# The wretched of the panoptic city: an evaluation of the spatial power in JM Coetzee's *Foe*

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**ABSTRACT.** This article explores Michel Foucault's heterotopia and Fredric Jameson's cognitive mapping in JM Coetzee's *Foe* (1986). It also finds links between social colonialism and socio-spatial identities within the terrain of the cities of London and Bristol. The paper thoroughly examines the crucial role of cities in shaping the spatial identities of the main characters in the novel. The urban space of London and Bristol is the third space for Susan and Friday, where they strive to find their true selves. Susan Barton and Friday are embroiled in a world divided into center and periphery, where they are grappling with a serious identity crisis. This is all happening within a closely monitored system under Mr. Foe's watchful eye. The cities bestow a sense of freedom on neither Susan nor Friday and under the supreme power of Mr. Foe, Susan's endeavor to give voice to Friday ended in a debacle. The novel unequivocally illustrates the perpetuation of urban authority by deploying panopticism and heterotopic space, albeit at the cost of fragmenting identities within the city.

Keywords: cognitive mapping; heterotopia; spatial identities; third space; urban space.

# Os miseráveis da cidade panóptica: uma avaliação do poder espacial no inimigo de JM Coetzee

**RESUMO.** Este artigo explora a heterotopia de Michel Foucault e o mapeamento cognitivo de Fredric Jameson em Foe (1986), de JM Coetzee. Também encontra ligações entre o colonialismo social e as identidades socioespaciais no terreno das cidades de Londres e Bristol. O artigo examina minuciosamente o papel crucial das cidades na formação da singularidade espacial dos personagens principais do romance. O espaço urbano de Londres e Bristol é o terceiro espaço para Susan e Friday, onde eles se esforçam para encontrar seu verdadeiro eu. Susan Barton e Friday estão atualmente envolvidos em um mundo dividido em centro e periferia, onde estão lutando com uma grave crise de identidade. Tudo isso está acontecendo dentro de um sistema monitorado de perto que está sob o olhar atento do Sr. Foe. As cidades não dão uma sensação de liberdade nem a Susan nem a Friday e, sob o poder supremo do Sr. Foe, o esforço de Susan para dar voz a Friday terminou em desastre. O romance ilustra inequivocamente a perpetuação da autoridade urbana por meio da implantação do panoptismo e do espaço heterotópico, embora à custa da fragmentação de identidades dentro da cidade.

Palavras-chave: mapeamento cognitivo; heterotopia; identidades espaciais; terceiro espaço; espaço urbano.

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What has made it impossible for us to live in a time like fish in water, birds in the air, and children? It is the fault of the Empire! Empire has created the time of history. Empire has located its existence not in the smooth recurrent spinning time of the cycle of the seasons but in the jagged time of rise and fall, of beginning and end, of catastrophe. Empire dooms itself to live in history and plot against history (Coetzee, 2019, p. 133)

### An introduction to Foe

Foe, a novel from 1986, falls under the category of a frame story, metafictional work, and a reinterpretation of Daniel Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe*. JM Coetzee took a different approach in writing his novel *Foe* compared to Daniel Defoe's. Coetzee's story focuses on the characters Susan Barton and Friday, told from a woman's perspective instead of centering on Cruso. Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe* was published in 1719 when the early Dutch settled in South Africa, an era when his *Robinson Crusoe* and *Moll Flanders* (1722) gave birth to the English novel. Unlike Defoe, in *Foe*, JM Coetzee gives voice to a white female narrator, Susan, cast away on an

Page 2 of 6 Yary and Hanif

inhabited island. The protagonist of Coetzee's book, Susan Barton, is on a quest to find an author who can help her release the story of a newly discovered land. Susan sets "[...] the voice from 'periphery' or 'edge' [...]" and "[...] the voice of the center" side by side (Di Michele, 2002, p. 166, emphasis in original). Both she and Friday have prominently featured identities on Cruso's Island as well as in the British cities of London and Bristol.

JM Coetzee's concern is primarily with assumptions about voice and context in his deconstructive postcolonial fiction and through the representation of space and place. Daniel Defoe's island story has created a towering figure in literature; in this way, Coetzee used the tale as a structural basis for his novel. Coetzee's narrator, Susan Barton, attempts to take control of the story. Instead of emulating Daniel Defoe's Robinson Crusoe, she decides to take charge of the challenging landscape of the island on her own, without the help of Foe. In this novel, Coetzee keeps his mind on interconnections between the metropolis and the peripheries; he engages with the 'strange[ness]' (Coetzee, 1986) of London as a postcolonial urban space and "[...] as a heterotopic site of self-reflexive negotiation between artistic creativity, critical interrogation, and commercial mobility" (Beswick, Parmer, & Sil, 2015, p. 794). Coetzee's novel, Foe, uses its geographic locations to encourage readers to explore the themes of identity and spatiality. By presenting a voice from the edge of the imperial world - the island - Coetzee prompts readers to engage in open and dialectic conflict with the voice of the 'center' (Di Michele, 2002, p. 166).

In this book, the focus is on exploring the impact of colonialism on individual identity, and the objective of this research is to deeply analyze the idea of space using a range of theories, such as Foucault's heterotopia, Fredric Jameson's cognitive mapping, and Edward Soja's third space. The importance of London and Bristol on the one hand and the island on the other are bound to Coetzee's mentality on 'the world', which is 'full of islands' (Coetzee, 1986). The heterogeneity of the islands seems remarkable "[...] in the context of the 'spatial' distribution of the novel" (Di Michele, 2002, p. 168, emphasis in original), and they are closely connected to the spatial identities of the characters in the novel. A meticulous analysis of the social space and the structure of subjectivity is desirable in this frame story. The concepts of margin and center strongly influence the main characters, Susan Barton, Friday, and Cruso, and it explores "[...] how an organization of urban and global space is expressive of capitalism" (Wittenberg, 1995, p. 6). To gain a thorough understanding of how 'space' and 'identity' intertwine in Coetzee's *Foe*, various theories such as Michel Foucault's panoptic structure and supervisory power, David Harvey's portrayal of postmodern culture, Edward Soja's redefinition of social space, and Fredric Jameson's ideas on hyperspace and cognitive mapping can be applied to the novel.

We have conducted a comprehensive analysis of the cities and the island, considering factors such as geography and terrain, and have established connections between social colonialism and socio-spatial identities. It is worth noting that Daniel Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe* does not address the role of urban space and environment in shaping social and ethnic identity through spatial patterns. He tries to dissolve Crusoe on the island without any urban adventures. Quite the contrary, JM Coetzee allows much of the novel to the cities of London and Bristol and intermingles the language, racial color, and gender in geographically different places. He attempts to knot urban space and identity in a postmodern milieu. This research introduces the urban areas within the novel, *Foe* as dystopian spaces. Coetzee does not believe London and Bristol are better than the island for Friday. The urban spaces of London and Bristol are the third space for Friday and Susan; they find no firm identities over there. The objective of this study is to examine Foe's struggle with identity in particular areas through socio-spatial concepts such as Michel Foucault's heterotopia, Fredric Jameson's cognitive mapping, and Edward Soja's third space. More specifically, it intends to illustrate how spatiality and geographical classification can affect the discourse of cultural identity, noticeably peripheral identities like Susan Barton and Friday.

# In search of the city

Under the power of imperialism, the peripheral regions of the cities and metropolises are always considered colonies, and they have inferior positions. Imperialism and colonialism have been based on "[...] ideas of superiority and practices of dominance and involving the extension of authority and control of one state or people over another" (Gregory, 2017, p. 373). In the novel, Coetzee criticizes the history of authority and colonialism, originating from *Robinson Crusoe*. One aspect to consider is that in Coetzee's narrative, Mr. Foe, is the one who possesses the power of writing, rather than Susan Barton, who serves as the narrator of the story. Susan cannot write down her story and is searching for an author and authority. In Coetzee's novel,

the protagonist, Susan, struggles with Mr. Foe, who takes control of the story and tries to narrate it in his own way. Susan endeavors to tell the tale in her own voice. Coetzee makes Susan's life into the narration and attempts to take control of "[...] all [her] life" (Coetzee, 1986, p. 133); he takes it from Mr. Foe and changes the whole story into a 'daughter figure' (Attwell, 1993) in the middle of a metropolis.

JM Coetzee attempts to prove that colonialism does not occur by chance in *Robinson Crusoe*, and Daniel Defoe very deliberately propounded "[...] to use [Friday] as [he] wished" (Coetzee, 1986, p. 148). According to Coetzee (1986, p. 149), freedom is merely a fleeting concept, represented by "[...] seven letters on a slate [...]" and a mere "[...] puff of air". This notion ties together his characters' sense of identity and autonomy with the concept of urban centers and metropolises in which they are partially located. Neither Susan Barton nor Friday can write about their own lives in the novel, and even Susan, who is supposed to be Friday's defender, is considered objectified by Mr. Foe, who takes control with authority. Susan endeavors to give voice to the mute Friday because she believes no one can voice themselves, and both are marginalized. She tends to take a sanguine view of the difficulty she is involved in. She is hopeful of giving voice to her companion, a tongueless enslaved person, when she utters: "There will always be a voice in him to whisper doubts, whether in words or nameless sounds or tunes or tones" (Coetzee, 1986, p. 149).

Foe aims at exposing the differences between the worlds of center and periphery, white and black, and male and female. Gayatri C. Spivak states that Foe "[...] seems interested in space rather than time, as it stages the difficulties of a timekeeping investigation before a space that will not yield its description" (Spivak, 1990, p. 7). She believes Foe is more about space and location than 'history and labor', and she proves her claim with a look at the 'metropolitan' sites of the novel. She compares Coetzee's Foe to Jean Rhys's rewriting of Jean Eyre and asserts that as Rhys could not accept "[...] Jean Eyre as the paradigm woman [...]", then JM Coetzee does not accept [Defoe's] "[...] Crusoe as the normative man in nature" (Spivak, 1990, p. 7). According to Spivak, Mr. Foe represents the colonialist viewpoint, while Susan Barton represents "[...] the metropolitan anti-imperialist [...]" perspective (Spivak, 1990, p. 13). Barton's goal is to help Friday, who is portrayed as Philomela – whose story exemplifies the colonial encounters that have perpetuated a legacy of violence, dispossession, and deprivation – in Coetzee's novel, gain freedom and overcome oppression (Coetzee, 1986). In the novel, Spivak explores the island and the periphery of the cities as the sites of resistance. Very close to her, Edward Soja reasserted the concept of space "[...] in critical social theory [as] an exercise in both deconstruction and reconstruction" (Soja, 1989, p. 12).

According to Edward Soja's theory of Thirdspace, urban spaces can be divided into three categories: Firstspace, Secondspace, and Thirdspace. Firstspace pertains to the actual physical environment that can be accurately mapped. Secondspace involves how people envision and think about that space in their minds. Lastly, Thirdspace encompasses the real-life experience of urban space, including both tangible and intangible elements. In his interview with Christian Borch, Soja (1989, p. 113) maintains that he uses "Thirdspace to refer to a particular way of thinking about and interpreting socially produced space". He sees the "[...] spatiality of our lives [...]" and "[...] the human geographies in which we live [...]" (Borch, 2002, p. 113) in this critical approach, thirdspace, including both 'material' and 'mental spaces'. From this perspective, Coetzee (1986) shows the cities London and Bristol as the thirdspaces for Friday and all the 'Negroes', though "[...] a great city [like London] is no place for [them]" (Coetzee, 1986, p. 47). According to Soja (1989, p. 80), these urban places are the "[...] product[s] of social translation, transformation, and experience [...]", and these socially-product spaces are constructed to form the identities like Susan Barton, Friday, or even Cruso. In the novel, it is apparent that Susan goes through a transition from her youth to adulthood, with a primary emphasis on attaining freedom within the urban confines of London and Bristol. At one point, she vows to Friday that she will set him 'free' in his 'master's home' once they return to 'England' (Coetzee, 1986, p. 41). She builds a castle in the air for him that "[...] life in England is better than life ever was on the island" (Coetzee, 1986, p. 41), whereas, very soon, she notices that "[...] London is strange to him", and she decides to send him back to Africa (Coetzee, 1986, p. 128).

Edward Soja's discussions on the production of space and power and especially 'Thirdspace', as he discloses, relied heavily on David Harvey, Henri Lefebvre, and Michel Foucault and their creation of "[...] a third, an alternative, [and] a significantly different logic or perspective" (Borch, 2002, p. 113). Susan Barton and her companion Friday are searching for their identities in the bustling city of London, which is commonly referred to as "[...] the metropolis of the English-speaking world" (Coetzee, 1993, p. 7). Some London-born poets like Ezra Pound and T. S. Eliot believed that "[...] [t]he high culture of the metropolis [London] provides them with compelling experiences which cannot, however, be embedded in their lives in any obvious way"

Page 4 of 6 Yary and Hanif

(Coetzee, 1993, p. 11). In this vein, and unlike Pound and Eliot, Coetzee follows Fredric Jameson's definition of a postmodern city like London, which is inextricably linked to "[...] the whole world system of multinational capitalism" (Jameson, 1991, p. 37). Coetzee's Susan defies Mr. Foe's advice to tell Friday's story and "[...] be silence on [his] tongue [...], as it is no better than offering a book for sale with papers in it quietly left empty" (Coetzee, 1986, p. 67). Susan Barton "[...] wishes to be recognized as the author of her own speech" (Dovey, 1989, p. 122) in the urban capitalist system of London and not under Mr. Foe's supreme dominance.

Expatiating on the issues of 'space' and 'spatial logic', Fredric Jameson, in his greatest work, *Postmodernism, or The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*, analyses postmodernity as the salient symptom of late capitalism (Jameson, 1991). Spatial recognition, to Jameson, is a grave concern of cultural identity, and its understanding seems critical to apprehend urban identities. Jameson details the concept of city space and refers to Kevin Lynch's 'imaginability' (Lynch, 1960). Lynch posits that individuals endeavor to construct a cognitive mapping of a city, which constitutes a personalized mental representation of the urban space. This map is distinctive for each person and mirrors their perception of the city. Lynch firmly contends that it is impossible for people to fashion a comprehensive mental map of the entire urban area. (Doherty, Graham, & Malek, 2001, p. 39). Likewise, Jameson modified Lynch's cognitive mapping that it is not a relationship between the individual and the state but their mutual relationship with an entire social system:

Surely this is precisely what the cognitive map is called upon to do in the narrower framework of daily life in the physical city: to enable a situational representation on the part of the individual subject to that vaster and properly unrepresentable totality, which is the ensemble of society's structure as a whole (Jameson, 1991, p. 51).

In the novel, Susan Barton attempts to map and represent their authentic selves, hers and Friday's, within Mr. Foe's total system. On the other hand, Mr. Foe's attitude about freedom in his self-governing system and in the urban city of London is that: freedom to him "[...] is [just] a word like any word. [...] a puff of air [and] seven words on a slate [...]" and he contends that he is "[...] not asked to turn Friday into a philosopher" (Coetzee, 1986, p. 149). Therefore, neither Susan nor Friday could mentally map their individualities in the urban city as well as in Mr. Foe's total system. They are unable to link themselves as individuals and their own social space; they are not able to cognitively map their positions in "[...] a mappable external world" (Jameson, 1991, p. 44).

In 'Of Other Spaces', Michel Foucault introduces a totally new approach to the space and spatial thinking of the world, named heterotopias. Foucault's entirely 'unimaginable' and 'semi-mythical' space has changed the approaches in humanities, urban studies, and architecture (Knight, 2016). His heterotopias are spaces of illusion that expose some real places. He opines that these heterotopias have "[...] the curious property of being in relation with all the other sites, but in such a way as to suspect, neutralize or invert the set of relationships designed, reflected or mirrored by themselves" (Foucault, 1997, p. 332). Foucault designates heterotopias as spaces that "[...] always presuppose a system of opening and closing that isolates them and makes them penetrable at one and at the same time" (Foucault, 1997, p. 335). In Coetzee's story, both Friday and Susan cannot draw a mental map of the urban space. The city that Susan once desired to be saved to live in has become a torturing place for her, and she thirsts for Friday's desert island: "When I was on the island I longed only to be elsewhere, or, in the word I then used, to be saved. But now, a longing stirs in me that I never thought I would feel. I close my eyes, and my soul takes leave of me, flying over the houses and streets, the woods and pastures, back to our old home, Cruso's and mine" (Coetzee, 1986, p. 50). She cannot feel herself in that alienated city because the streets "[...] are a bustle with people going about their business, slave, and free, Portuguese and Negro and Indian and half-breed" (Coetzee, 1986, p. 114). Urban space is not a place where Susan or Friday can see themselves voiced, but rather a space of illusion where they can neither imagine themselves nor map their social position.

# Panoptic gaze: spatial power is everything

In his *Discipline and Punishment* (1975), Michel Foucault took Jeremy Bentham's Panopticon and deployed it as "[...] a master trope in literary criticism" (Fludernik, 2016, p. 1). The idea of Panopticism proved in every respect fruitful in literary studies in the 1980s and '90s. Duly, Bentham's vision of surveillance became the theme of most novels, namely Angela Carter's *Nights at the Circus* (1984) and Sarah Waters's *Affinity* (1999), in these decades, and the final stage of it continued to the wake of 9/11 and the literature of terror. William Warner suggests that Foucault's adaptation of Bentham's panopticon "[...] becomes an expanding metonymy that evolves [...] from being a specific architectural plan to being a more

general technique to being a texture of the whole society" (Warner, 1991, p. 195). In this novel, Foe serves as a powerful emblem of an authoritative figure who embodies the leader of a vast urban network situated remotely from the eerie island. The novel explicitly perceives the Foucauldian paradigm of surveillance and Panopticism. The themes of confinement and observation are prevalent in the book when Susan and Friday are kept at Mr. Foe's house.

In Coetzee's castaway story, Coetzee thoroughly spotlights that the metropolitan space is a boiling cauldron of exercise of space power, authority, and constant surveillance. Michel Foucault's trailblazing scientific article, 'Of Other Spaces: Utopias and Heterotopias', is meticulously concerned with "[...] space as an institutionalized demarcation of structures of power" (Leach, 1997, p. 329). His discussion on Jeremy Bentham's panopticon "[...] provides a model which encapsulates the characteristics of a society founded on discipline" (Foucault, 1997, p. 329). In the mentioned discussion on power, Michel Foucault applies "[...] a ubiquitous form of monitoring and disciplining human behavior, a kind of invisible fence that provides simultaneous surveillance and disciplinary power over certain groups of people, notably prisoners" (Sudradjat, 2012, p. 32). In Foe, the unnamed stranger who calls herself Susan Barton is similar to a panoptical structure, a CCTV camera; she was probably tasked by Mr. Foe to monitor the actions of both Friday and Susan: "A stranger has been watching the house, a girl. She stands across the street for hours, making no effort to conceal herself. Passers-by stop and talk to her, but she ignores them. I ask, is she another of the bailiff's spies, or do you send her to observe us?" (Coetzee, 1986, p. 72). Once Friday is on the island, Susan in the city is kept under surveillance. Coetzee implies that similar to Daniel Defoe, the powerful center, Mr. Foe, exploits peripheries in the urban areas. The colonial space of the cities of London and Bristol should be situated within "[...] the spatiality of empire" (Wittenberg, 1995, p. 63).

The novel's text consists of a sequence of settings that reveals several kinds of imprisonment on the island and in the urban city. The novel's protagonist, Susan Barton, has been cast away to the 'wrong island' (Coetzee, 1986). On the island, she had been kept under surveillance by Cruso, and in the city, Mr. Foe kept a watch on her. Susan knows that authority is observing her and frequently asks about being kept under observation: "Do you have spies who peer in at the windows to see whether we are still in occupation? Do you pass by the house yourself daily in thick disguise? [...] Is Mr. Summers on your part? Have you taken up residence in his attic, where you pass the time pursuing through a spyglass the life we lead?" (Coetzee, 1986, p. 71). Benthamite panopticon of gaze is reproduced in Coetzee's *Foe* when Susan is being watched by Mr. Foe, although, Coetzee "[...] goes against the grains of Foucault" (Fludernik, 2016, p. 13) and Mr. Foe discloses himself at the end of the novel. In this regard, Homi Bhabha relies on Foucault and employs the colonial discourse "[...] as an apparatus of power [...]" which "[...] its predominant strategic function is the creation of a space for subject peoples' through the production of knowledge in terms of which surveillance is exercised" (Bhabha, 1994, p. 100). This apparatus was less drastic for both Susana and Friday in the island than in the 'master's home' (Coetzee, 1986).

#### Conclusion

Foe exposes a spatialized power through the structures of the narrative. Its author, JM Coetzee, sets a collection of opposing terms side by side: silence and voice, center and periphery, and city and island, and he epitomizes them in his main characters. Unlike Robinson Crusoe, we believe Coetzee's Foe gives prominence to space and geography rather than war, cannibals, and the adventurous man in the colonial discourse. In Coetzee's novel, Cruso dies very soon, and the story's setting shifts between Bristol and London. Friday and Susan are consistently reminded of their master's presence and authority, as it is a recurring aspect of their position as subordinates. This capitalist metropolis does not bestow them any sense of freedom; instead, it detains them from a city and a more excellent island where they are constantly being watched. Under Mr. Foe's supreme power, Susan Barton cannot voice herself, yet Susan narrates the story and even gives voice to the tongueless Friday. Coetzee tends to culminate his story in a postmodern way. Susan's abducted daughter is still missed in the novel, and Susan is no longer eager to find her. The novel fails to represent the marginalized voices adequately, and even Susan Barton cannot assist in this matter. There are some interstices which the readers should fill. The readers do not know about the true story of Friday's tongue or the little girl in the story named Susan Barton. Coetzee's emphasis in Foe is on the city, and he criticizes the power of the Metropolis in shaping colonized people's identities.

Page 6 of 6 Yary and Hanif

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