

## How Soon Is Now? Reading and the Postcolonial Present

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Like history, the novel is thus an exercise in making the past coherent. Like history, it explores the respective contributions of character and circumstance to forming the present. By doing so, the novel suggests how we may explore the power of the present to produce the future. That is why we have this thing, this institution, this medium called the novel.

-J. M. Coetzee, *Elizabeth Costello*

The study of postcolonial fiction must necessarily embrace and embody—and, thus, deal with—all the contradictions and complications semantically constitutive of the terms themselves. The uneasy link between temporal delimiter and associative contextualization with other critical posts- (postmodern, poststructural, posthuman, postpolitical, postnational, etc.) has proven to be a point of contention among disparate theories and theorists of postcolonial literature. Likewise, the impulse to reclaim, to re-colonize must not perpetrate oppressive appropriations that mimic the colonial practice itself. Into this debate, the term intertextuality has served as one way in which the postcolonial author “writes back,” as it were,<sup>1</sup> though I would argue that the critical usage of the term has gone largely unquestioned. This discussion attempts to demonstrate how intertextuality—as a theory of reading and the interaction with a particular text and its plurality of contexts—can provide a framework within which to situate postcolonial narratives as they function to develop not only an examination of postcoloniality, but also the politics and performative nature of the postcolonial present. At a critical juncture where binary and dialectical relationships—as fundamentally artificial constructs—between self and Other, author and reader, speaker and audience have come under

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<sup>1</sup> Two particular examples that have garnered much critical attention and discussion include, but of course are not limited to: *Foe* by J. M. Coetzee and *Wide Sargasso Sea* by Jean Rhys. While specifically intertwined with and responding to earlier novels (*Robinson Crusoe* and *Jane Eyre*, respectively), these texts have encouraged a critical move to link intertextuality, as a critical and compositional practice, with the emergence of or response to an earlier text from the colonial period within specific postcolonial works—an important and elucidating critical practice to be sure; however one that can lead toward a reductive definition of intertextuality.

heavy attack from theorists both inside and outside of the postcolonial debate, an intertextual approach to reading in the postcolonial present affords writers and readers the fictional space both to respond to the highly charged politics of the present and to challenge any essentializing discourse attempting to pin down either the author or the work in a comfortable and unquestioned act of interpretation.

As a point of analytical departure, intertextuality appears very much aligned with the political and ethical imperatives of postcolonial critique, though we perhaps should qualify the way in which we conceptualize the term. Beginning with a brief detour through the semantic history of intertextuality as a term in the literary critical lexicon, this essay then discusses the ways in which a nuanced understanding of intertextuality responds to the project of postcolonial critique broadly defined. By highlighting some of the disparate deployments of the term “intertextuality” in critical conversations, the import of qualifying the usage of the term comes forth. In understanding the intertextual engagement between and among texts, across both cultures and time, as something other than a hermetic set of references that the reader must effectively trace out and navigate, we begin to see how an intertextual engagement need not necessarily require anything like reader competency or literary detective skills in order for a reader to “get it.” Even more divisive than the question of just who has access to the education necessary to pinpoint the multitude of references and resonances which characterize any piece of literature, the question of the right to interpretation becomes bound up with a history of cultural imperialism that an engaged postcolonial criticism should remain wary of repeating or downplaying.

#### *Location: “Terms” of the Argument*

Since Julia Kristeva’s coinage of the term in her essay “The Bounded Text” (1960), the word *intertextualite* has entered into the lexicon of literary criticism—and, much like the theory it espouses would suggest—has emerged neither unscathed nor completely unaltered. From Kristeva’s reading of M. M. Bakhtin to Roland Barthes’s influential essay “From Work to Text,” the term intertextuality received much critical attention initially in the French journal *Tel Quel* during the 1960s, a journal in which certain poststructuralist critiques found their first programmatic expression. However, the term, as originally employed by Kristeva, has served different meanings and critical uses when idiomatically employed by other theorists and literary critics. For example, the use of “intertextuality” has proven essential to more structuralist approaches to textual theory, including the works of Gérard Genette and Michael Riffaterre, which rely on models that assume a basic literary competence for readers of literature to effectively interpret and make sense of the text.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Riffaterre and Genette differ slightly on their interpretation of how intertextuality functions within texts, though both argue for the merits of a structuralist critique.

To this list we can also add the American poststructuralist critic Harold Bloom, who subscribes to a method of critical reading much akin to the idea of intertextuality with the working theory of poetry and poetical composition put forth in *The Anxiety of Influence*. Sharply divergent from Kristeva's initial use of the term, such critics have nonetheless adopted "intertextuality" to describe the relationship not only between texts, but also between readers and texts. Though the term "intertextuality" may emerge in a variety of critical works and theories of literature, the working definition vacillates greatly between different critics and critical applications.<sup>3</sup>

Arguably, for reading and writing in a postcolonial setting, Kristeva's version of intertextuality proves the most instructive in revealing the intricacies of composing (self)referential fiction and likewise adopting a political stance as postcolonial author. However, the nature of intertextuality and its potentiality for Kristeva deserves a somewhat thorough discussion before proceeding with any application of her theory, in order to set it apart from other theoretical methodologies sharing the same terminology. As Mary Orr notes, "Hence, because the more concerted theorization of intertextuality by a Barthes, Riffaterre or Genette brought the critical rigour her original work was deemed to lack, French critical guides eclipse Kristeva's version and concentrate on theirs" (23). However, as Orr intimates, such a collapsing of theoretical work under the blanket term of "intertextuality" seriously risks overshadowing the unique critical and political position offered by Kristeva's theorizing. Tracing Kristeva's critical position from her initial work on Bakhtin, this essay attempts to situate Kristeva's work within the larger debate over intertextuality—suggesting that her unique critical position has productive implications for studying literature, specifically works emerging from a postcolonial context.<sup>4</sup>

Owing largely to her influential work translating and introducing the work of M. M. Bakhtin to the French intellectual scene of the 1960s,

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Genette's work relies upon the actual presence of the inter-text, as a traceable or identifiable text appearing within the body of the text under analysis. Though Genette does not propose a solution to a "missing" inter-text, Riffaterre argues that such an inter-text can be "imagined" by the reader to fill in the necessary gaps, if the reader proves competent in her or his interpretive ability. See Riffaterre, *Fictional Truth* and Genette, *Narrative Discourse* for a detailed discussion of these points.

<sup>3</sup> For an overview of intertextuality and its history within the critical idiom, see Graham Allen's *Intertextuality* (2000). Also, for a thorough discussion of the politically charged debates over the effectiveness of intertextuality as a tool for critical discussions of literature, see Mary Orr's *Intertextuality: Debates and Contexts* (2003). Both texts detail the historical and contextual uses of intertextuality as a critical tool; however, Orr's book assumes a readership more conversant in the lexicon of literary criticism and surveys a much larger breadth of critics and critical methodologies.

<sup>4</sup> Though I am not suggesting that postcolonial literature is in some way unique in its treatment of intertextuality, I would argue that the political implications of a formalist/structuralist notion of intertextuality comes to the fore in writing and criticism committed to a politics of postcoloniality.

Kristeva's theory of intertextuality derives much from the Russian critic's theories of dialogism and heteroglossia as they function within the space of the novel. In his essay "Discourse in the Novel," Bakhtin describes the textual mechanisms functioning within the novel, which separate the novel from other genres, creating a textual space within which an author can develop an open-ended discourse:

The prose artist elevates the social heteroglossia surrounding objects into an image that has finished contours, an image completely shot through with dialogical overtones; he creates artistically calculated nuances on all the fundamental voices and tones of this heteroglossia. (278-79)

With the incorporation of heteroglossia within the space of the novel, Bakhtin argues that such multi-voiced discourse develops a type of linguistic and epistemological space that most accurately captures the nature of "living discourse," a type of discourse that sets the novel apart from its epic precursor.<sup>5</sup> Although, for Bakhtin "every literary work faces outward away from itself, toward the listener-reader, and to a certain extent thus anticipates possible reactions to itself" ("Forms of Time" 257), he nonetheless provides for a certain indeterminacy in the reception and interpretation of a given work by an essentially polyglot readership; and, for Kristeva, this indeterminacy opens up a space in which the novel can function as a viable vessel for critique and the representation of social reality.

In an interview, Kristeva clearly spells out her indebtedness to Bakhtin's theories of the novel and discourse, though she insists upon a fundamental difference in her approach to a theory of intertextuality. In response to the question of Bakhtin's influence upon her work, Kristeva states,

I see the following differences. In the first place, there is the recognition that a textual segment, sentence, utterance, or paragraph is not simply the intersection of two voices in direct or indirect discourse [i.e. dialogism *en sensu stricto*]; rather, the segment is the result of the intersection of a number of voices, of a number of textual interventions, which are combined in the semantic field...So there is the idea of this plurality of phonic, syntactic and semantic participation. (*Interviews* 189)

Though Kristeva insists upon a more pluralistic understanding of the disparate voices and discourses incorporated within the space of the novel, the influence of Bakhtin permeates her critique, providing a theoretical basis from which to expand. Mary Orr notes the following in her discussion of Bakhtin's influence upon Kristeva's use of intertextuality: "It is from such [Bakhtinian] 'double-voiced' critical dialogue that

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<sup>5</sup> For a thorough discussion of Bakhtin's distinction between the novel and other genres of fiction, see his essay "Epic and the Novel," collected within *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays*. As opposed to the "closed time" of epic, Bakhtin posits the temporality of the novel—the present. Bakhtin writes, "Therefore, when the present becomes the center of human orientation in time and in the world, time and world lose their completedness as a whole as well as in each of their parts" (30).

Kristeva's essay takes its cue so that her own translingual project can be integrated within the French intellectual climate of left-wing *Tel Quel*" (27). Indeed, though Kristeva's use of intertextuality expands upon the terms set forth by Bakhtin and his theories of heteroglossia and dialogism, the use of intertextuality, for Kristeva, sets forth a relatively unambiguous critical position from which she can observe and detail the mechanisms by which novels, prose and poetry do not emerge devoid of context and historical association and associative meaning.

Kristeva first sets forth the terms of the debate over intertextuality within the essays collected in her 1960 work, *Desire in Language: A Semiotic Approach to Literature and Art*. Though not translated into English until the 1980s, Kristeva's work first rigorously employed the term "intertextuality" to denote a fundamental aspect of any understanding of the manner in which poetic discourse achieves significance, signification and/or *signifiance*.<sup>6</sup> In her essay, "The Bounded Text," Kristeva explains how intertextuality affects the production of meaning in any textual encounter:

The text is therefore a productivity, and this means: first, that its relationship to the language in which it is situated is redistributive (destructive – constructive), and hence can be better approached through logical categories rather than linguistic ones; and second, that it is a permutation of texts, an intertextuality: in the space of a given text, several utterances, taken from other texts, intersect and neutralize one another. (*Desire in Language* 36)

The model of the text as "productivity" remains central to Kristeva's critical work, and intertextuality provides her the space and critical tools necessary to explore the nature and directionality of such productivity. In arguing that such productivity "can be better approached through logical categories rather than linguistic ones," Kristeva wishes to debunk formalist interpretations which argue that the reader can interpret any text from an informed analysis of the particular programmatic arrangement of individual linguistic components. Within the same essay, Kristeva develops her concept of the ideologeme, which she defines as

the intersection of a given textual arrangement [...] with the utterances [...] that it either assimilates into its own space or which it refers in the space of exterior texts. The ideologeme is that intertextual function read as "materialized" at the different structural levels of each text[...]giving it its historical and social coordinates. (36)

Understanding the ideologeme along the lines of intertextuality and the relationship between texts, Kristeva's model of textuality allows for a multidirectional space for discourse and meaning formation, which does not make overt claims for definitive meaning. The ideologeme, a textual fragment symptomatically expressive of the social/ideological context of its formulation, retains an essential, though not necessarily unproblematic,

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<sup>6</sup> A Kristevan neologism, *signifiance* refers to the contingent act of meaning creation that occurs in the negotiation between the realms of the symbolic and the semiotic.

relation to the larger social and cultural context. Essential to the larger claims of this study, intertextuality, for Kristeva, affords the text the ability to remain connected—even if arbitrarily—to the larger historical and social contexts in which it comes into production and/or interacts with its readership. Though contextual connections must retain a certain level of arbitrariness, this does not necessarily preclude the formation of meaningful relationships between texts and the circumstances of their production.

Combining psychoanalytic theory and textual scholarship, Kristeva's version of intertextuality orients and describes the split position from which the subject speaks. As Graham Allen notes, "Kristeva's work places a psychological dimension onto Bakhtin's analysis of double-voiced discourse, dialogism, heteroglossia and [hybridity]" (52). Focusing on language through the process of semianalysis, Kristeva expands upon the Bakhtinian concept of dialogism, as she explores the manner by which the subject of speaking and writing remains simultaneously constructed by previous discourses. Such an exploration opens a potential space in the present for enunciation and the resulting passage from sign system to sign system. Outlining the import of intertextuality as an essential aspect of both subjectivity and the mechanisms of subject drive, Kristeva notes,

What we discover, then, within this texture, is the function of the subject caught between instinctual drives and social practice within a language that is today divided into often incommunicable, multiple systems: a Tower of Babel that literature specifically breaks open, refashions, and inscribes in a new series of perceptual contradictions. (97)

In this manner, the speaking, writing and reading subject constructs conceptions of identity from what has come before, as per the nature of language, where "subjects cipher the normative language of everyday communication by means of extralinguistic, biological, and socially unforeseeable, changing codes" (100). Run-through with infinite possibility and recombinatory power, intersubjectivity—just like literature in general—remains a fundamentally intertextual experience for Kristeva's purposes.

Another underlying aspect of Kristeva's development of a theory of intertextuality includes its necessary embeddedness in and connection to the larger social and cultural context. And, for the purposes of reading postcolonial literature within an intertextual framework, such an embeddedness and connection affords the space by which an author can forge a discourse out of disparate textual fragments, polymorphous cultural contexts and circling heteroglossia. To the Freudian/Lacanian analysis of metaphor and metonymy, Kristeva argues for a "third 'process'—the passage from one sign system to another" (*Revolution* 59), which adds a decidedly psychoanalytic dimension to her poststructuralist critique. Such a process "invokes an altering of thethetic position—the destruction of the old position and the formation of a new one. The new signifying system may be produced with the same signifying material; in

language, for example, the passage may be made from narrative to text” (59). This process of transposition, which for Kristeva occurs explicitly within an intertextual framework, takes place initially in the location of writing, the space where the writer puts down to paper words in a particular order, in the formation of the text. As such, the intertextual network within a novel represents the “redistribution of several different sign systems” (59), which then enter into their own unforeseen and somewhat unpredictable interactions without losing their grounding within the textual network and, therefore, the connection to the larger social and cultural context. Precisely at this point, for Kristeva’s reading, intertextuality allows writing and discourse to evolve and shift their positions in response to the interaction between texts and contexts, leaving a space in the enunciative, writing and, ultimately, reading *present* for the forging of subjectivity in literature.

Kristeva’s use of intertextuality, however, does not receive full explication if simply understood “in the banal sense of ‘study of sources’” (*Revolution* 60). It follows then that we can view her terminological move to define transposition as the passage from one signifying system to another, which takes place in a more complicated and involved series of textual interactions, as an attempt to complicate a more straightforward definition. Transposition takes into account the intertextual situatedness of both the textual artefact, specifically, and the condition of intersubjectivity, in general. No passage from discourse to discourse or sign system to sign system occurs without experiencing resistance with what has come before, and reshaping the objects of resistance encountered during the passing. Wherever discourses and sign systems intersect, interact and intersperse, Kristeva locates the present of the intertextual condition, the place from which literary analysis must take place. Much like Bhabha’s argument for the “location of culture,” Kristeva understands the creation of meaning at the interstices of textual composition, which provides an in-between place for both author and reader to create and develop nuances of meaning—meaning that remains malleable in regard to cultural contextualization, falling outside the confines of any essentializing discourse (*Desire in Language* 51-55). In pointing to the significance of qualifying the critical deployment of intertextuality in postcolonial studies, I want to first consider some of the ways in which Kristevan intertextuality responds to certain core concerns of postcolonial criticism. In sum, I suggest that Kristevan intertextuality provides critical tools very much aligned with Bhabha’s promulgation of the third space and the performative present.

*Temporality:* How soon is now?

In the Winter 2004 volume of *Critical Inquiry*, members of the journal’s editorial board address the current state of critical theory and what the future might hold for critical studies. Bhabha recounts an exchange with a

student quite willing to challenge the critical foundations of postcolonial studies:

And then, she strode away, she fixed me with a stare and threw me a rather ungainly sentence that, for a tense minute, I thought I had written myself: “[Global] power has evacuated the [binary] bastion [that you postmodernists and postcolonialists] are attacking...in the name of difference.” (“Statement” 343)

Such a critique of postcolonial criticism and theory, as the student questions the efficacy of insisting on positions of difference to establish identity and subjectivity, has challenged any reading of postcoloniality based upon fixed and ever-present binaries. The export of multinational political and economic discourses via the language of cultural production has unquestionably impacted the position of postcolonial critiques, as highlighted, albeit by different means, in Hardt and Negri’s *Empire* and Jameson’s *Postmodernism: Or the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*. As Hardt and Negri specifically implicate the participatory nature of postcolonial criticism/cultural production in the solidification of Empire, they contend that such critical positions address and attempt to challenge the outdated—and effectively impotent—enemy of early stage imperialism and colonization; Jameson takes the critique one step further, arguing that an essential feature of the multinational capitalist world includes the impossibility of establishing any significant critical distance by which to separate cultural discourses from their all-inclusive postmodernist context.<sup>7</sup> Yet, Bhabha argues that postcolonial studies may still hold an important place in contemporary critical discourse. Bhabha returns to the initial issue raised by the student, in order to highlight his argument that postcolonial studies can offer an *intertextual* approach, which remains effective in criticizing emergent discourses of globalization:

The discourses of cultural globalization have become a major intertextual and interdisciplinary highway between the humanities and the social sciences; and the traffic of ideas and methods that passes between them shapes much of your thinking in the arts and humanities. (345)

Bhabha finds critical theory, and postcolonial criticism specifically, especially adept at highlighting the intricacies of such an “intertextual and interdisciplinary highway,” as he argues for the relevance of such a critical position. Yet, the project of discourse analysis that Bhabha alludes to does not hinge on an accoutrement of reader competency, but rather appears to function productively in meaning formation and negotiation in a manner whereby the terms of the intertextual engagement remain far from settled at the outset.

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<sup>7</sup> The discussions alluded to above can be found in Ch. 2, “Culture,” of Jameson’s *Postmodernism: Or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* and “Symptoms of Passage” in Hardt and Negri’s *Empire*.



As fully articulated in his work *The Location of Culture*, Bhabha's conception of the postcolonial critical position depends upon the temporal situation of such a critique. According to Bhabha, the "terms of cultural engagement, whether antagonistic or affiliative, are produced performatively" (2). As per the nature of performance, the space of interaction between cultures, and thus the position of the postcolonial critic, depends upon the temporality of the present. Bhabha details the engagement of the postcolonial critic, as he notes, "the critic must attempt to fully realize, and take responsibility for, the unspoken, unrepresented pasts that haunt the historical present" (12). The space of the historical present, for Bhabha, not only facilitates the interstitial location of engagement between disparate cultures and/or cultural discourses, but also represents a politically charged situation, whereby "the representation of the political, on the construction of discourse, is the radical contribution of the translation of theory" (27). Here, at this stage of translation—Bhabha's "location of culture"—discourses interact with and combat one another over the formation of meaning in the critical present. In a theoretical move resembling Kristeva's use of the "third process," Bhabha argues that the hybridity of cultural discourse gains fullest expression in what he terms the "third space," which, importantly, must "have a colonial or postcolonial provenance" (38). If we look to the theoretical linguistic work of J. L. Austin—and even its later expansion and elaboration by philosopher John Searle—this performative utterance can function conventionally, yet bring about results in an unconventional manner, a speech act that blurs a strict understanding of intentionality.<sup>8</sup> Though Judith Butler notes that this form of performative utterance "suggests that the words and the things done are in no sense the same," a form of "linguistic immanence" (44), the undecidability of the cultural and/or critical encounter does seem to offer a libratory potential for writing and reading in a postcolonial context. While working within the logic of a performative theory insistent on the temporality of the present, we must, of course, remain wary about its concomitant effect: the potential for denying the postcolonial subject access to history and agency in an undefined future. However, Kristevan intertextuality provides a way to preserve the potentiality of the present without disavowing a violent and exploitative colonial past.

In fact, Bhabha's insistence upon the present as the temporality of postcolonial critique retains many similarities with a Kristevan conception of intertextuality: both rely upon the interaction between not only text and context, but also the numerous ideologemes located within a particular sample of writing, which retain a grounding in both the social and cultural space and synchronic situatedness of the text. Bhabha writes,

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<sup>8</sup> Austin refers to this specific performative utterance as a perlocutionary act, which provides a middle path between acts strictly classifiable as either felicitous or infelicitous in a strict illocutionary framework. See J. L. Austin, *How To Do Things With Words*, 2<sup>nd</sup> Ed., Eds. J. O. Urmson and Marina Sbisa, Cambridge: Harvard UP, 2005.

The production of meaning requires that these two places [I and You] be mobilized in the passage through a Third Space, which represents both the general conditions of language and the specific implication of the utterance in a performative and institutional strategy of which it cannot 'in itself' be conscious. (36)

Far from a static situation, the nature of the performative present opens up unforeseen potentialities for the creation of meaning, as discourses interact; writers mix words; readers interpret meaning. As J. Hillis Miller notes, "A performative utterance...is a way of doing things with words. It does not name a state of affairs, but brings about the thing it names" (37). In much this way, the performative potentiality of the present affords a viable space for critique, as any contest over meaning and/or signification remains far from decided at the point of utterance. As Miller rightly argues, "the imaginary realm opened by a literary word is not simply 'made available' to the reader, however. The performative dimension of the work's words demands a response from the reader" (38). Here, in the postcolonial present, texts and discourses intersect and intersperse, freeing up any inherent ideological underpinnings and recombining in unpredictable and potentially politically liberating manners. As a theory of textuality and subjectivity, Kristevan intertextuality addresses such liberative concerns of the postcolonial critique and its continual attempt to level any essentializing discourse insisting upon the arbitrary boundaries between Self and Other. Bakhtinian dialogism, which greatly informs Kristeva's work and theorizing, discusses in detail the malleability of discourse within the novel, as it retains an important openendedness. In his essay "The Epic and the Novel," Bakhtin notes the interplay between levels of heteroglossia as manifested in differing genres:

[Genres] become more free and flexible, their language renews itself by incorporating extraliterary heteroglossia and the "novelistic" layers of literary language, they become diaologized, permeated with laughter, irony, humor, elements of self-parody and finally [...] the novel inserts into these other genres an indeterminacy, a certain semantic openendedness, a living contact with unfinished, still-evolving contemporary reality (the openended present). (7)

Bakhtin's argument for the "semantic openendedness" of the dialogical present provides Kristeva with a basic theory of textuality, or how texts function in the production of meaning. While Bakhtin focuses primarily upon specifically textual encounters, Kristeva inclusively incorporates portions of his work on genre into her own conception of how intertextuality functions to create meaning in all texts, not simply novelistic discourses. In concluding her assessment of Kristeva's contributions to theories of intertextuality, Mary Orr argues, "Intertextuality, then, shows a tenacity for the critical present, but also hints of a strong survival rate, proved through textual time, but in different guises" (59). Such "tenacity for the critical present" does not preclude discussions of history and/or historical context, however. For Kristeva, and arguably for the purposes of reading and interrogating the potentiality

of postcolonial literature, intertextuality functions significantly within a particular text, as it allows for the interpretation of meaning (a meaning grounded in its historical context), the relationship between word and world.

*Context: The Word in the World*

For certain theorists and critics, including Roland Barthes and Jacques Derrida, the openendedness of intertextuality simply highlights the radical uncertainty at the heart of any text; the indeterminate interplay between words and texts; the production of infinite meaning; the insurmountable distance between text and context.<sup>9</sup> However, Kristeva's interpretation of intertextuality highlights her unwillingness to totally divorce text from context, as both interact in the production of meaning in the space of the critical present. In an interview, Kristeva clearly outlines her position with respect to Roland Barthes's radical critique, as Barthes would argue for a permanent and fundamentally impassable disjunct between text and sociohistorical context.<sup>10</sup> Kristeva, while she demonstrates some agreement with Barthes's work, does wish to qualify such affinities between their respective critical positions:

I have already tried to answer this aporia posed by Barthes with the idea of intertextuality. Because I think, on the one hand, that we must maintain the autonomy of discourse with respect to the social level, because it is a level of autonomy that guarantees freedom...And, if one does not keep this autonomy of discourse, one falls very quickly into a reductionism and a sociological conception where all aesthetic or personal performances are explained by the social milieu or a similar fate. (*Interviews* 53)

Continuing her discussion, Kristeva further explicates her insistence on employing intertextuality as a model for understanding the situatedness of discourse, despite the fact that such situatedness does not retain any fundamental level of stability:

This said, there is an incontestable interaction between discourse and society, and I myself would consider that the fact of taking society as a generalized text permits us to see how, for example, a literary text does not live in an autistic fashion, closed on the interior of itself, but borrows always from the discourses of the press, from oral discourses, from political discourses, and from other texts that preceded it, that provide vehicles in turn for those cultural and political texts of history. (53)

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<sup>9</sup> For exemplary discussions see Barthes's *The Pleasure of the Text* and Derrida's *Writing and Difference*.

<sup>10</sup> Barthes directly challenges the idea of filiation with his essay "The Death of the Author." In this essay, Barthes makes his point explicit: "a text's unity lies not in its origin but in its destination. Yet this destination cannot any longer be personal: the reader is without history, biography, psychology" ("The Death of the Author" 148). Such a position, which seriously challenges the import of context within his theory of intertextuality, describes one such aporia, or gap in understanding, to which Kristeva directly responds in the above cited interview.

In an undeniably political move, Kristeva argues for the use of intertextuality as not only a theory for understanding the constructedness of texts and discourse in general, but also as a method of recycling elements of social and cultural history through the transmission and incorporation of texts; yet, Barthes would wish to challenge the degree to which such constructedness exists in the first place.

Kristeva finds, in the place of the reader approaching a particular text, what she refers to as “‘a subject in process,’ which makes possible [her] attempt to articulate as precise a logic as possible between identity or unity, the challenge to this identity and even its reduction to zero” (*Interviews* 190). Here, through reader participation, the intertextual nature of all discourse influences subjectivity in the historical present, which inextricably binds the word to the larger context of the world of the reader. Literary criticism specifically—and, arguably, reading in general—has undergone numerous revamps, reformulations and retranslations following the influx of Ferdinand de Saussure’s linguistic theories in the postwar critical milieu. Though poststructuralist and deconstructionist critics have taken Saussure’s arbitrariness of the sign to develop a position insistent upon negating any meaningful relationship between the word and the world, certain aspects of Enlightenment thought have proven difficult to cast off. As Valentine Cunningham notes, “It is not so easy to rinse away logocentricity, the metaphysics of presence, the notion of a referential system: the history we all inhabit won’t allow us any real choice in the matter” (57). And, importantly for a postcolonial writing, the mechanisms of Kristevan intertextuality provide a critical framework within which to explore Cunningham’s claim. Intertextuality, as it functions in the creation of meaning and subjectivity, encourages sociohistorical and political connections between reader and text in the space of the postcolonial, historical present. In the interaction between word and world, such an engagement remains far from decided at the outset while still facilitating and relying upon a conception of the text as always already enmeshed with its historical context.

As opposed to a radical poststructuralist version of intertextuality, Kristeva’s version takes into account the power of words to interact and affect change in the real world. Discussing the interconnectedness between word and world, William H. Gass addresses the pitfalls of naïve reading: “We needn’t narrow our reading eye to such a slit, or look so literally upon the text; nevertheless, it is our world, as we most broadly perceive it, which the novel intersects, interpenetrates, and transforms” (109). In her conception of intertextuality, Kristeva, though wary like Gass of drawing unshakably concrete and unchanging connections between the space of the text and the world, nonetheless leaves room for the possibility for the word and world to interact within a particular text or, specifically, the space opened within postcolonial literature. Such a theory of intertextuality provides a meaningful location whereby the social and cultural historical past can interact with the historical present. Discussing the interaction of word and world, Bakhtin notes,

The living utterance, having taken meaning and shape at a particular historical moment in a socially specific environment, cannot fail to brush up against thousands of living dialogic threads, woven by socio-ideological consciousness around the given object of an utterance; it cannot fail to become an active participant in social dialogue. (276)

Bakhtin's metaphor of "dialogic *threads*, woven by socio-ideological consciousness" further elucidates the intermeshed and fabric-like conception of intertextuality espoused by Kristeva. The text, composed of "threads, woven by socio-ideological consciousness," comes into being in the historical present, a space that offers a location from which to compose viable critique and form socially relevant meaning.

*Coda: The "Lesson" of Elizabeth Costello*

Oddly enough, one of the most instructive examples of the potential foreclosures perpetrated by a dogmatic and competency-based intertextual modality of reading comes from a work of fiction, not literary criticism. J. M. Coetzee's *Elizabeth Costello* (2003) seemingly responds to the hermetic impulse of reference tracing that has characterized much of postcolonial literary criticism. Coetzee's *Foe* has long functioned as the example *par excellence* of writing back in the postcolonial context. Yet, we must also consider the ways in which critical concern with *Foe*'s specific relation to Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe* cuts-off other ways of reading the text, other avenues of meaning creation and reader response. As Bo Lundén notes, such metafictional and seemingly clear-cut intertextual works "express a discontent with theoretical discourse. The discontent does not have so much to do with theory (poststructuralist or any other) as such, but with the excesses of theory, with reductive tendencies of theory, and with its almost absolute privileging of the intellectual over the intuitive and the affective" (127). It is just this "privileging of the intellectual" that Coetzee challenges with *Elizabeth Costello*, most especially in the final "lesson" of the book. Sam Durrant eloquently summarizes one of the key impasses in postcolonial writing. Durrant writes, "Postcolonial narrative is thus confronted with the impossible task of finding a mode of writing that would not immediately transform the formlessness into form, a mode of writing that can bear witness to its own incapability to recover a history" (6). Such reluctance to "transform the formlessness into form" pervades this enigmatic text, perhaps most confounding the readers adept at catching its seemingly meaningful literary references.

The final "lesson" within *Elizabeth Costello*, "At the Gate," makes most explicit the degree to which previously written texts invade and inform the site of literary performance. Costello appears to find herself in some form of the beyond, but the reader never learns exactly beyond *what*. Does the reader have a record of one of Costello's dreams or perhaps one of the narrator's? Does the gate represent the barred entry point into that which comes after life, implying that Elizabeth has died? In order to pass

through the gate, Elizabeth must first present a statement of her beliefs before an imposing and inscrutable court, in what would appear to function as some form of a trial. Where has the reader encountered such a representation of the absurd, such an unsettling encounter with the impersonality of bureaucratic entities? The reader, confronting narrative details that do not necessarily depend on an understanding of another text, but nonetheless open themselves blatantly to comparison, participates actively in the process of signification in such an intertextual encounter. Here, along with the allusions piled upon allusions, the metafictional moments force the reader to notice the constructedness of such a fictional world. As the third person narrator relates, Costello at one point thinks to herself, “the whole thing put together from clichés, with not a speck of originality” (198). Who inhabits such a world? Where has the reader previously encountered such an unsettling narrative effect, whereby any sense of agency arises only to later fall to the uncontrollability, perhaps even the inhumanness of some ambivalent, external fate? Though Martin Amis pithily denounces the “half-impressions subsumed by that woolly watchword ‘Kafkaesque’ (used, nowadays, to describe a train delay or a queue in the post office)” (399), nonetheless even the suggestive title of the lesson encourages the reader to pay attention to Coetzee’s use of intertextuality in achieving such a narrative aesthetic.

In the small, unnamed and nondescript border town in which Elizabeth Costello waits before passing through the gate, every detail carries the combined weight of association and personalization, no matter how clichéd the individual elements. The engagement for Costello, and arguably for the reader as well, assumes a tailored fit, a personal experience in the face of so much impersonality. At each of her hearings before the court, Costello must attempt to convincingly deliver a statement of belief, apparently justifying not only her career as a writer, but perhaps having to account for her life in general. Costello’s first appeal does not satisfy the court, when she argues, “In my work belief is a resistance, an obstacle. I try to empty myself of resistances” (200). Though she argues for the necessity of impersonality and unbiased representation as the prequalification to a career as a writer, such an answer proves unacceptable and the court encourages her to rewrite her statement and return only after having done so. When the court asks her to comment upon her own humanity and how it relates to writing, Costello responds, “On my own humanity? Is that of consequence? What I offer to those who read me, what I contribute to their humanity, outweighs, I would hope, my own emptiness in that respect” (201). Further, Costello argues against the ascendancy the court places on such a notion of belief, continuing to attempt to divorce herself and her work from such contextual ties. Costello concludes her statement by noting, “Let me add, for your edification: beliefs are not the only ethical supports we have. We can rely on our hearts as well. That is all. I have nothing more to say” (203). Yet, Costello does not gain admittance to what lies behind the gate, as her ability to persuade the court fails and the possibility of some form of escape or

transcendence remains deferred indefinitely. The reader, continually taking note not only of Costello's arguments, but also of the textual framework in which they appear, attempts to draw upon the intertextual clues circulating throughout the chapter, as the overt textual mechanics of the narrative give no direct clues as to how to achieve some semblance of resolution.

At this juncture, Costello begins once again to take more explicit notice of her surroundings in her attempt to situate herself within the present through an opening of dialogue with past experience. Costello observes the following, as the narrator provides access to Costello's interior monologue:

Exactly, she thinks to herself, what one would expect in an obscure Italian or Austro-Italian border town in the year 1912. Out of a book, just as the bunkhouse with its straw mattresses and forty-watt bulb is out of a book, and the whole courtroom business too, down to the dozy bailiff. (206)

The literary allusions mount, not just for the reader, but also for Elizabeth Costello, and appear to influence the dynamics of her subjectivity as character. Do the increasingly overt intertextual references provide essential information necessary for the reader to uncover and interpret the *meaning* of such an unsettling text? And, indeed, unsettling appears an apt description of the effect achieved both inside and outside of the text, as Costello asks herself, "why does the simulation fail so consistently, not just by a hair's breath—one could forgive that—but by a hand's breath?" (206). Again, Coetzee provides no answer to this question; but the reader knows that, in writing, the hand holds the pen: Coetzee's textual arranging does not function haphazardly within his fiction. Coetzee does, however, make explicit the intertextual references bombarding the reader within the work's final "lesson," as Costello surmises:

It is the same with the Kafka business. The wall, the gate, the sentry, are straight out of Kafka. So is the demand for a confession, so is the courtroom with the dozing bailiff and the panel of old men in their crows' robes pretending to pay attention while she thrashes about in the toils of her own words. Kafka, but only the superficialities of Kafka; Kafka reduced and flattened to a parody. (206)

Coetzee directly implicates the intertextual relationship between *Elizabeth Costello* and the works of Kafka within this passage, but to what effect? The intertextual mechanics of the passage, deferred to this point for the judgment and interpretation of the reader, now appear obvious and overstated in such a metafictional move. How does J. M. Coetzee reconcile the intertextual reading experience with Costello's literary analysis, which argues that the "lesson" functions as "Kafka reduced and flattened to a parody"? Coetzee's choice of the word "parody," as opposed to pastiche, might provide a clue. Frederic Jameson delineates between parody and its contemporary variant pastiche as such:

Pastiche is, like parody, the imitation of a peculiar or unique, idiosyncratic style, the wearing of a linguistic mask, speech in a dead language. But it is a neutral practice of such mimicry, without any of parody's ulterior motives...devoid of...any conviction that alongside the abnormal tongue you have momentarily borrowed, some healthy linguistic normality still exists. (17)

By drawing explicit attention to the manner in which the intertextual references to Kafka direct the reading of the text, Coetzee allows the reader to recognize the mechanisms of such parody, which does imply some type of reconciliation between reader and text, as opposed to slipping into the complete and resigned indeterminacy of pastiche. Pastiche, according to Jameson's definition, would function differently: while still appropriating the intertextual connections between *Elizabeth Costello* and a canonical reading of Kafka, pastiche would not allow for effective commentary on the nature of such a textual device. The possibility for commentary proves important for Coetzee, whose metafictional devices function less to confuse and disorient the reader from engaging with the text, than to ironically highlight the not-so-evident mechanisms and assumptions that inform each reading act, no matter how covertly.

Somewhat circularly, Costello herself questions the nature of a world in which Kafka references abound, a question that numerous characters within the text, ironically enough, ask of Costello, as many of her lectures rely upon textual references to Kafka's works. Costello thinks to herself,

And why is it Kafka in particular who is trundled out for her? She is no devotee of Kafka. Most of the time she cannot read him without impatience...So why the *mise en scène* into which she has been hurled so—she dislikes the word but there is not other—Kafkaesque? Perhaps that is what these border towns are for: to teach pilgrims a lesson. (209)

Yet, what lesson does the pilgrim take away from an engagement with the formidable but not entirely unwelcoming border town? Coetzee does not provide a definitive answer within the text, but the structural parallels between Costello, as pilgrim attempting to successfully navigate the power structures of the border town, and the interactive event of the reader coming to the text deserve some attention. The ending of Kafka's short story, "Before the Law," highlights the mechanisms of such a contingent situation. As the main character nears the end of life and still has yet to pass through the gate to which the sentry continually denies admittance, the resolution, no matter how unsettling, reveals much about the nature of the impasse. Kafka writes,

Before he dies, all his experiences in these long years gather themselves in his head to one point, a question he has not yet asked the doorkeeper [...] "Everyone strives to reach the Law," says the man, "so how does it happen that for all these many years no one but myself has ever begged for admittance?" [...] [The doorkeeper replies] "No one else could ever be admitted here, since this gate was made only for you. I am now going to shut it." (4)



The experience for Kafka's character, Elizabeth Costello and the reader, in the end, remains essentially a personal and contingent engagement. And, as per the nature of the reading act, the engagement takes place in a perpetual present, albeit outside of the narrative itself. Here, the existence of such a chronotope—to borrow Bakhtin's neologism—functions as a lesson in and of itself for Coetzee. Though the intertextual relationship with Kafka slips into self-conscious parody, it does not necessarily strip the potential power from Coetzee's performative demonstration. Rather, by tracing the specific references employed in generating the hyper-intertextual section of "At the Gate," Coetzee demonstrates that intertextuality does not open the space for meaning formation in the historical present by simply providing narrative scraps and tidbits that the reader should then trace back to their source in order to obtain some form of truth within the text. For Coetzee, like Kristeva, intertextuality provides the reader with the possibility of more freedom and arguably less effort: every textual encounter functions as an intertextual encounter; the act of reading in the historical present necessarily draws texts from the historical past into dialogue with the unnamed future, regardless of whether the reader can trace each allusion (or perhaps seeming allusion) to another concrete, identifiable text. Subjectivity, both within and outside the text, experiences the possibility of achieving a radical and potentially libratory instability through such an encounter, a point Coetzee dissects within *Elizabeth Costello* to then reaffirm in the reading act.

\* \* \*

As the final "lesson" within *Elizabeth Costello* demonstrates, intertextuality, as a poetic mechanism, functions within any encounter with literature and, arguably, the same applies to the act of reading in the context of an explicitly postcolonial present. The postcolonial text in its potentially unbounded circulation within the context of the real world retains the power conferred by its openendedness, not a particular coded and essentialist meaning for the competent reader to uncover. As Wolfgang Klooss notes, a Kristevan notion of intertextuality functions productively in a postcolonial context:

It reinforces the claim that any study of intertextual traces ought to be aware of its own cultural conditioning as well as of the forces that have instructed the object of investigation. In this way, intertextuality as both a creative and critical practice opens opportunities for the disclosure of literary and cultural manifestations that have become canonized. (xi)

Yet, Klooss's remarks draw attention to a common misinterpretation of intertextual practice within postcolonial writing: namely, that any such intertextual writing functions mainly to "write back," to reappropriate works the canon has already colonized and claimed as its own cultural and intellectual territory. In her analysis of J. M. Coetzee's *Foe*, Sue Kossew addresses the more effective space opened by a particularly postcolonial form of intertextuality and intertextual reading. If an explicitly

postcolonial intertextuality functions simply to challenge already canonized texts, then Kossew warns that “the notion of complicity and the links between authorship and authority are thus necessarily inscribed within this process of writing back” (155). If critically accepted as simply “writing back,” the liberative nature of reading within an intertextual framework fails to recognize the complex and potentially contradictory gestures of such works. Kossew writes, “However, it seems to me that these readings fail to take into account the counter-discursive nature of the text, which, by offering different versions of the same story, emphasizes the danger of single readings” (161). It would appear that critics should be wary of a tendency to embrace the practice of intertextuality as another way to simply establish authority by the postcolonial author.

The historical present, the time of performative poetics and writing, enables the postcolonial critique to recognize and argue for the subversive and empowering aspects of literature, as it pertains to the formation of subjectivity and identity in the real world of the modern nation-state. Such a space, one probed and mapped out by Kristevan intertextuality, appears to positively respond to the potentially liberating interpretation of cultural construction championed by Bhabha, as he argues,

The secular language of interpretation needs to go beyond the horizontal [linear, causal] critical gaze if we are to give ‘the nonsequential energy of lived historical memory and subjectivity’ its appropriate narrative authority. We need another time of writing that will be able to inscribe the ambivalent and chiasmic intersections of time and place that constitute the problematic “modern” experience of the Western nation. (*Location of Culture* 141)

In attempting to forge a critical perspective that debunks the myths of essentializing discourses, viable postcolonial critiques must remain wary of falling into the binary traps against which they strive to negate and break open to the potentials of plurality. In a tacit acknowledgement of the Foucauldian conception of discourse as power, the postcolonial perspective, as formulated by Bhabha and, as I argue, manifested particularly in fiction of a postcolonial provenance, attempts to free discourse from binary entrapments and fixed traditions, while preventing a complete dissolution between word and world. By demanding an interpretation of the text never completely divorced from, yet never beholden to context, such a theory of intertextuality within postcolonial discourse proves both instructive for readers, writers and critics of postcolonial literature and, likewise, potentially liberating. Linked to notions of intertextuality, the postcolonial present encourages readers to participate in the formation of meaning, a participation much akin to an intertextual reading as prescribed by Kristeva: reading which acknowledges its limitations, but still insists upon a connection between intertextuality and subjectivity; text and context; past and present.

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