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Donald Powers

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Emigration and photography in J.M. Coetzee's *Slow Man*

Donald Powers*

University of Cape Town, South Africa

This article examines how photographs in J.M. Coetzee's novel *Slow Man* focus questions about the muteness and mutability of the historical record, particularly in the context of migrancy, while elaborating the metafictional dynamic between the protagonist Paul Rayment and his nominal author Elizabeth Costello. Drawing on the work on photography of Walter Benjamin, Roland Barthes and Susan Sontag, the article argues that the dispute among the characters over Drago's "forgery" of one of Rayment's Fauchery photographs foregrounds how the past, in the retrievable form of a static photographic image, is available for reinterpretation and reconfiguring in the present. Whereas in the novels of a writer like W.G. Sebald black-and-white photographs are included as a sign of the silence around personal histories touched by communal trauma, in *Slow Man* colourless photographs function as a thematic motif to highlight such silences, and more centrally to emphasize how a personal history can be as readily assimilated to a collective history as superimposed over it.

Keywords: emigration; photography; authenticity; collective history; metafiction; J.M. Coetzee

Since emigrating to Australia in 2002, J.M. Coetzee has published four works of fiction, each of which draws mileage from his status as a celebrated writer and multiple emigrant. The eight "lessons" of *Elizabeth Costello* (2003) cohere around the eponymous character, a fêted Australian writer, who enables a self-reflexive and deconstructive performance of Coetzee's cultural authority. In *Slow Man* (2005), Elizabeth Costello enters the narrative as a figure of the author impatient to get the stalled story of her character, the emigrant to Australia and amputee Paul Rayment, moving again. *Diary of a Bad Year* (2007) absorbs and reconfigures Coetzee's literary celebrity and emigration to Australia in the character of JC, while *Summertime* (2009) collates, for a biography of the late acclaimed writer John Coetzee, five interviewees' accounts of the man as they knew him in the period following his return to South Africa from the United States in 1971. The 2002 autobiographical fiction *Youth* is also structured around a would-be emigration – the protagonist John's flight from South Africa in the 1960s – but of these five fictions it is in *Slow Man* that the various dimensions of the experience of emigration come most starkly into relief. Paul Rayment's bicycle accident is the first and most abrupt displacement-event in the novel. The accident prepares the way for the second-order displacement of Rayment's and Marijana's respective emigrations to Australia, which Rayment imagines constitute the common ground on which to forge a bond with Marijana's son Drago. Elizabeth Costello's role in the novel draws attention to Coetzee's emigration to Australia

*Email: donaldpowers1@gmail.com

as an occasion for exploring questions about affiliation, belonging, and the relation between personal and national history.

In this essay I examine how Rayment's collection of Fauchery photographs appears to hold out the promise of realizing his desire to bond with Drago and record his name in Australian history, but finally reveals Rayment's mistaken assumptions about both priorities. Drawing on the work of Walter Benjamin, Roland Barthes and Susan Sontag, I explain how these photographs provide a means for Rayment to reflect at once on his status as a fictional character in this novel and the unstable nature of the historical record.

Forms of displacement and disjunction

The bicycle accident that jolts *Slow Man* to life immobilizes the protagonist. The phrases that unroll in his mind while he is airborne materialize within a time frame independent of the historical time in which his displacement from bicycle through air to tarmac takes place:

Relax! he tells himself as he flies through the air (*flies through the air with the greatest of ease!*), and indeed he can feel his limbs go obediently slack. *Like a cat*, he tells himself: *roll, then spring to your feet, ready for what comes next.* The unusual word *limber* or *limbre* is on the horizon too. (Coetzee, *Slow Man* 1; Coetzee's italics)

The italicized phrases here identify the accident as the occasion of a literary description, later attributed to Costello; but they are also a typographical sign of the sense of disjunction that comes to dominate Rayment's experience after the accident. As a physical event, the accident violently marks Rayment's body as the site of pain and loss. As an event in time, it marks a decisive rupture in Rayment's personal history, a line cordoning off a relatively unconsidered ("frivolous") past from a newly self-conscious present: "By the sign of this cut let a new life commence" (26). As the accident opens the narrative, it opens too a new phase in Rayment's life, bringing him to consciousness in a haze of pain that is simultaneously the author's gazing at words on a screen with an inchoate sense of where the conjunction of this character and this event will lead.

Slow Man begins, then, with a physical event that violently displaces Rayment from his bicycle and the groove of his accustomed life and disjoints his sense of his body and his history. The surfacing in his thoughts of the sequence of letters "Q-W-E-R-T-Y" (3) frames this physical event as a creative act of writing in which he is the partly self-conscious subject. Rayment's accident leads to a radical contraction of his horizons: crippled, he is restricted to his flat; inhabiting what he calls a "zone of humiliation" (61), he dwells in his homespace and is chary of ventures into the outside world. By bringing the professional carer Marijana Jokić into his circumscribed life, Rayment's bicycle accident brings into view a different order of displacement – emigration.

Both Rayment and Marijana are emigrants to Australia: Rayment from France, Marijana from Croatia. The qualities in Marijana that appeal to Rayment range from her exotic name and handsome appearance to her direct manner and efficiency about the house. He is especially attracted to Marijana as a capable maternal figure committed to supporting her family. It is largely because he has lost his mobility that he admires Marijana's stability in the real world (represented by her "sturdy" legs; 50). He believes she embodies a structure of values he associates with the old world of Europe, yet equally he sees her as a model of frank practical adaptability. This aspect of her character is reflected

in her hybrid vocabulary and awkward but emphatic manner of speaking. She speaks a “rapid, approximate Australian English” infused with slang, “with Slavic liquids and an uncertain command of *a* and *the*” (27). Though himself an emigrant a few times over, Rayment has a surer command of English idiom than Marijana. By the measure of his speech he is more fully assimilated to the Australian English linguistic community than she is, but, unlike Marijana, he lacks the bonds of a family group, his own “people”. Unmarried and childless, his parents and sister deceased, Rayment feels for Marijana an erotic desire infused with a need to belong to a family. Whereas Rayment is something of a purist who resists change, Marijana is presented as an adaptable, cosmopolitan character. This contrast between Rayment and Marijana in personality and attitude, as well as Rayment’s desire to affiliate himself to a group and remember himself to history, comes sharply into focus in their interactions over photographs.

The aura of the photograph

In Coetzee’s earlier novels, photographs play a slight but significant role. In *Dusklands* (1974), Eugene Dawn carries around with him 24 incriminating photographs of American military activity in Vietnam, classified material for his work on his Vietnam report. From poring over these photographs at night he draws a surreptitious pleasure that speaks to his voyeuristic fantasy of penetrating the mind and body of the Other: at home, his wife Marilyn and son Martin; abroad, the Vietnamese. He gazes at his photographs secure in his detachment from the event he is ideologically complicit with, but greedy for the gritty reality of. Magda in *In the Heart of the Country* (1977) is doubtful of many things, one of which is evidence of her childhood, and she suspects such evidence exists in the form of a forgotten daguerreotype secreted in a desk drawer or trunk somewhere about her farmhouse (*In the Heart of the Country* 43). In *Age of Iron*, Mrs Curren mulls over the absence of African labourers from a photograph taken of herself as a 2-year-old child in a garden in Uniondale (*Age of Iron* 111).¹ A second photograph of her daughter’s two sons afloat in a canoe on a lake in North America prompts Mrs Curren to interpret the life jackets they wear as emblems of her daughter’s insulated existence in America. It dispirits her to think that her daughter’s children are out of touch with the brute facticity of death that she confronts daily as a cancer-ridden citizen of a country in the throes of revolt against apartheid (*Age of Iron* 194–95). As for the dissolute Vercueil, Mrs Curren thinks of him as unphotogenic in the manner of a recalcitrant prisoner or fabled animal, likely to emerge in a photograph blurred or incomplete (193). In contrast to their relatively marginal role in these novels, photographs in *Slow Man* are central to the plot.

Rayment’s collection of Fauchery photographs focuses various conversations between the three main characters – Rayment, Marijana and Costello – about forms of authenticity; they are also the object of Drago’s “theft” and “forgery”. Rayment initially explains to Marijana that he started to collect these old photographs because he wanted to preserve in public memory the visual trace of the individuals represented in them. He later reveals that the collection sprang equally from his desire to preserve evidence of an outmoded method of photographic reproduction. He thinks of the photographs themselves as unwanted or forgotten, some of them “last survivors, unique”, to which he has given “a good home” (65). His interest in photography is limited to black-and-white prints. Originally a darkroom technician, he lost interest in photography with the advent of colour prints and digital modes of reproduction. Colourless prints evoke in him nostalgia not for a specific past, but the past as such, instanced as a material relic. In their imperfection

they seem to him more authentic visual documents than digitally doctored prints. But how accurate is this assumption?

In his seminal essay “The Work of Art in the Age of its Technological Reproducibility” (1936), Walter Benjamin argues that in the realm of visual art authenticity lies in “the here and now of the original” artwork that has been passed down “as the same, identical thing to the present day” (21). He notes that an artwork’s authenticity is evident in the physical traces it bears of its passage through time and in the cultural record of its transfer through the hands of those who have owned it (21). As such, authenticity “eludes technological [...] reproduction” (21). Benjamin distinguishes between the claim to authority of an artwork reproduced manually as against one reproduced by technological means. He argues that a manually reproduced replica cannot challenge the authority of an original because the traces of age on the latter are too subtle for imitation; absence of these traces identifies a false twin, a forgery. Because technological reproduction “is more independent of the original artwork than is manual reproduction” (21), the former process can bring to light qualities of the artwork without physical interference. As examples, Benjamin notes how in photography an adjustment to a camera lens can change the focus and perspective with which an object is represented, and how in film the processes of slow motion and enlargement bring into relief details in the represented scene that are imperceptible to the human eye.² Technological reproduction has the further capacity to place a copy of an original artwork in a new context: Benjamin gives the example of a recording of an orchestral performance listened to in a private room (21–22). For Benjamin, “what withers in the age of technological reproducibility” (22) is the aura of an artwork, which he defines as “a strange tissue of space and time: the unique apparition of a distance, however near it may be” (23). It is precisely the auratic quality of his collected Fauchery photographs to which Rayment is specially sensitive.

Rayment attributes the aura of black-and-white photographs to the manual stages in the darkroom required to develop them. He contextualizes his preference for analogue over digital photography as follows: “to the rising generation the enchantment lay in a *techne* of images without substance, images that could flash through the ether without residing anywhere, that could be sucked into a machine and emerge from it doctored, untrue” (65). He is disquieted by the thought that an image in electronic form can be subjected to unconstrained manipulation in the period between its first recording and eventual printing. What unsettles him is that in this virtual space the image is volatile in its potentiality: it is open to endless differentiation from the referent it purports to mirror. He finds a pathos as much in the textured singularity of the human individuals engrained in the colourless images as of the prints themselves. For Rayment, these photographs’ palpable age and air of obsolescence amplifies their authority as testaments to absence and loss.

Rayment’s interest in the Fauchery photographs is thus not limited to the photographs’ content, but is antiquarian in a broader sense. He collects them because he believes them to represent a more rooted and tactile mode of recording the world in images than modern electronic modes. Rayment’s archaeological sense of history here recalls the Magistrate in *Waiting for the Barbarians* (1980), who devotes a large share of his spare time to preserving and deciphering the enigmatic poplar slips he finds among the desert ruins outside his imperial settlement. He would like to believe that in the “vacuousness of the desert”, and these ruins in particular, there lies “a special historical poignancy” (*Waiting for the Barbarians* 16–17). The ruins and the poplar slips survive as relics of an earlier community’s settlement, of which there remains no other material record. The Magistrate recognizes that his preoccupation with these relics is a function of

his social status and his private concern about how he will be remembered in history. This concern is both a natural reflex of his late middle age and a specific response to his sense of complicity with the Empire in its campaign against the “barbarians”. In drawing this parallel between Rayment and the Magistrate, I want to emphasize their shared interest in the *trace* of that which has been lost. This interest is significantly informed by an awareness of how, in times of historical crisis, individual voices are silenced by authorities or subsumed by collective narratives of struggle and resistance.

To return to *Slow Man*, Rayment’s hobby is more self-interested than it first appears: it answers his desire to affiliate himself to the Australian nation by ensuring that his name is publicly recorded as the donor of the Fauchery collection to the State Library in Adelaide. He thinks of his hobby as a matter of giving these Faucherys a home: by making a bequest of them – the “Rayment Bequest” (65) – he hopes in turn to be accommodated in public memory as their preserver. Marijana approves of Rayment’s pastime on the grounds that by collecting first-generation photographs he “save history” (sic; 48). For Marijana, the value of Rayment’s hobby lies in its contribution to an archive of public memory: as she says, “So people don’t think Australia is country without history, just bush and then mob of immigrants. Like me. Like us” (48). It is not clear to Rayment who is included in Marijana’s “us”: himself and herself, or herself and her family. Uneasy that she seems to locate the beginning of Australian history not with its aboriginal population but in the arrival of European immigrants, Rayment would like to imagine that his experience as an emigrant links his history not just to Marijana and her family, but to the members of the early immigrant communities in Australia depicted in the photographs of his collection.

The silence of the record

The Fauchery photograph that most deeply moves Rayment shows a woman and six children standing at the door of a wattle-and-mud cabin. It is one of hundreds in his possession of scenes from early mining camps in Victoria, New South Wales and South Australia. Inspecting the photograph after his first exchange with Marijana about his Fauchery collection, Rayment has to check an impulse to align his history with that of the anonymous figures depicted in it and count himself one of their “tribe”.

Not just bush, he would like to tell Marijana. Not just blackfellows either. Not zero history. Look, that is where we come from: from the cold and damp and smoke of that wretched cabin, from those women with their black helpless eyes, from that poverty and that grinding labour on hollow stomachs. A people with a story of their own, a past. *Our* story, *our* past. But is that the truth? Would the woman in the picture accept him as one of her tribe – the boy from Lourdes in the French Pyrenees with the mother who played Fauré on the piano? Is the history that he wants to claim as his not finally just an affair for the English and the Irish, foreigners keep out? (Coetzee, *Slow Man* 52; Coetzee’s italics)

Beyond the signs of squalor and a labour-hard life, Rayment identifies with the figures in this photograph because, static and helpless, they seem to look back at him from the far side of historical time, consigned and all but forgotten. It is precisely Rayment’s fear of becoming, like these figures, voiceless in the echo-hall of history, immobile and anonymous before the gaze of posterity, or worse: uninstanced at all, lost to history, that causes his gaze to linger on this photograph and inspires his collection.

Rayment’s sensitivity to the silence of the figures in this photograph is symptomatic of Coetzee’s concern in his critical and fictional work to draw attention to the discursive

silence of individuals sidelined by the collective movements of history. In the novels this priority is particularly pronounced in *Waiting for the Barbarians*, *Life & Times of Michael K* (1983), *Foe* (1986) and *Age of Iron*; Coetzee succinctly formulates it as a priority of postcolonial literary criticism in the closing lines of his chapter on the South African farm novel in *White Writing*:

Our ears today are finely attuned to modes of silence. We have been brought up on the music of Webern: substantial silence structured by tracings of sound. Our craft is all in reading *the other*: gaps, inverses, undersides; the veiled; the dark, the buried, the feminine; alterities. (81; Coetzee's italics)

In "The Novel Today" (1987), Coetzee characterizes the discourse of the novel as a medium with the means to scrutinize and amplify the silences, exclusions and distortions that occur in orthodox historical accounts. More to the point of my discussion here, Coetzee's critical interest in the silences and exclusions of history surfaces in the course of his essay on Mona de Beer and Brian Johnson Barker's book-length collection of photographs of pre-1910 South Africa, *A Vision of the Past: South Africa in Images 1843–1910* (1992). In this essay, Coetzee asks whether it is plausible to treat "social history" as a subcategory of "history":

If the lepers confined to Robben Island are in the book because they belong to social history, are the Xhosa chiefs also confined to Robben Island not in the book because they belong to history? Does a dead baby in its little coffin (in the book) fall into social history, while trenches full of dead soldiers (not in the book) fall into history? (Coetzee, "Photographs of South Africa" 348)

Coetzee agrees with the editors' guiding idea that "ordinary" individuals and their pastimes are as deserving of a place in the historical record as prominent figures and seismic political events (like the 1960 Sharpeville massacre), but he objects to the tone of placid contentment that he finds dominates the editors' selection of photographs representing "ordinary" folk in "ordinary" scenes. Who are these ordinary people and what constitutes the ordinariness of their activities? Coetzee's point here is that the term "ordinary" is expediently vague; it pretends to a coverage it does not achieve. He questions the editors' unexplained exclusion of pornographic photographs and photographs of an ethnographic sort exhibiting "primitive" people. He implies that this sort of suppressed material contributed as much to sharpening the self-image of Victorian South Africa and the nature of its ordinariness as stiff bourgeois family portraits and images of women in sunbonnets playing lawn tennis.

Susan Sontag points out that photographic images "which idealise (like most fashion and animal photography) are no less aggressive than [photographic] work which makes a virtue of plainness (like class pictures, still lifes of the bleaker sort, and mug shots)" (*On Photography* 7). Sontag links this aggression to what she identifies as the fundamentally "didactic" (7) quality of photography, by which she means a photograph's power to boast authority as a piece of documentary evidence. In a court of law, she writes, "the camera record incriminates" (5). In contrast, the photographs in de Beer and Barker's book are collected for the less urgent purpose of exhibiting "scenes from provincial life". But, as Coetzee points out, the editors' exclusion of improper or marginal photographs from the collection suggests that they seek to parade an innocent image of life in pre-1910 South Africa. To critically appreciate such a collection of photographs, one needs to bear in mind these exclusions while remembering that the reader's view of de Beer and

Johnson's "vision of the past" is certain to be lensed by the historical events in South Africa, principally apartheid, that intervened between 1910 and the present.

Rayment's efforts to preserve his Fauchery photographs spring from his awareness that the historical narrative of a nation necessarily involves certain exclusions, "acts of silencing and censoring" (Coetzee, *Giving Offense* vii), along with certain emphases. As an emigrant he has lived out discontinuities in space and culture; without living family he is peculiarly conscious that he lacks the affirmation and security of a foundational group on which to stake an identity for himself. Rayment explains to Drago that it is for the sake of "our historical record" (177) that he maintains his Fauchery collection. This phrase evokes in him an upwelling of emotion because he senses that the particular photograph he holds, depicting two "fellow" emigrants to Australia, is capable of establishing between himself and Drago the bond of shared witness.

Because just possibly this image before them, this distribution of particles of silver that records the way the sunlight fell, one day in 1855, on the faces of two long-dead Irishwomen, an image in whose making he, the little boy from Lourdes, had no part and in which Drago, son of Dubrovnik, has had no part either, may, like a mystical charm – *I was here, I lived, I suffered* – have the power to draw them together. (Coetzee, *Slow Man* 177; Coetzee's italics)

"What is valorised here is the real", Wicomb notes, "its transformation through photography that not only recalls the actual subjects of the past, but has affective value in the present" (20). Whereas Rayment sees this image as the coin of his bond with Drago, Drago's later digital manipulation of another of Rayment's Faucherys has precisely the opposite effect of estranging them. But before turning to Drago's "forgery" it is worth asking: what justifies Rayment's belief in the power of this photograph to act as a "mystical charm" in creating a bond with Drago? Does this "power" really lie with the photograph, or does it lie with the one who gazes upon it?

The muteness and mutability of history

In a photograph's illusion of immediacy, its status as an *unmediated* moment distilled from the flux of time, there is an uncanny quality. Roland Barthes discusses this quality in *Camera Lucida* (1980), a collection of his reflections on photography that is also a meditation on the death of his mother. Looking through photographs of his late mother, Barthes finds an image of her, aged 5 (the year is 1898), standing with her brother at one end of a little wooden bridge inside a glass conservatory. Gazing at this image (the "Winter Garden" photograph), Barthes experiences a disjunctive sense of himself in relation to his mother: he is at once his mother's senior and not yet born. His sense of his mother as "*already dead*" (*Camera Lucida* 96; Barthes's italics), although still a child, mingles with a recognition of his own mortality and the prospect of his own spectral afterlife as a photographic image. The sense of temporal disorientation at issue here arises in Barthes as the viewer of the photograph, but similar motions of self-distancing and self-projection occur when he is the one being photographed. In posing for a photograph, Barthes writes, "I transform myself in advance into an image" (*Camera Lucida* 10–11):

In front of the lens, I am at the same time: the one I think I am, the one I want others to think I am, the one the photographer thinks I am, and the one he makes use of to exhibit his art. [...] I do not stop imitating myself, and because of this, each time I am (or let myself

be) photographed, I invariably suffer from a sensation of inauthenticity, sometimes of imposture [...]. (Barthes, *Camera Lucida* 13)

Camera Lucida belongs with Roland Barthes (1975), *A Lover's Discourse* (1977) and the essay "Deliberation" (1979), works he published towards the end of his life in which, as Nickel notes (233), Barthes wrestles with the problem of self-writing by sorting and reflecting on autobiographical fragments. Coetzee's engagement with Barthes's work ranges from essays written in the spirit of Barthes's *Mythologies* (1957), through the echoes in *In the Heart of the Country* of S/Z (1970) and Coetzee's interest in the dynamics of the middle voice, to a fiction like *Summertime*, which in exploring the inner workings of literary auto/biography recalls Barthes's *Roland Barthes*. It is not surprising that photographs crop up as a point of thematic emphasis in Coetzee's later fiction as a convenient way of posing questions about the problems of putting an unselfconscious, unphotogenic self into writing. In *Diary of a Bad Year*, JC's thoughts on portrait photographs of Samuel Beckett recall the "overlapping series of pretences" (Nickel 233) I have just quoted Barthes describing. On the dust jacket of the Harvill Secker edition of *Summertime*, the photograph of the author is not an image of Coetzee as he looked at the time of the novel's publication in 2009, but as he was at a much younger age: this photo was used on the dust jacket of the 1985 Penguin edition of *Life & Times of Michael K*. These details of Coetzee's two most recent fictions suggest that Coetzee's interest in cultivating and, crucially, *qualifying*, an authorial self-image in the narrative and peri-textual material of his fictions is as pronounced today as Herman Wittenberg has shown it was at the outset of his career.³

However, in Barthes's case, as in Coetzee's, it is less photographic images than a lifetime's output of words that produces the partly true, partly spurious afterlives of the writer's self. For Barthes, the difference between photographs and words is that words cannot corroborate their authenticity: "the Photograph's essence is to ratify what it represents. [...] No writing can give me this certainty. It is the misfortune (but also perhaps the voluptuous pleasure) of language not to be able to authenticate itself" (*Camera Lucida* 85). While Barthes is correct in observing that the documentary authority of a photograph lies in its illusion of self-presence, this authority is tenuous because as an image frozen and turned free of its place in space and time it calls for contextual framing in words. The difference between photographs and writing is for this reason surely less marked than Barthes maintains. He seems to concede this point when he writes that a photograph does "not necessarily say *what is no longer*, but only and for certain *what has been*", that a photograph is a "certificate of presence", but "it cannot *say* what it lets us see" (*Camera Lucida* 85, 87; Barthes's italics). Nor does the photograph disclose substantial information about the person responsible for "capturing" and processing what Henri Cartier-Bresson once called the "decisive moment" (Wells 253) embalmed in the photographic image. The incapacity of photographs to *say* what they show is foregrounded particularly poignantly in the novels of W.G. Sebald, which in their inclusion of black-and-white photographic images provide a useful point of contrast with Coetzee's use of colourless photographs as a thematic motif in *Slow Man*.

In the hybrid affairs that are Sebald's novels – *The Rings of Saturn* (1995), *The Emigrants* (1996), *Vertigo* (1990) and *Austerlitz* (2001) – uncaptioned, colourless photographs punctuate the prose. Placed at irregular intervals and variously sized, banal and haunting, their net effect is to deepen the sepia tone of Sebald's digressive narratives. Suggestive of muted histories, particularly those subsumed in the collective trauma of the Holocaust, these photographs are remarkable less for what they reveal than for their

silence on the identities and histories of the people they depict and the circumstances in which they were taken. For Susan Sontag, writing about *Austerlitz*, to offer evidence in the form of photographs in a novel “is to endow what has been described by words with a mysterious surplus of pathos. The photographs and other relics reproduced on the page become an exquisite index of the pastness of the past” (“A Mind in Mourning” 4). Sontag’s observation here resonates with Rayment’s interest in the Faucherys, which, as we have seen, he values not merely for their content, but as artefacts of the dark-room process by which they were reproduced.

There are no photographs interleaved in *Slow Man* in the manner of Sebald’s novels, but there is a characteristic Coetzeean emphasis on the priority of being remembered. To remember, to *re-member*: disjointing the word in this way makes clearer the link between Rayment’s desire to imprint his name in the Australian state record by way of the Fauchery bequest and his efforts to regain a measure of agency and independence as a maimed body in the world and author of his life. In both instances he seeks to assert himself as a subject with the will to decide the terms of his existence in the face of a narrative (the history of a nation, Costello’s story) apparently beyond his power to write. Whereas in Sebald the photograph occurs as a testamentary ruin or fragment of memory, at once evocative and mute, in *Slow Man* Coetzee uses photographs to dramatize the *mutability* of the historical record: how a personal history can be as readily assimilated to a collective narrative as superimposed over it. The dispute that erupts over Drago’s “forgery” of certain of the Fauchery photographs highlights the contestability of the record of the past and Rayment’s folly of imagining it to be a static slate and seeking to guarantee for himself a niche on it.

Drago’s “forgery”

In the previous section I drew attention to the silence or passivity of photographs, in order to emphasize that while they offer the illusion of self-presence, their authority as testaments of a past moment is limited and provisional, for they await anchorage and interpretation in the contexts of those who gaze upon them. The Fauchery photograph of the two Irish women speaks to Rayment’s sense of himself as an emigrant who hopes to affiliate himself to Marijana’s family. His desire to attach his name to the Fauchery archive rests on an understanding that those photographs have historical value in themselves as relics and that his name will acquire public visibility and longevity through its association with those images. But what Rayment misprizes is the originality of the photographic image, which is always already a copy. Rayment’s outrage at Drago’s act of digitally superimposing his father’s and sister’s faces onto the faces of two figures represented in two of Rayment’s Fauchery prints stems from his sense that a pristine original has been corrupted or desecrated. His strong reaction is ironic on at least three levels. First, Rayment places an undue premium on his Faucherys’ originality. He values the Faucherys because they are first-generation prints, “touched by Fauchery’s hand” (205), and because for him they are relics of an obsolete mode of photographic reproduction that he imagines preserves the authenticity of the objects it represents. The special value he accords them is based on their status as artefacts bearing the traces of their history. Drago’s two acts mingle in his mind as one: misappropriation of the images-as-objects and his digital doctoring of their content. The second level of irony lies in Rayment’s interpretation of the act as a violation of his property, which, as Costello points out (*Slow Man* 220), is an interpretation out of line with his view of himself as the temporary custodian of a collection of artefacts not rightly his own, but public stock. The third and

clinging irony is that Rayment's reaction betrays his earlier deeply felt wish (expressed in the extract quoted earlier) to bond with Drago.

In reply to the accusations Rayment directs at her son, Marijana insists that "images is free" (sic; 249). By this statement she means to highlight the naivety of the idea that to "take a photograph" in the first place is to *steal an image* of something and to remind Rayment that Drago has displayed the "stolen" or doctored images on his website, where they may be *freely* viewed by others. Marijana's point is that Drago's priorities and frame of reference are more modern and quite different from Rayment's. Rayment proves Marijana's intuition correct: he swats aside her suggestion that he placate himself by browsing Drago's website and renews his demand for the originals. Uninterested in computers, he values what he can hold in his hands. Rayment's first impression that Drago's alteration of the Faucherys amounts to a forgery is reinforced for the reader by the near homophony of the words "Fauchery" and "forgery". Costello later observes that Drago is not a forger, nor the act a forgery, since Drago evidently did not perpetrate it with a view to making money (259). The pun in the surname "Jokić" underscores the interpretation of Drago's act as a joke.

Drago's tampering with the Faucherys is foreshadowed by his sister Blanka's alleged theft of a silver chain from the store Happenstance. The charge against her is possibly false and the silver chain she steals is known to be fake. These details reinforce the link between this incident and her brother's act, and these in turn with Rayment's concerns about his prosthetic status as a character. The events hinging on Drago's forgery-joke illustrate a few key points about Rayment, which are among the novel's major concerns. First, it points up his preoccupation with authenticity. This stems primarily from Costello's presence in his life, who causes him to doubt that his agency is his own and that he has a non-fictional existence. His arguments with Costello and Marijana about the comparative status of copies and originals in the realm of photography elaborate directly, though in different terms, his abiding concern about his status as a fictional character. His suspicion that he is a pawn in a narrative dictated by her informs his reluctance to accept that he has been permanently severed from the life he had prior to his accident and that his new condition as an amputee calls for compromises on his part: in particular, admitting he is no longer fully in control of his life, but must rely on a walking aid and professional carers. Further, as Dominic Head notes, the forgery-joke reveals that Rayment's egotistical desire to be identified as author of his Fauchery collection is at odds with his ostensible aim of making them public property and his "idealistic and reverent notion of a shared history of migrancy" (Head 87).

Migrancy and writing

One might expect the figure of the migrant – particularly since his emigration to Australia – to hold a special appeal for Coetzee as a mobile figure in whom disparate histories cross and cultural influences mingle, whose identity changes to suit new situations. As Andrew Smith notes, it is "precisely because they represent a removal from 'old' foundations and from previous 'grounded' ways of thinking about identity", such as nationality and ethnicity, that migrants have gained an emblematic status in postcolonial literary studies (249). Graham Huggan has critiqued the metaphorization of migration in contemporary postcolonial theory on the grounds that it overlooks "often conspicuously hierarchical attitudes towards different migrant groups" (138); and it is true that, as with the tendency to find in such related touchstone terms of postcolonial theory as *hybridity* and *diaspora* the virtue of being between cultures, the qualities of freedom and detachment

that are often celebrated in the idea of migrancy belie the pain and difficulty involved in the far more widespread experience of migrancy as an *enforced* condition.

In *Slow Man* the emphasis falls less squarely on any individual migrant history than on migrancy as a figure of writing. As a character, Rayment hardly recommends himself as an emblematic migrant figure, for compared to the adaptable Marijana he is someone who resists change (hence the title ‘Slow Man’) and longs for the stability and security of affiliation. However, Rayment’s migrancy gains significance through its intersection with Costello’s conception of writing. Late in the novel, Rayment remarks to Costello: “Privately I have always felt myself to be a kind of ventriloquist’s dummy. It is not I who speak the language, it is the language that is spoken through me” (*Slow Man* 198). Rayment’s sense of inauthenticity as a speaker of language is as much a function of his status as an emigrant who has moved between languages (English and French) as it is as a character directed by his author Costello’s hand. Further, the phrase “a kind of ventriloquist’s dummy” echoes Costello’s description of herself as a writer in the last lesson of *Elizabeth Costello* (“At the Gate”) as a “secretary of the invisible” (199), one who channels words that come to her in her inspiration. In this way Rayment’s status as a migrant who lacks any rooted sense of linguistic and cultural identity correlates with and in a certain sense enables the metafictional flexibility of this prose narrative, in which the writing of his story and the making of history are revealed to be unpredictable processes of which he is the partially empowered subject.

Costello’s sponsorial interest in Rayment duplicates Rayment’s interest in Marijana’s family: in seeking to affiliate himself to Marijana and her children by investing in their futures and observing them living out that investment, he resembles Costello, who seeks to see out a speculative investment in her character Rayment. The lesson Rayment reluctantly learns about the instability of the historical record occurs by way of his photographs. This lesson is in turn set within the destabilizing frame of Costello’s act of writing, which returns the focus to Coetzee and the status of this novel as a meditation on the making of history and a self-conscious, carefully qualified account of Coetzee’s own emigration to Australia.

The Fauchery photographs at issue in *Slow Man* are thus less terminal points of significance as artefacts of muted histories than a means of demonstrating the mutability of the historical record in the hands of those in the present.

Notes

1. In *White Writing* (1988) Coetzee writes about the silence around black African labour in novels in the English and Afrikaans tradition of the farm novel (see in particular 71–72).
2. According to Benjamin, the camera has the power of evoking what he calls “the optical unconscious”, by which he means a deep structural choreography of objects invisible to the naked human eye (37).
3. See Wittenberg on the publication history of *Dusklands*.

Notes on contributor

Donald Powers is a Postdoctoral Research Fellow in the Department of English Literature at the University of Cape Town, where he teaches South African and American literature. His doctoral thesis is titled “Emigration, Literary Celebrity, and the Autobiographical Turn in J.M. Coetzee’s Later Fiction.” His current research focuses on the figure of the urban pedestrian in the work of Teju Cole, W.G. Sebald and Iain Sinclair.

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