to illuminate the meaning of this absence.

The ocean has been an ideologically significant landscape in Western liberal consciousness.83 In the nineteenth century, when the ocean found its aesthetic expression in European culture, with the image appearing profusely in art, literature and music, it was apparently associated with the representations of sublimity as an aesthetic category.84 The image of the ocean was, at the same time, inscribed by colonial fantasies and racialized desires, as scholars Sara Suleri and Laura Doyle pointed out.85 Furthermore, the ocean’s obscurity, vastness, and magnificence, scholars argue, cannot be easily separated from masculinist colonialist aspirations: a heroic adventure in which masculine capacities are tested, a desire to conquer a new land, to a hope for an awe-inspiring life.86 In Coetzee’s lifetime, however, the history that colonialism has told us seems to have less to do with the sublime and more to do with the destructive ways in which colonial endeavors generate failure, loss, and ongoing processes of ruination. This shift means that post-colonial cultural production may require different conceptual frameworks, repertoires of images, and affective vocabularies. The ocean as an ideological and aesthetic category recedes from Western liberal consciousness, while the Karoo, an affective landscape in J. M. Coetzee’s writing, becomes a purveyor of people’s changing relation to physical landscape in the aftermath of colonial failures that have left European descendants with an uneasy awareness that the lands belonged not to them but to their original owners.87 Soberly materializing the failure of the colonial project, the Karoo, at

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82In my reliance on the concept of midpoint of life, when arguing for John’s awareness of his own infinitude, I implicitly reference psychoanalyst Elliott Jacques view of the midlife crisis. In Jacques’ view, mid-life crisis occurs around the age of 35 and is triggered by a profound recognition of one’s own inevitable death. While the early adulthood psychology is based on the unconscious denial of one’s own mortality, the conscious encounter with one’s inevitable, personal death, that is the midlife crisis, leads to a more mature phase of adulthood. In his famous 1965 article, Jacques, drawing on Beethoven, Dickens, Balzac, Dante and examining the changes their work, in terms of style and themes, in the early and mature adulthood, shows how the lyrical content first gives way to a tragic, philosophical content, which is followed by a serenity of mature content, as these artists work their conscious encounter with mortality. Elliot, “Death and the Mid-Life Crisis,” 502–514.

83For a discussion of ocean in the western consciousness in modern era, see, Alain Corbin, The Lure of the Sea.

84See, Hitt, “Toward an Ecological Sublime.”

85See for example, Suleri, The Rhetoric of English India and Doyle, “The Racial Sublime.”

86See for example, Freeman, The Feminine Sublime and Yaeger, “Toward a Female Sublime.”

87In White Writing, Coetzee identifies an anti-pastoral strand in late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century literature in South Africa, which he calls “the literature of empty landscape.” The arid landscape in South Africa depicted in this literature alludes to the failure of the colonial project: “a failure to imagine a peopled landscape, an inability to conceive a society in South Africa in which there is a place for the self” (9).
the same time, acts as a repository of melancholy, longing, and shame, exerting an affective force on the descendants of colonizers and confounding the established understandings of belonging. In Summertime, the questions Margot poses concerning their own place in the Karoo reflect her raw experience of failure and futility:

What are we doing in this barren part of the world? Why are we spending our lives in dreary toil if it was never meant that people should live here, if the whole project of humanizing the place was misconceived from the start? This part of the world. The part she means is not Merweville or Calvinia but the whole Karoo, perhaps the whole country.\(^{88}\)

J. M. Coetzee’s autobiographical fiction, in disclosing the psychic workings of power in the aftermath of colonial failure, renders oceanic imagery extraneous, not just as an aesthetic category, but also as an affective experience. Like any landscape, the ocean is suffused with affects and able to elicit particular emotions such as oceanic feeling, which seems to be omitted in J. M. Coetzee’s writing. Oceanic feeling, which first emerged in personal correspondence between Romain Rolland and Freud, is designed to capture a fleeting but profound emotional state aroused by the ocean, closely resembling a mystical feeling of eternity, a feeling of unlimitedness and unboundedness.\(^{89}\) The volatile and vast waters of the ocean that instill a particular feeling of being in the world and a sense of self permanently bonded with the universe and transcending all limitations, cast oceanic feeling as an affective trope of the sublime. The self, affected by oceanic feeling, merges with the world, feels expansive and even limitless in the experience of the sublime. This sense of self stands in stark contrast with that in Coetzee’s writing, where the self is vulnerable, prone to loss, painfully aware of its limitations. John, in Summertime, tunes into his ultimate limit, his finitude, and is overwhelmed by a particular type of melancholy, a Karoo feeling, stirred by his perception that the Karoo has never been a place for him to inhabit. His colleague Martin’s remark on white presence in South Africa conveys poignantly John’s sense of being in the world, marked by the impossibility of belonging:

Our presence was grounded in a crime, namely colonial conquest, perpetuated by apartheid. Whatever the opposite is of native or rooted, that was what we felt ourselves to be. We thought of ourselves as sojourners, temporary residents, and to that extent without a home, without a homeland.\(^{90}\)

The affective repertoire of water, to be sure, is generally larger and much more varied than oceanic feeling represents. Freud, for instance, notably invoked the hydraulic view to analyze the inner workings of desire, which he modeled on the dynamics of water, its vigor and energy when confronted with any pressure and its capacity to overcome restrictions.\(^{91}\) The absence of water, in this regard, speaks to a general tendency within Coetzee’s writing concerned with exploring the ways to defuse desire as well as the modes of attachment it generates. Desire,

\(^{88}\) Coetzee, Scenes from Provincial Life, 392.

\(^{89}\) The term first emerged in correspondence between Freud and Romain Rolland, which Freud later quoted in Civilization and its Discontents. It was Rolland who experienced oceanic feeling and argued that the term suggests insights into the metaphysical nature of the self-world relationship. Freud, however, analyzed oceanic feeling in terms of primary narcissism and saw it as a residue of a pre-Oedipal stage of ego development. Freud, Civilization and its Discontents, 11–20.

\(^{90}\) Coetzee, Scenes from Provincial Life, 442.

\(^{91}\) See Goebel, Beyond Discontent, 110–124. Goebel points out the ways in which Freud relies on a hydraulic view to conceptualize the sublime.
generative of conventional belongings and attachments, seems to fade away in view of melancholy, giving way to minor attachments. An affective intensity that neither animates nor mobilizes melancholy nevertheless enables the self to let go. With the wistful awareness it confers, one comes to understand that there is no point in clutching or clinging and relaxes its grip. It is with melancholy that John recognizes the impossibility of belonging to the land and asks Margot: “What future do I have in this country, where I have never fitted in? Perhaps a clean break would have been better after all. Cut yourself free of what you love and hope that the wound heals.”

It is also through melancholy that John is able to relinquish the illusion of the invulnerable self, and as Being-unto-Death acknowledges his own frailty and vulnerability. In fact, melancholy, evoked by the awareness of death, leaves an indelible mark on self-consciousness, on the defenses that have long helped the ego ward off the reality of finitude, becoming finally penetrable. Such a profound change in egoic consciousness might also alter one’s mode of being with the other. The self no longer defending its own boundaries fiercely, the self, accepting its own precariousness and capable of understanding the vulnerability of the other, might open up to and cultivate intimacy with the other.

This is the affective energy of melancholy Coetzee’s autobiographical fiction engenders, linking the affective intensity of melancholy with the possibility of intimacy. In *Diary of a Bad Year*, melancholic capacities produce the affective energies to forge intimacy between self and other. Señor C nurtures melancholy, which eventually affords him the affective energy to open up to Anya. Finally able to pull back from the feelings of invulnerability and certainty stimulated by his intellectual endeavors, he hands the second diary to Anya, where he expresses his self-doubts and unveils his innermost feelings, including those about his impending death. His gesture of openness is greeted by kindness. Anya’s decision to be the company Señor C seeks for his death, her gesture of attachment, seals their intimacy. For the occasion, she notes in her diary:

All that I will promise him, and hold his hand tight and give him a kiss on the brow, a proper kiss, just to remind him of what he is leaving behind. Good night, Señor C, I will whisper in his ear: sweet dreams, and flights of angels, and all the rest.

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**Prologue**

In 2012, one July afternoon, I flew into Cape Town and stayed there for two months. I was 33 years old, writing my dissertation on the sociology of globalization and saleswomen in Turkey. I was also at a point in my life when I became acutely aware of the reality of my own eventual death. With this newfound awareness came a debilitating sense of urgency, forcing me to achieve immediately what I am supposed to achieve in order to immortalize my mortal life. Unable to overcome the pressure and sense of terror that the full awareness of mortality created, I took a break from writing and began to spend my days reading South African literature, taking long walks along the promenade, and watching ocean waves break on the shore. *Life & Times of Michael K* was the first...
book I read in Cape Town. Seeing me staying in and reading the book, my partner asked me what I thought of it, “It is okay” I said. It was only when I read the 13th section of the second part, the section where the doctor writes in his letter that he is the only one who sees Michael for the original soul he is, \(^95\) I found myself crying uncontrollably. Then, I pored over Coetzee’s books.

Three years later, in 2015, when I had a chance to stay for two months in Johannesburg, I had everything already planned. “If you want to understand the poet/you must go to the land of poet” says Goethe. It is with this epigraph that Coetzee opens his fictionalized autobiography, Youth. Following this advice literally, I took the Trans-Karoo express from Johannesburg to see Coetzee’s land. It was just before midnight when we passed through Kimberley, close to Modder River, that our train derailed. My plan was to see the Karoo, a place Coetzee spent parts of his childhood, poured himself into someone for the first time, contemplated his own mortality, and felt what the baboons felt when they stared out onto the Karoo at sunset. Instead, we were taken to a hospital in a minibus with our fellow Afrikaner passengers, who, on our way to hospital, sang merry songs, clapping their hands, remained oblivious to death, and treated us like family. I did not get a chance to see the Karoo, at least the parts where Coetzee spent his childhood, but it was the first time I was close with Afrikaners. It was also the first time I came so close to death. This is the autobiographical back-story against which I elaborated my ideas on the encounter of self and other, intimacy, modes of attachment, and death in Coetzee’s writing.

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\(^95\)Coetzee, *Life & Times of Michael K*, 151.
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