

The American Dusklands

What We Can Learn About Empire from JM Coetzee

by JEREMY HOLT '20

"Like everything else they withered before us. We bathed them in seas of fire, praying for the miracle. In the heart of the flame their bodies glowed with heavenly light; in our ears their voices rang; but when the fire died they were only ash."

So wrote South African author and future Nobel laureate JM Coetzee (pronounced Keut-SEE-eh) in his 1974 novel "Dusklands." Written at the climax of American involvement in Vietnam, "Dusklands" was deemed remarkable in its ability to capture the anxieties and repressions of colonial powers.

Today, nearly fifty years and a handful of wars later, Coetzee's book continues to provide a devastating vision of the United States' behavior in the world. In turbulent times America would do well to listen to its thesis: that approaching the world as a conqueror is every bit as toxic for the conquering ego as it is for that of the subjugated.

"Dusklands" deals with American classicist Eugene Dawn, who is contracted by the government to design a psychological warfare campaign for use against North Vietnamese civilians. Harrowed by the evil of his task, Dawn gradually slips into insanity, but with his fall comes a paradoxical clarity on the roots of the American invasion, buried in the national subconscious.

America, Dawn realizes, as a nation of impossible power in a world with no equals for it, is elementally lonely: "Our nightmare was that since whatever we reached for slipped like smoke through our fingers, we did not exist; that since whatever we embraced wilted, we were all that existed." In coming to Vietnam,

America had irrationally hoped to find a rival that could withstand it where others had collapsed. Such a rival would be an entity, a Lacanian Other, from which America could finally find validation and self-definition. "If you prove yourself, we shouted, you will prove us too, and we will love you endlessly and shower you with gifts."

But in Coetzee's narrative, the Vietnam of the American imagination "withered," and America, left with its existential loneliness, lost the will to fight against the real Vietcong. Unfulfilled, it continues to search the world for the Other.

Readers leave "Dusklands" with a sense of futility about America's "mission." The story's implicit tragedy, after all, is that as long as a powerful America conceives of the world in terms of what it can and cannot conquer, desiring to meet an equal Other, it will only reach conclusion when its search leads it to either subsume the entire world or be destroyed at the Other's hands.

Coetzee would speak of the 2003 U.S. invasion of Iraq in terms of that search. Despite the fact that Iraq was far weaker in real terms than the United States, American politicians liked to frame the country under Saddam Hussein as an "existential threat" that warranted immediate engagement. The fantasy of an Iraqi nuclear arsenal helped bolster the country as the Other in the American (irrational)



Mt. Rushmore
2019
Faheem Dyer

imagination, a discourse that subverted facts known to America's "rational" faculties, the C.I.A. and the State Department. When the invasion came, Saddam fell in one month and his nuclear arsenal never materialized. Like Vietnam, Iraq had been reduced to ash, and had proven itself to be far from the validating Other or "existential threat" America had desired. Again, America lost the will to continue fighting, and Iraq soon fell into Vietnam-like disorder.

Eight years after the U.S. exit from Iraq, there is again talk of war; North Korea, Iran, and Venezuela have been mentioned as possible targets of America's projections.

Coetzee's image of the conquering ego is based on the conqueror's own perceptions of its ability. Now, in a world where other states are rising in power, an America that still fears aloneness will almost certainly find the Other if it looks for it; not from Iran or North Korea, but from the newly powerful states that will oppose America's efforts to disrupt the global balance of power. Such a meeting, born of America's collective, persistent irrationality, would be catastrophic.

Coetzee writes not to treat the "lonely conqueror" pathology, but to diagnose it. He would likely be doubtful about America overcoming what he frames as a complex buried so deeply in the national

psyche, even if America were to successfully parse a multipolar world or interact more constructively with other nations. Though critical theory's abstractness and pessimism are understandably unpopular in foreign policy circles, America would do well to heed Coetzee's warnings that irrationality undergirds so much of its global behavior and must be exposed and understood.

As he writes: "I speak to the broken halves of all our selves and tell them to embrace, loving the worst in us equally with the best." •

Bio-Powerless

China and State-Sponsored Corporate Eugenics

by JACOB BEARD '21

During her Senate campaign in 2012, Elizabeth Warren had been accused of falsely claiming Native American heritage for social clout. After years of controversy surrounding this issue, she took a DNA test and received her results in October of 2018. The conclusion only served to cause more controversy, especially among prominent Native American figures who were critical of the idea of using genetic test results to determine heritage. According to these figures, Warren's test results delegitimize and dishonor members of their community whose ancestries have been properly verified. DNA tests can be socially harmful to indigenous communities, but their danger exceeds American social injustices in favor of something far worse: the increased global prevalence and acceptance of public access to genetic evidence has eugenic potential.

In a more global setting, China has been collecting genetic samples, including fingerprints and blood samples, of its citizens with help from the United States. Officials claim that the information has aided crime prevention in China. But at what cost? The coercive, Nineteen-Eighty-Four-esque nature of this practice is dystopian to say the least, and this violates both the privacy and safety of its citizens. Whenever genetic information is collected, especially during a time where global fascism is on the rise, eugenics is the inevitable progression.

During the Second World War, Germany started targeting people with physical or mental disabilities, homosexuals, criminals, and anyone who did not fit the Aryan archetype. These people were considered "life unworthy of life" by the Nazis. As a result, they were sent to concentration camps and exterminated. China is also no stranger to attempting to determine who is worthy of life, which can be seen in the country's history of limiting the amount of children a family can have. The country enforced policy that was intended for population control and enforced by mandatory contraception, but it often led to parents choosing children based on ability or sex. Because able-bodied boys were regarded more favorably, the amount of people with disabilities and the amount of women in China dwindled in the late twentieth

century. This is a direct form of eugenics that, intentionally or not, targets oppressed individuals and treats them as subordinate.

Once a group in society is considered inferior, a domino effect of marginalization and oppression occurs. It is incredibly terrifying, therefore, to see that China is using DNA information to target criminals, especially considering what a strikingly similar approach the Nazis took. Normally this type of information about China is something to take with a grain of salt. Reports of this sort of Orwellian human experimentation frequently boil down to something that is overblown in order to create an orientalist narrative about China, but to dismiss this story outright seems like a poor decision.

The reality is that worries about genetic tests are quite rational; they are increasing in popularity across the globe. Services like Ancestry and 23andMe are engaging in what one might call "genetic capitalism," where genetic information is transformed and commodified. Of course, the criticism here is obvious; private corporations are profiting off of the insecurities people have about their cultural identities.

This information is much more powerful than simply a means of income, though. The real danger arises

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New Zealand and What Colonialism Leaves Behind

by MORGAN DELAHUNT '19

Off in Aotearoa (Māori) rests New Zealand, a country full of sheep, mountainous regions with miles of breathtaking views, black sand beaches, rugby, and racist ideology. To be more exact, colonial ideology that uses racism as an oppressive standard to sustain British-inspired whiteness. New Zealand has a history of displacing their native people, the Māori, by pushing them off sacred land.

While I was abroad in Auckland, NZ, my roommate Sammie told me she was Māori and she taught me much about the oppressive stereotypes people place on her and her people; they're lazy, uneducated, and more impoverished than white people. And even though many of the names used for streets, buildings, and towns are Māori, I soon realized that a majority of the white people I talked to brushed off the names as long and impossible to say. Everyone is taught Māori throughout their schooling before university, and Auckland U. has a Māori major. But what cannot be overlooked is the lack of attention Māori students and the culture receive throughout New Zealand. The displacement of Māori history lies within the Treaty of Waitangi that exchanged land and rights based on equality between the British and Māori. But because of a language barrier between the two, the British tricked the Māori into exchanging land for blankets, clothes and guns. This exchange is not a symbol of equality between British and Māori people and only leads to the issues the New Zealand people face today with racism.

But it isn't only the Māori culture and people that are on the receiving end of endless stereotypes and oppression. While there it wasn't hard to notice the massive immigrant and refugee population, where I met people from all over the world who lived year round in Auckland — people from Israel, South Africa, India, China, Japan, and Singapore, to name a few. What became apparent to me was the sheer racism that consistently appeared especially while singing a Kanye West or Jay-Z song at a bar. After my receiving a text from my flatmate asking, "where are you N****" I was not only disgusted but knew I had to shut it down immediately. But I heard it everywhere and it didn't stop with one inflammatory spout. According

when this information inevitably becomes weaponized by the state. It is entirely possible, and arguably probable, that these ancestral services could have their information and records purchased by governments across the world.

A state's acquisition of genetic information is directly a form of Foucault's concept of biopower, which treats genetics as a tool of the state to install discriminatory policies. These reforms could start with a simple policy that has actually already been considered in various governmental systems: the idea that one must be informed and intelligent to vote. This raises a few issues, mainly about how intelligence should be measured. Many would wrongfully argue that certain mental disabilities are grounds for disqualification. With the state having access to genetic information, the government could determine exactly which people are likely to have this disability and delegitimize their political agency.

This concept extends beyond ability and into identities such as sex, race, and immigration status, too. Once an oppressed group has their political power nullified, it becomes easier for the state to justify tangible means of dehumanization. The central government can deny a group access to services, or even advocate for their genocide, which history has shown to occur. The state's access to genetic information is inherently dangerous, especially to those that are already victims of the hegemonic power structure in place.

It is evident that China is using genetic information against a marginalized group already. It is starting as something that most people can justify in their minds; for now, it is simply a way to stop crime and catch criminals. China isn't going to throw that information out when they have caught their suspects, however. Instead, one should anticipate that they will use that information to justify other actions against people they might deem necessary. Today, it is simple law and order, but tomorrow it could be China coming to the conclusion that a certain genetic trait makes someone predisposed to crime, and therefore a danger to society that must be taken care of. When that day comes, you had better hope that you have the right ancestors. •

to my flatmates, Asians were smelly and annoyingly loud. Something they didn't realize when I tried to shut down these generalizations is that they are actually ingrained with the idea that white people are superior to those of a different skin color and culture than them. If you were not, in their sense 'kiwi-ized,' just like you may be 'Americanized,' then you were excluded from an English-speaking, white, normalized culture.

The United States has similar history in erasing native cultures that came before our own American one. Still, as our own immigrants try to live up to what it means to be American, they risk losing their own culture for the sake of being recognized as an English-speaking, 'normal' American. With the racist background the United States has, I was able to recognize a similar undergirding in New Zealand culture that tries to appropriate not only Māori, but a lot of Asian, and Afro-American culture, some of that culture being based in oppressive language and history.

When a white terrorist massacred fifty people and wounded fifty more with a semi-automatic gun, New Zealand's safe world shattered. Or more justly said, their white superiority shattered; it was seen for what it was, deadly, violent and aggressive. For all of the racism I witnessed in New Zealand, this was the final action that was taken upon a Muslim community that thrives in Auckland, but is underrepresented as a minority religion and race. It is only now ironic that the British gained land, as well as guns from the Māori.

For the community of Kiwis there, to say "This is not our New Zealand" is not enough. It is a way of

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pushing off the truth of the matter: for centuries, New Zealand has kept foundations and institutions of white colonial ideology intact. Starting from pushing the Māori people off their sacred land and transitioning their culture into one that the British settlers could appropriate and pass off as their own, a culture that is undermined through the brushing off of its significance to ancestors.

Through the lens of blasé New Zealand attitudes, I still applaud Jacinda Ardern for doing what the United States and many terror-stricken countries have not been able to do, ban semi-automatic guns. We can't place all the blame on the guns, but outlawing them is a first step to hopefully realizing that, yes, this is your New Zealand and it can be a more accepting place. That yes, your culture does allow white transgressions on a minority immigrant and Māori culture. Acknowledge the history, acknowledge, for safety's sake, and life's sake, that just because your country is displaced from adjoining land, it will not be dismissed from justice. Acknowledge the way colonialist and white supremacist ideology have founded your long-held beliefs and seeped sometimes subtly and other times overtly into your institutions of education and language. It is an acknowledgement I wish American politics would realize about the immigrants that live among us and the people whose history we have hidden beneath AP History textbooks. Gun control does not fix the years of systemic oppression in either New Zealand or the United States, but it does bring one country closer to humanity and holding those who do not show it accountable. Ardern's policy sets New Zealand on the right path to calling out white supremacy and terrorism which is important if they are to ever bring peace and acceptance and healing to the immigrant and native populations that find safety in New Zealand's mountainous regions. •

What Putin Really Wants

by NICK LEKKAS '20

Russian foreign policy is indisputably one of the most hotly discussed topics in America today. Whether relating to the masked special forces operatives who seized Crimea in a matter of days to the recent revelations of election interference in the United States and several European democracies, Vladimir Putin's foreign policy decisions are on the forefront of much of the world's geopolitical affairs. Many in the West rush to label the Russian president an authoritarian leader who seeks to reestablish the former glory of the Soviet Union by brazenly and aggressively standing up to the United States, NATO, and the European Union. The truth, however is that Putin's foreign policy decision-making is far more complex and nuanced. Although he may come across as a cold and calculated leader who is always planning his next move to undermine Western influence, what Putin and Russia truly seek is recognition on the international stage.

For as long as it has existed, Russia has sought to be recognized as one of the key actors in international politics and viewed at the same level of influence and power as the predominant superpowers of the world. This can be seen at many points in Russia's history where its rulers put forward policies that greatly enhanced the country's cultural, military, and technological capabilities. Yet after a period of immense success and progress, Russia would inevitably tumble into a period of political and economic decline until another strong leader came forth promising to return the Russian people to a time of prosperity and respect. Russian ethnic pride has always highly valued strength in leadership, and as such the country has continually rallied behind an individual whom they perceive as strong and capable of fixing its problems. This is due to the fact that, in the eyes of

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its people, Russia can only be a strong country if it is guided by a strong leader. If not, another power will inevitably invade the country, which is something the Russian people will never tolerate.

Ever since he was elected President of the Russian Federation in 2000, Vladimir Putin has been regarded as the strong leader that Russia so desperately sought after the collapse in the Soviet Union. He not only brought an impoverished Russia out of a post-Communist depression and curbed the power of the country's gang of oligarchs, but he also poured millions of rubles of the federal budget into a massive overhaul of the army. He has also adopted an increasingly aggressive stance toward the U.S. and NATO, claiming that they present the two greatest threats to Russian national interests in the 21st century. This way of thinking is nothing new; with previous countries such as France and Germany having come very close to overtaking Russia in the 19th and 20th centuries, Putin's rhetoric has established an image that both American and NATO forces are the newest form of Western attempts to curb Russia's expansive interests.

Today, Russia's military and political influence has been felt across the world. Ranging from military invasions in Ukraine and Georgia disguised as interventions meant to protect ethnic Russians to hacks on the Democratic National Committee servers in an effort to meddle in United States elections, Putin has expressed in taking an increasingly hostile stance against the West. By doing so, he satisfies two important roles as the leader of Russia which bolster both the international and domestic perceptions of Russia. First, he preserves Russian national interests by staying off the United States and NATO, whom Russia perceives to be the predominant threats to its security. Secondly, by standing up to the United States, who after the collapse of the Soviet Union seemed to be the world's sole superpower, Putin has embodied the Russian image of a determined and steadfast leader who remains unwavering amidst American attempts to contain Russia's rise as one of the world's modern global powers.

By carefully cultivating an image of a Russia free of Western influence and determined to achieve its goals, Putin hopes that the international community will finally realize that Russia is a nation that cannot and will not be treated as a subordinate to the established powers in Europe and America, but rather as an equal who shifts the balance of power further towards the East. •

Exploring Chinese Identity At the Movies

by YAO LAN '19

It was the Lunar New Year. On a cold, sunny afternoon, I went to Boston to meet friends and to watch a sci-fi movie made in China, “The Wandering Earth”. It was adapted from a novel of the same name by a big-time writer Liu Cixin, whose *The Three-Body Problem* won a Hugo Award for Best Novel in 2015. The film was and is a cultural juggernaut, and I certainly felt the popularity going into that AMC in Boston. We waited a week after its opening to finally get nice seats; the hall was filled with Chinese people, mostly young students like me, ready to hear some authentic Mandarin and view our home country on the big screen in a hopefully different light.

Some cinematic experiences are un-replicable and once in a lifetime. I’m reminded of that gentle night when I travelled across Miami to watch the Polish black-and-white music film “Cold War” in an art cinema with a rosé in my hand, in a room full of baby boomers. I don’t usually watch Chinese commercial films in theaters, and watching “The Wandering Earth” was unlike my other theater visits. I heard my mother tongue in a foreign country, I shared this experience with fellow Chinese youngsters, and to some extent, I felt spoken to. It was something, at least, to feel my Chinese identity emphasized on the outside. But walking out onto streets of a windy Boston, I couldn’t help but ponder exactly how Chinese this movie is.

“The Wandering Earth” is the second highest grossing film in mainland China’s cinematic history. It stars Wu Jing, a superstar actor who also helmed China’s highest grossing film, the deeply patriotic “Wolf Warrior 2.” A state-of-the-art blockbuster with Wu Jing as the face, therefore, “The Wandering Earth” is associated with a heavily nationalistic undertone in media campaigns and reviews. Nonetheless it is has been a major hit; even on the other side of the Earth, discussions were heated and tickets sold fast.

Unlike a typical Hollywood post-apocalyptic film where American heroes are at the forefront of saving humanity, this film puts Chinese people at the core with the task to save the day, and also spends some screen time to fit other nationalities in it. It follows that a well-praised theme of

internationalism is present— or it at least seems so. What the film actually does is include one Russian astronaut as a sidekick, and many nameless foreigners to be “the people”, who when needed, generously lend their hands for the protagonists. Fans claim that in doing so, the film is not an American-style story of individual heroism where different nationalities actually have their parts, and that it just so happens that the Chinese were the ones who saved Earth.

The other nationalities, however, do not have their own plot lines; their existences only serve the function of propelling the story for the Chinese protagonists; they don’t even have names. To paraphrase one critic: real internationalism means to respect each culture and each country’s independence, instead of having one country as the leader, the rest as just passive followers. In fact, the film showcases different cultures in a very Hollywood way; they are a collective of “others” at the background with very little individual portrait, narrative function, or agency. We’re used to understanding how Hollywood shies away from telling stories of minorities and puts token characters in productions centered on white people, as if shouting political correctness makes it really multicultural. Shedding the skin of “internationalism” from “The Wandering Earth”, we’re left with a tale as old as time, but this time, it’s the Chinese incarnation. Is it even Chinese enough?

There are scenes of the underground city where the remaining people live, with shots of mahjong, street vendors, hot pot and tea house, all Chinese traditional items and activities. But beyond those few elements shown at the beginning, the entire movie isn’t uniquely Chinese. One could concede that in a post-apocalyptic world, all the cultural sights would be drastically different from what we see today, but then it’s even more important to

“The Wandering Earth”
2019
IMDb



find something central to Chinese values and cultures for viewers of this age to identify and empathize with. The story revolves around a family of three generations, and many people claim it is the emphasis of family that makes it uniquely Chinese. However, if the main characters were substituted to be other ethnicities, the plot won’t be impacted in a significant way. Valuing family isn’t unique to Chinese identity. The sheer act of Chinese people saving the day doesn’t make the story Chinese either. Still, it simply looks like a Hollywood production with Chinese faces in it, from special effects and editing, to execution in storytelling, like familiar tropes of rebellious teenagers, kitsch-like moments of sentimentality, and acts of heroism spanning out the entire movie. Perhaps the creators were attempting to show the universal through the particular; but instead the universal stops at a superficial level, while the particular isn’t thoroughly cooked to stand on its own either.

I had hopes that a major production from a non-western country might provide a distinctive cultural narrative, challenge the dominant American perspective, and illustrate local cultures and native identities; but not only did *The Wandering Earth* fail to deliver an organic localization of pop genres like sci-fi, it also tells the story with an American worldview. Especially as a Chinese living overseas, I need to see more than just gestures toward Chinese culture, and I need to feel a sense of pride espoused unequivocally by this film for me to wholeheartedly jump on the bandwagon. I didn’t feel deeply moved; I didn’t feel what’s supposed to be there across time and space; I didn’t feel recognized for being Chinese. Disappointment would be an understatement.

What’s worse is that many fans see this film as a source of national pride, and they morally blackmail anyone who acted differently. Some anti-nationalist

audiences went on Douban.com (the Chinese equivalent of IMDb) to give a lower score, and that attracted many attacks from the moral high ground who believe “The Wandering Earth” is the epitome of Chinese filmmaking techniques, and hence the peak of our development. Most discussions about this film extend beyond the realm of filmmaking as an art; instead nationalism has hijacked and engulfed the public space, and it became almost impossible to have an open and honest debate. Ironically, public fanaticism about anything that remotely touches on Chinese identity, Chinese sovereignty, and Chinese power is seen as a uniquely Chinese phenomenon, in all its postmodern and surreal ways. Even that might need to be called into question, though since right-wing nationalism in on the rise globally, not even that can be unique to China.

How is a film that merely scratches the surface in claiming to challenge dominant Western narratives a national pride? In all its glory, “The Wandering Earth” reflects a mentality rampant in contemporary Chinese society: to be a great power is to replace American hegemony. The US is the imaginary opponent to Chinese greatness, in both foreign policy and socio-cultural activities. The making of good films is falsely equated to making films like Hollywood. As a consumer of Hollywood films, I can’t say I’m inclined to categorically despise them, but must one’s ambition stop short of Hollywood standards? Wouldn’t it be more inspiring if the Chinese film industry opened up a whole new realm for the art, in a uniquely non-Western way?

Take a step back, does China have to aim for the US to achieve greatness? Edward Said, in his text *Orientalism*, presents that Orientalism is the way of constructing one’s identity as mirrored to an imaginary Other. Historically, the West has substantiated its own identity by standing opposite to those of the East, including the Near East (Jewish-Palestinian), Middle East (Arabic, Persian) and Far East (Chinese, Japanese, etc). Without the Other, there wouldn’t be the One. Contemporary Chinese have turned the tables, and are viewing themselves in the othering light – it is self-Orientalization for China to define itself with an American lens. They have internalized Orientalism like women who have internalized misogyny. A few centuries since the initial steps of colonization, we’re still haunted by its imperialist ghost. The West still defines the East, and the East has accepted it.

Said himself, like other post-structuralists is deterministic, offering no way out. At least I can say, Chinese standing in the international arena shouldn’t be in relation to American greatness. We are above that. •