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Slow Violence of The Refugee Life in *The Childhood of Jesus*

At first glance, everything seems benign, if not well-intentioned, in Novilla. In this Spanish-speaking city, which one could bluntly translate as 'no home', we meet Simón and David, a middle-aged man and a little boy. Freshly arrived on its shores via Belstar — "the camp" (2) — the pair is ready to forge new lives with their newly assigned names, birthdays, and language. So begins J. M. Coetzee's *The Childhood of Jesus*, a tale about beginning anew in a foreign city, where everyone starts "with no memories, with a blank slate" (98). Yet, Simón's subsequent uneasiness with his life in Novilla betrays the unsettling nature of this new world. Focusing on Simón, I would like to explore the repression of memory as a form of slow violence done to migrant ontology, both within the novel and without. Resisting and defying the mandate to forget, however, are the interruption, persistence, and assertion of desire and difference, which allow the refugee to create his or her authority.

The rupturing violence and recursive trauma of the refugee experience have been written about extensively. One only has to think of the spectacle of the border wall and of dehumanizing barbed-wire refugee camps to grasp the violence done to refugee lives. Coetzee too has articulated the realities of domination and oppression under which asylum-seekers languish, in his moving piece titled "Australia's Shame". If such violence is instantaneous, hypervisible, and

often structural, what then is slow violence? Described first by Rob Nixon in the context of environmental studies, slow violence refers to "violence that occurs gradually and out of sight, a violence of delayed destruction that is dispersed across time and space, an attritional violence that is typically *not viewed as violence at all*" (2; emphasis added). I would like to look at the Novillan regime as a form of 'slow violence', incremental and accretive in temporality, simultaneously invisible yet body bound, and ostensibly benevolent while no less violent.

To conceive of Novilla's expunging of memory as a form of slow violence is to consider violence as not only a contest over resources, but also time. The universal precept for the migrant is straightforward: to belong, he has to cut off his past. Novilla strips the precept bare of any pretensions or complications that afflicts real-life states — assimilation, multiculturalism, and diaspora — and presents the precept as an unavoidable fact of existence. Washed clean by the passage to Novilla, the characters only have shadow memories of their prior selves, which recede with time — Simón and David recall only a shipwreck that brought them to Novilla and the lost letter around David's neck. The language also hints at rebirth or the afterlife; all "start anew here. We start with a blank slate, a virgin slate" (103). In short, everyone has been a new arrival at some point in time, complicating the usual native-other dichotomy and creating an egalitarian starting point for all. Moreover, Novilla itself is a land without history. Though everyone speaks Spanish, and some works of literature endure (*Don Quixote* and *Der Erlkönig*), the city is wiped clean of any sense of history — as fellow stevedore Eugenio puts it confidently in a debate with Simón, "Because history is not real…It has no power to reach into the present" (116). The absence of history and memory forms the bedrock of Novilla's perennial, unchanging, essentialist rhythm of life.

While unsettling to the reader, there may appear to be no particular reason for reading such a repression of memory as a form of violence. After all, the equal (vaguely socialist) distribution of resources, labor, and opportunities and the relative ease of assimilation seem to be more deserving of gratitude than criticism. Indeed, Elena's 'sermon' to Simón summarizes what the country has bestowed on its refugees: "You arrived in this country naked…You could have been turned away, but you were not: you were made welcome…you were given a roof over your head." (107) Yet, Simón's experience of dissatisfaction instead of contentment reveals a gap in the placid idyll of Novilla, allowing for hints of an amorphous, oblique menace to bubble to the surface. Simón wonders throughout the novel if "the price of forgetting" (the price everyone pays for this new life) is too high (60). He suffers from and holds onto "the shadows of memories" (65). He has not let go of "the idea of history" (115). More than just simply clinging onto memories, he professes a reluctance to yield up "the feel of residence in a body with a past, a body soaked in its past" (143). For Simón, then, the past disrupts the present. His awareness of a past introduces a differential temporality — one of history — into the static essentialism of Novilla. Contrary to his surface-level settlement, the sense of loss continually ruptures his subjectivity and unsettles the stability of his relationality to Novilla. His suffering from the lingering of the past despite the state's absolute attempt to shorn him of it reflects the refugee condition: the continual balancing between settlement and unsettlement, as well as the lack of an anchor. The host society's demand for the refugee to forget the past constitutes a formless and obscure erasure of both his individual history and his sense of history. The erosion of the refugee's sense of self in order to absorb him into the larger unitary oneness of the host society is an opaque, gradual violence that masquerades as inevitable in *The Childhood of Jesus*.

The slow violence of forgetting is also one of non-attachment. Early on in the novel, Simón senses the asceticism of the Novillan regime. His outcry to Ana, the official they meet at the Centre, is a heartfelt allegation towards the faceless bureaucracy: "You tell us to subdue our hunger, to starve the dog inside us. Why? What is wrong with hunger?...If we had no appetites, no desires, how would we live?" (29) His cry is never answered directly, but circumvented by the Novillan logic of detachment and the absence of appetite. Despite the ostensible truth of Elena's declaration that "*Nothing is missing*" (63), Simón finds that things — from music to lovemaking to food to the Spanish they speak — do not have their due "weight" (64) in Novilla. He highlights the "bloodless" (30) nature of the country, manifesting in its dreary diet which lacks "the substantiality of animal flesh, with all the gravity of bloodletting and sacrifice behind it" (65). The companionship of passionless sex he forms with Elena also does not satisfy his hunger for intimacy and passion. We see the subtle but seemingly innocuous policing of the body by the state as Simón attempts to find state-sanctioned ways to satiate his desires. Yet, his quests are futile. For instance, when he tries to access sex by registering for Salón Confort's service, he is so overwhelmed by red tape and endless paperwork that he gives up (30). Though the episode borders on the absurd and the comedic, a slow violence is at work. By rendering obsolete the libidinous impulse, the body of the refugee is subsumed under the collective imagination of the state. In Novilla, then, the puritan abstraction of desire from the body towards the Platonic ideal subsumes the personal under the state's socialist agape.

But is forgetting and detachment inevitable in Novilla? Ironically, Simón's unfulfilled desires allow him to resist to the state's control over his ontology. On one level, Simón's attachment to the past points to memory's hold on our *bodies*, which "epidemiologically and ecologically are never our simple contemporaries" (Nixon 8). However, more critically, the

constant intrusion of Simón's desire defies Novilla's neat instrumentalism and allows him to resist the regime of forgetting. To forget one's history is more than just the cerebral, but also a policing of one's appetite and body — the affect is much harder to banish and control. Simón's desire for food beyond the bland diet of bread, for intimacy beyond passionless sex, and for privacy beyond the universal goodwill produces its own disobedience, pushing him to see difference where others do not. In Novilla, the absence of individual desire strips other characters such as Elena and Álvaro of the capacity to see doubleness in the world, "any difference between the way things seem and the way things are" (64). Simón, on the other hand, does not just see "the thing itself" (114). He sees the "gaps" and dissonance in nature where others see "oneness and silence" (176). In his attempt to grapple with his desires, including a yearning for a body with a past, Simón introduces difference. Here, his notion of gaps is critical. The gap between the signified and the signifier allows for individual imposition of desire, of interpretation, of relationality, and of irony. At the heart of the novel lies the faux family of three: Inés is both mother to David and not his mother in the state's interpretation; David is both the son of Inés and Simón, and not their son; and Simón is both father and not father. Built around the relational gaps of the familial order, this arbitrary family denotes private, familial love outside of the state's functional domain of definitions. Such love is not just desire, but also a momentum for transgression, a form of social knowledge, a cautious gauging of latitude, and a grammar of dissidence. Through this disobedience, his finding of a mother for David, Simón creates some sense of his own authority as a parent, one that does not conform to the hyperrational society. In *The Childhood of Jesus*, therefore, desire is self-assertion for the refugee, against the uniform singularity of the host society and the state's cosmological logic of forgetting. Although Simón cannot dislodge the power of the state (nor can he reverse the violence of forgetting), his

unwavering bond with David allows him to piece together an authority of seeing the world and over his being — of desire and doubleness.

The first line that Simón says in the novel is, "We are new arrivals." (1) In its final pages, *The Childhood of Jesus* comes full circle. Its last line, spoken by Simón, is similar but more buoyant: "Looking for somewhere to stay, to start our new life." (277) But the Simón at the novel's end is no longer a man without a past and struggling with the abstraction of desire. Though on the run with David from educational authorities, he is en route to a new life on his own terms, building his private world. While forgetfulness is Novilla's embedded violence — like Nixon points out in the environmental context, such violence is often difficult to source, oppose, and to reverse — Simón has chosen to face head-on the conflict and passion that emerges from the relational gaps he sees: with David, between a shadow past and an imagined future, and with the ideas of history in a land without history.

Read through the lens of slow violence, *The Childhood of Jesus* is a peeling away of the utopic to reveal how it reshapes migrant ontology. By replacing the relative, the contingent, and the personal with the generic, the universal, and the impersonal, Novilla erases each individual's ability to think outside of its static oneness. This invisible, unspectacular violence does not seem like violence at all, at first glance — just as how vast disparities due to the contingency of birth is not easily comprehended. That we, the readers, live in a world where the birth lottery and forces of displacement are as arbitrary as the names assigned to the refugees in *The Childhood of Jesus*, compels us to rethink the trajectories that bring migrants to foreign shores. Fiction's ability to erect a bridge between where we are and the far bank, as Coetzee elucidates in *Elizabeth Costello*, is constructed in *The Childhood of Jesus* to reflect the refugee ontology: forcibly stripped of affect and memory, suspended between being and nonbeing, and confronted with a

slow violence that is overlaid with benign notions of belonging — the ultimate gap being the one between who the refugee once was and who the host society wants he or she to become.

Works Cited

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