Monkey Trouble

Christopher Peterson

Published by Fordham University Press

Peterson, Christopher. 
Monkey Trouble: The Scandal of Posthumanism. 

For additional information about this book
https://muse.jhu.edu/book/55730

For content related to this chapter
https://muse.jhu.edu/related_content?type=book&id=2021783
J. M. Coetzee’s *Foe* revolves around an alleged absence. According to
Crusoe, Friday cannot speak by force of a cruel slave master having cut out
his tongue. Its loss recalls von Max’s painting *Monkeys as Art Critics* that I
analyzed in the introduction. Whereas the tongue of the painting’s central
female monkey pokes out at the viewer as if to satirize the humanist and
masculinist presuppositions of feminine and animal lack, this deprivation is
thoroughly racialized in the case of Friday. Von Max’s painting is not, by
itself, racially suggestive, but one cannot read it alongside *Foe* without
recalling the long racist history of associating black people with apes.2

*Foe* retells Defoe’s *Robinson Crusoe* from the perspective of a woman
named Susan Barton who finds herself shipwrecked on the same island
with Friday and Cruso (spelled sans “e”). They are eventually rescued, but
Cruso dies en route to England, where Susan tracks down the novelist
Daniel Foe in hopes that he will help her write a manuscript recounting her
adventures. In addition to chronicling her experiences on the island, Susan
attempts to restore language to Friday. After initially trying to teach him
the names of everyday objects, and later engaging in a failed musical duet
using two of Foe’s flutes, she finally settles on the idea of teaching him to
write. She quickly becomes frustrated with her pupil’s lack of progress, as he only seems capable of threading together an incoherent string of letters as well as figures that resemble “row upon row of eyes upon feet: walking eyes.”

Susan’s motivation to communicate with Friday is not as straightforward as it might first appear. Her apparently other-oriented gift of language both conceals and reveals what she elsewhere terms her “desire for answering speech,” which she likens to “the desire for the embrace of, the embrace by, another being.” In other words, her ostensibly altruistic reasons for restoring Friday’s voice obscure her own desire for language and its promise of intersubjective immediacy. Would Friday want to speak even if he could? Moreover, how can we be absolutely certain that he is physically incapable of speech? As Lewis MacLeod observes, the novel provides no definitive evidence that Friday is lacking a tongue. As with Susan, we can only take Crusoe’s word for it. Derek Attridge also remarks upon the lack of conclusive evidence that Friday’s tongue is absent. Even so, he focuses almost exclusively on silence as a product of dominant discourses. Aligning the colonial violence of Friday’s silencing, the struggles over authorial voice that arise from Susan’s desire to have her story told, and the larger historical processes of literary canonization, Attridge writes, “all canons rest on exclusion; the voice they give to some can be heard by virtue of the silence they impose on others.” Yet literary texts do not “speak” precisely in the same manner as living subjects. The legitimation of certain texts at the expense of others is not strictly analogous to Friday’s silence, and not only because we cannot rule out the possibility that it is willfully performed rather than repressively imposed. Unlike the metaphorically silenced literary text, a speechless living subject does not necessarily dwell in silence.

The penultimate chapter of the novel resolves on the weakly optimistic note that Susan’s efforts might finally pay off. After taking a brief respite from their lessons, she returns to discover Friday seated at a table wearing Foe’s robes and wig, busily smudging the papers with sequences of the letter o. “It is a beginning,” says Foe. “Tomorrow you must teach him a.”

The fourth and final section of the novel immediately follows, consisting of two short fragments narrated by a first-person voice whose identity remains undisclosed. The narration begins by repeating the opening line of section three, which was originally told in the past tense from Susan’s perspective but is now given in the present tense: “The staircase is dark and mean.” As if to foster the impression that Susan and this voice bear a common perspective, the narrator eventually descends into the water in
the same area where Susan observed Friday casting flower petals, a mysterious ritual that she had earlier speculated marked the watery grave of a friend or family member who drowned in the wreck. That this “I” describes Susan, Friday, and Foe as now dead means, however, that none of them can inhabit the grammatical position of narrator.

This unidentified “I” thus floats among the wreckage of the sunken ship, never anchoring itself to any referential ground, as if conforming to the dream logic of Freudian “condensation” whereby more than one experience and identity are combined and manifest in a single dream image. Yet we are nevertheless bidden to loosely tether this voice to Friday insofar as his linguistic abilities and the identity of the final section’s narrator are equally the novel’s most conspicuous and most unfathomable unknowns. Although the source of the narration is not finally knowable, the impenetrability of Friday that preoccupies Susan invites us to associate this voice with him as much as with her. Whereas Friday is a body without a voice, the narrator is a voice without an identifiable body. Not by accident does the final section of the novel follow immediately after Friday learns to write “rows and rows of the letter o tightly packed together.”

The letter o visually marks a hole or opening through which emerges a new voice that is not strictly identified with Friday, but which nevertheless draws us inward, giving us to think that the novel might finally fasten the buttonhole that Susan invoked earlier as a figure for Friday’s nonexistent tongue.

If Friday’s o inscribes both an opening and an absence, it also graphically closes in on itself. Like the buttonhole that figures the tongueless mouth, the o inscribes an aporia that both opens and closes, reveals and conceals. The reader thus slips through this orificial o into a series of enclosed spaces, beginning with the narrator’s ascent along a dark staircase in Foe’s house that leads to a dim, oxygen-deprived room (“my matches will not strike”). Here we find the dead bodies of Susan and Foe exhibiting signs of advanced decay, and a supine Friday harboring only a faint pulse.

The second half of the section abruptly shifts location to the submerged wreck of Crusoe’s ship, where the narrator finds Friday half buried in the sand and seemingly deceased, and the dead bodies of Susan and Foe appear bloated from prolonged submersion. “What is this ship?” the narrator asks Friday. Grasping the futility of eliciting a response, the voice continues: “But this is not a place of words. Each syllable, as it comes out, is caught and filled with water and diffused. This is a place where bodies are their own signs. It is the home of Friday.” What does it mean that we have arrived at the home of Friday? And what is the status of this narrative voice that leads us to the humanly uninhabitable bottom of the ocean floor, a place where
language is thoroughly inoperable, a place that cannot properly be narrated by any living, breathing human “I”?

Susan’s preoccupation with giving voice to Friday is consistently framed in terms of a language of penetration that would access his hidden interiority: through the eye, mouth, or ear. When Susan recounts having witnessed Friday scattering the flower petals, Foe surmises that it may in fact have been a slave ship rather than a merchantman (despite Cruso’s claim to the contrary), in which case the boat would have marked the burial place of “hundreds of his fellow-slaves—or their skeletons—still chained in the wreck, the gay little fish (that you spoke of) flitting through their eyesockets.” Foe continues: “Friday rows his log of wood across the surface of the dark pupil—or the dead socket—of an eye staring up at him from the floor of the sea. He rows across it and is safe. To us he leaves the task of descending into that eye.” Whereas Foe employs the image of an empty eye socket in order to figure his descent into the mind of Friday, Susan invokes a different orifice: “It is for us to open Friday’s mouth and hear what it holds: silence, perhaps, or a roar, like the roar of a seashell held to the ear.” When Susan hears that Friday’s tongue has been removed, she develops an absolute aversion to Friday’s mouth, refusing to examine its dark recesses when Cruso commands her to do so. Yet the mouth as both an anatomical and *figurative* void is cited frequently throughout the novel, culminating in the final two paragraphs:

He turns and turns till he lies at full length, his face to my face. The skin is tight across his bones, his lips are drawn back. I pass a fingernail across his teeth, trying to find a way in.

His mouth opens. From inside him comes a slow stream, without breath, without interruption. It flows up through his body and out upon me; it passes through the cabin, through the wreck; washing the cliffs and shores of the island, it runs northward and southward to the ends of the earth. Soft and cold, dark and unending, it beats against my eyelids, against the skin of my face.

Eye sockets, mouths, ears, dark suffocating rooms, deep-sea shipwrecks—these spaces are all aligned with the hidden depths of Friday that Susan longs to plumb. To access this interiority, she must give Friday a voice. Yet her many speeches on the value of speech read like a litany of metaphysical, humanist, and political platitudes—all centered on the indubitable value of speech over silence:

If the company of brutes had been enough for me, I might have lived most happily on my island. But who, accustomed to the fullness of
human speech, can be content with caws and chirps and screeches, and the barking of seals, and the moan of the wind?\textsuperscript{16}

To live in silence is to live like the whales, great castles of flesh floating leagues apart one from another, or like the spiders, sitting each alone at the heart of his web, which to him is the entire world.\textsuperscript{17}

Many stories can be told of Friday’s tongue, but the true story is buried within Friday, who is mute. The true story will not be heard till by art we have found a means of giving voice to Friday.\textsuperscript{18}

According to Susan, language is essentially human; hence, to be bereft of speech is to dwell within an alienating silence that renders one less than human, notwithstanding the fact that Friday is not also deaf, and therefore cannot be likened to an animal existing in absolute isolation from others, such as a whale or a spider (both species of which are capable of communicating with other living beings, notwithstanding Susan’s simile). Figuring Friday as living in silence, Susan thus projects onto him her experience of his absent voice, her experience of his silence.

In his analysis of Coetzee’s \textit{The Life and Times of Michael K}, Ato Quayson suggests that the eponymous character’s elective silence “might be taken as an illustration of the autistic spectrum.”\textsuperscript{19} Although he briefly compares the “scrupulous silence” that Michael and Friday both “enjoin upon themselves,” the possibility that the latter’s silence is volitional is nevertheless discarded when Quayson asserts that Friday “is certainly mutilated and without a tongue.”\textsuperscript{20} Whether Friday does or does not possess a tongue, and whether he intentionally withholds speech from Susan or is physically incapable of it, it seems crucial to counter her assumption that he inhabits a self-enclosed world utterly cut off from language. Nowhere in \textit{Foe} does Friday “speak” to the reader in the manner of interior monologue. Yet the sequence of interior spaces described in the novel’s final section gives us to believe that we might finally puncture the bubble that surrounds him. On the brink of giving us his story only to take it away, \textit{Foe} interrogates the political platitude of giving voice, which is to say the devotion to speech (whether literal or metaphorical) as evidence of the plenitude of political recognition and presence, a view that rests on an uninterrogated conception of language as property.\textsuperscript{21} As I argued in chapter 1, we do not own language. Language is \textit{leased} from language itself. Lessees without lessors, we have no choice but to sign a “contract” that gives access to the language in which we dwell but do not fully inhabit.

If language is originarily alien to each and every speaking human, even to the vast majority of those whose tongues have not been violently severed, then any claim of property or proximity that would permit language to
inhabit us, and vice versa, is undermined by an irremediable ex-habitation. Our mother “tongue” is inherently excised, cut off from ourselves. To speak of the loss of language in such general terms is undoubtedly to invite the de rigueur accusation of “eliding the specificity” of colonial violence, especially the physical brutality that results in the actual loss of one’s tongue. Yet I wager that we must risk this allegation in order to demonstrate how the investment in language as property fails to recognize its own colonializing imperatives. As Derrida argues, “the master does not possess exclusively, and naturally, what he calls his language.”

On the contrary, the master employs “force or cunning” through discursive, educational, and military means in order to reinforce the fiction of his linguistic possession. He maintains:

[We should not] efface the arrogant specificity or the traumatizing brutality of what is called modern colonial war in the “strictest definition” of the expression. . . . But what if, while being attentive to the most rigorous distinctions and respecting the respect of the respectable, we cannot and must not lose sight of this obscure common power, this colonial impulse which will have begun by insinuating itself into, overrunning without delay, what they call, by an expression worn enough to give up the ghost, “the relationship to the other”! or “openness to the other.”

Although Derrida is commonly interpreted as a thinker of difference and alterity, his emphasis here on the monolingual and the monological complicates this received view. Slogans such as “openness to the other” permeate scholarship on race, gender, class, sexuality, and postcoloniality. Many readers have often associated Derrida with a similar imperative to respect alterity, especially given the Levinasian echoes that resound throughout his work. Yet the alliterative, repetitive language of “respecting the respect of the respectable” clearly satirizes various discourses of alterity that piously call for a wholly nonviolent, nonappropriative relation to others.

In The Monolingualism of the Other, Derrida stresses the sovereignty that “tends, repressively and irrepressibly, to reduce language to the One,” an “impassable, indisputable . . . inexhaustible solipsism,” a drift toward the solitary self whose gravity he feels as strongly as does anyone else: “I am monolingual. My monolingualism dwells, and I call it my dwelling; it feels like one to me, and I remain in it and inhabit it. It inhabits me. The monolingualism in which I draw my very breath is, for me, my element.” That he freely admits his own complicity in this solipsism will seem anomalous to readers inclined to view him simply as an advocate of difference. Yet a
preoccupation with an insuperable solipsism can be traced all the way back to *Voice and Phenomenon* (1967). When Derrida fleetingly remarks in *The Monolingualism of the Other* that our originary linguistic alienation introduces the phantasm of “hearing-on oneself-speak in order to mean-to-say [pour vouloir-dire],” he is alluding to Husserl’s discussion of interior monologue in the *Logical Investigations*, which is the central focus of *Voice and Phenomenon*. For Husserl, interior monologue promises a realm of pure expression without communicative intent (when I “speak” to myself silently I do not indicate anything existent in the exterior world). Silent soliloquy involves “no function of indicating the existence of mental acts . . . for the acts in question are themselves experienced by us at that very moment.” For Husserl—since it requires the exteriorization of inner mental life in relation to an auditor who perceives such speech as indications or signs of the speaker’s thoughts—silent speech has no need for indication because speaker and hearer are identical. Derrida’s crucial contribution in *Voice and Phenomenon*, however, is to call into question the possibility of this space of pure interiority, utterly closed in on itself, a place of pure auto-affection: “A sign is never an event if event means an empirical singularity that is irreplaceable and irreversible. A sign that would take place only ‘once’ would not be a sign. A purely idiomatic sign would not be a sign.” Far from functioning as a sign beyond signs—which is to say a sign whose ownness restricts it to referring only to itself, to the *idios* or the *ipse* from which a sign would emerge and never leave itself—Friday’s body as sign must lend itself to an ideality, or formal identity, that permits its repetition across innumerable empirical events and thereby exposes it to a temporal and spatial alterity that deprives it of any pure idiomaticity. In other words, a body could be a sign of something other than itself, as is the case with those gestures commonly referred to as “body language,” but no body could be a sign simply and only for itself.

Whereas Husserl believes that silent speech involves no hiatus between sign and meaning given that the latter is immediately present to the speaker as an intentional subject who says what he means because he means to say it, Derrida argues that “a voice without différance, a voice without writing is at once absolutely alive and absolutely dead.” The voice of pure auto-affection whose meaning would be absolutely present to itself would dispense with writing (understood not merely as empirical inscription but as iterability in general). A silent utterance that could not be repeated—that was so idiomatic as to bear no relation to the past or to the future, an utterance absolutely tied to the singular life of the *ipse*—is absolutely dead. If the phantasm
of auto-affection is produced in and through the reduction of an originary hetero-affection, then ironically the plenitude of a living speech that would remain absolutely close to me can only be achieved at the expense of denying language its life, its capacity to signify above and beyond my breath. This accounts for why the “truth” of Friday can only emerge in the form of a speech whose promise of transparent meaning opens onto an apocalypse that reveals nothing. The “words” that issue from the submerged Friday are literally breathless, as if to imply an utterly unique language that inspires no life beyond the instant of its emission.

In addition to the phenomenon of auto-affection, Derrida refers to another Husserlian concept in *The Monolingualism of the Other* when he asserts that, “far from sealing off anything, this solipsism conditions the address to the other, it gives its word, or rather it gives the possibility of giving its word.” Here the reference point is the principle of analogical appresentation. As I discussed in chapter 1, analogical appresentation names our elusive *experience* of others. This experience is not a matter of logical inference, but rather constitutes a spontaneous analogical transfer based on the perception of the other’s similarity to myself. I experience others as inaccessible, but this does not render them absolutely unknowable. The quasi-monadic self is the condition of possibility for my indirect perception of *alter egos*.

Throughout his extensive body of work, Derrida frequently drew upon the twin Husserlian insights of auto-affection and analogical appresentation. Yet, whereas the principle of appresentation survives more or less intact, auto-affection is submitted to a thorough dismantling by virtue of Derrida bringing the former to bear on the latter. Although Husserl maintains that interior monologue constitutes a closed sphere of pure expression in which the indicative function of language disappears, Derrida argues that this absence of indication is illusory: “[It only appears that] the subject does not have to pass outside of himself in order to be immediately affected by its activity of expression. My words are ‘alive’ because they seem [my emphasis] not to leave me, seem not to fall outside of me, outside of my breath, into a visible distance; they do not stop belonging to me.” So-called internal soliloquy occurs across time in relation to indicative signs whose capacity for repetition always bears the possibility that these signs will be severed from me. This severing is both spatial and temporal insofar as the signs that I employ in silent speech can be repeated to infinity (audibly or inaudibly) in other times and spaces. While repetition implies future externalization, a *possible or eventual* becoming nonproper and non-present, this a-proximity occurs anterior to my silent utterance given that
it constitutes a “citational” act, a trace of prior linguistic utterances that do not have their origin in me. Auto-affection is thus always already hetero-affection because my own self-relation is appresentive, that is, mediated through representational traces that precede and exceed me.

Such traces haunt Foe’s final chapter, which seems to hold out the possibility that the signifier can become “perfectly diaphanous by reason of the absolute proximity of the signified.” When Friday’s mouth issues a stream of water rather than speech, this current washes over the unnamed narrator’s face and then travels “northward and southward to the ends of the earth,” as if having escaped its containment, the hitherto hidden interior of Friday now exposed to an infinitely expanding outside. Yet we can no more access the truth of his interior life than we can anyone else’s. The novel thus stages this incomplete, appresentational contact when it welcomes us into his home, only to be immediately borne away by the stream emanating from his mouth. The home of Friday thus designates an impossible place where absolute interiority coincides with absolute exteriority. An “inside” that appears entirely enclosed on itself, an inside without any outside, paradoxically equates to an infinity without borders. When Friday finally “speaks” to us, he does so from the oceanic depths where “words” flow outward toward infinity, toward an ostensibly boundless outside that nevertheless envelops itself by virtue of having no borders. “Bodies are their own signs” only in this breathless place of pure interiority without verbal or written language.

Coetzee’s depiction of a body that signs in and for itself thus implies a pure materiality absolutely liberated from the representational domains of speech and writing for which Susan has doggedly sought Friday’s inclusion, as if Friday finally responds to Susan’s demand for answering speech by mouthing, “I have no need for speech or writing, thank you very much.” In an often-cited interview with David Attwell, Coetzee remarks: “Friday is mute, but Friday does not disappear, because Friday is body. If I look back over my fiction, I see a simple (simple-minded?) standard erected. That standard is the body. Whatever else, the body is not ‘that which is not,’ and the proof that it is is the pain that it feels. The body with its pain becomes a counter to the endless trials of doubt (One can get away with such crudeness in fiction; one can’t in philosophy, I’m sure).” For Coetzee, the conclusion of his novel attempts to achieve closure by putting a stop to ceaseless skepticism: “Is representation to be so robbed of power by the endlessly skeptical processes of textualization that those represented in / by the text—the feminine subject, the colonial subject—are to have no power either?” Too much skepticism is said to weaken representation on
the one hand, yet nevertheless invest it with an ironic power to deprive Susan and Friday of power on the other. Coetzee goes on to suggest that the novel’s “preemptory ending . . . close[s] the text by force” rather than accept “the prospect of endlessness.”

Taken together, the question of oppositional power and that of the mandated conclusion imply that the ending aims to force open an absolute extra-textual outside (or absolute inside, which amounts to the same thing) that would allow the previously muted power of the female and colonial subjects to speak. Yet if the restoration of the other’s power is predicated on ceasing with textuality altogether—as if Friday could only speak once Coetzee stops writing—then this absence of representation would amount precisely to the annulment of any oppositional power. What force could an unrepresented or unrepresentable power wield?

Whereas Benita Parry reproaches Coetzee for allegedly straying from his critique of political oppression by promoting a “non-linguistic intuitive consciousness,” an “ineffable” language that credits Friday with “mystical properties and prestige,” Coetzee’s response to Attwell attempts to situate the ending of the novel squarely with the framework of postcolonial critique by lifting the hitherto suspended access to Friday’s body. Is Coetzee guilty of the crudeness or simple-mindedness that worries him by endlessly deferring the presence of Friday’s voice only to supplant it with the body? Or should we avoid the temptation to exploit his self-deprecating comments and ask instead whether a novel otherwise so keenly attuned to the interplay of multiple linguistic strata ultimately signifies, in a strictly serious, wholly nonironic fashion, a corporeality utterly removed from speech and writing? Suffice it to say that Friday’s body is necessarily inscribed within a text that produces the fiction of speaking through the voice of a disembodied narrator, which means that the home of Friday can only represent a realm ulterior to inscription, an impossible territory of nonlanguage that nevertheless takes place within language.

This pure interiority toward which the conclusion of *Foe* gestures, a sphere that dispenses with linguistic signs, thus bears a striking resemblance to what Derrida characterizes as the “prior-to-the-first time of pre-originary language,” the invention of an absolute idiom, a pure monolingual language that would thoroughly align with the self, that would require no detour through alterity. Of course, this utterly solipsistic language does not and cannot exist. A language without alterity is no language at all. Yet it survives as the memory of what never was: the absolute possession of “my” language. That we do not possess language so much as we are pos-
sessed by it means that its spectrality constitutes the “degree zero-minus-one of memory.” One does not start with one native language onto which are grafted additional foreign tongues. One starts with zero, a buttonhole of sorts, an abiding absence and dispossession that the acquisition of a native language cannot fill. The zero-minus-one of this language before language names the empty placeholder of a purely idiomatic language where bodies would have no need of signs.

Wanting to Say

Just as interior monologue’s would-be transparency of meaning is undone by the mundanity of indicative signs against which no soliloquy can isolate itself, the home of Friday names precisely an unhomely (unheimlich) space submerged in a cloud of murky water that occludes access to Friday’s “true story.” The question that the unidentified narrator asks Friday—“what is this ship?”—echoes Foe’s speculation that the ship was a slave vessel not a merchantman. Friday’s lack of response, however, means that we can neither confirm nor deny Foe’s conjecture. In addition to withholding the ship’s identity (merchant or slave vessel), the novel also does not resolve the question of whether Friday’s tongue is indeed absent, and if so, who removed it. Susan comes to distrust Cruso’s account that slavers committed the mutilation, and tries unsuccessfully to extract the truth from Friday in order to confirm her suspicion that Cruso himself executed the cruel act. If Susan doubts Cruso regarding the perpetrator of Friday’s maiming, however, she nevertheless takes him at his word that Friday has been deprived of the word due to his mutilation. Yet on what basis ought Susan to accept that Friday has no tongue? Given that she refuses to examine his mouth, his verbal silence—save for saying “ha-ha-ha” when Cruso commands him to say “la-la-la”—provides the only evidence to support her conviction. Susan speculates wildly as to the cause of Friday’s absent tongue. While she steadily maintains that the culprit is either Cruso or a slave trader, she briefly ponders whether his tongue was removed in infancy, “at the age when boy-children among the Jews are cut. . . . Who was to say there do not exist entire tribes in Africa among whom the men are mute and speech is reserved to women? Why should it not be so? The world is more various than we ever give it credit for.” This analogy with circumcision morphs into a parallel with castration later in the novel when Susan likens Friday to a “gelding” and she wonders whether Cruso may have spoken about Friday’s absent tongue metaphorically to indicate “a more
Sovereign Silence

atrocious mutilation . . . a slave unmanned.” However, as with the question of whether his tongue has indeed been excised, the novel does not provide definitive proof that Friday has been castrated.

Despite the curiosity that Susan’s imaginative ruminations display, they nonetheless presume the presence of some absence, as it were, a lack whose location and cause may be uncertain but whose existence is undeniable. Susan takes it as a given that Friday lacks either a tongue or a penis or both. Moreover, her revulsion toward his ostensible mutilation is not solely an expression of moral outrage against the cruelties of slavery. For even when she speculates that the amputation might belong to an African custom that deprives men of speech—or later when, making little headway in teaching Friday to write, she muses that perhaps Friday is silently laughing at and mocking her “efforts to bring him nearer to a state of speech”—Susan never questions the value of speech over silence, nor does she consider that the latter does not equate with the absence of the former. That she suspects Friday may be mocking her is the closest she comes to ascribing him any agency, as if to imply that his silence may be volitional. When Susan fails to engage Friday in a musical duet that she had hoped would have supplemented his verbal deficiency, she wonders if “it might not be mere dullness that kept him shut up in himself, nor the accident of the loss of his tongue, nor even an incapacity to distinguish speech from babbling, but a disdain for intercourse with me.”

Her desire for “answering speech,” even if it must finally take the form of writing, follows the circuit of auto-affection: a desire to hear herself speak. To account for this ironic reversal whereby the desire for the other’s speech amounts to a desire to hear oneself speak, we must grasp how Susan conceives of language as a gift to bestow upon the other, a conception that discloses a possessive investment in language notwithstanding its irremediable dispossession. The specter of Friday’s absent tongue thus provides a useful surrogate for her own linguistic buttonhole. Appointing herself as both guardian and teacher of Friday, she adopts the role assumed by Defoe’s Robinson Crusoe, who expresses a desire to “make [my emphasis]” Friday “speak, and understand me,” a desire all but abandoned by Coetzee’s Cruso, who has little interest in teaching his companion to understand more than a few simple phrases. Puzzled by Cruso’s indifference to intersubjective communication, Susan explains to Foe that “life on the island, before my coming, would have been less tedious had he [Cruso] taught Friday to understand his meanings, and devised ways by which Friday could express his own meanings, as for example by gesturing with his hands or by setting out pebbles in shapes standing for words.” Who would dare object to the apparently incontro-
convertible common sense of this affirmative valuation of language? Who would want to champion the almost autistic quality of Cruso’s desire for silence and insularity? Yet perhaps we need not choose between Susan’s naive quest for intersubjective speech as self-presencing truth or Cruso’s solipsistic self-encirclement. If auto-affection is always already riven by hetero-affection, if appresentational (spatial) and representational (temporal) traces expose my monadic self to an exteriority that mediates both my self-relation and my relation to others, then neither pure self-containment nor pure openness toward alterity is possible.

When Susan says that she wants to give voice to Friday, she means that she wants him to want to speak. As Derrida underscores, desire is not merely accidental or exterior to signification; rather, meaning and desire are indissoluble. To stress this connection, he translates the German term *bedeutung* (meaning) into French as *vouloir-dire*, literally “wanting-to-say.” What Derrida wants to say is that meaning is always bound up with volition. This will and drive for stability and transparency is manifest particularly in Husserl’s insistence on meaning as intentional, which he argues excludes facial expressions and other unconscious, bodily gestures from the sphere of signification. Susan’s volition thus warrants translation into the following (admittedly nonidiomatic) English: she wants to say that she wants Friday to want to say. Yet how are we to separate her wanting to say from his wanting to say? How does Susan even know that Friday wants to say anything? As Wendy Brown remarks: “[I]f the silences in discourses of domination are a site for insurrectionary noise, if they are the corridors we must fill with explosive counter-tales, it is also possible to make a fetish of breaking silence. Even more than a fetish, it is possible that this ostensible tool of emancipation carries its own techniques of subjugation—that it converges with non-emancipatory tendencies in contemporary culture.”

Brown is particularly concerned with a certain “pre-Foucauldian” tendency within feminist politics to view speech as either expressive or repressive. On this view, speech either expresses freedom and selfhood or leads to further oppression through hate speech, pornography, or harassment: women’s “truth” or men’s “truth.” Susan clearly employs an expressive/repressive model of speech, though the gendered opposition between female expressivity and male repressivity is inverted and reframed in racialized terms. As a white woman eliciting speech from a black man, Susan is not unaware of the power dynamic that subtends their relationship: “I tell myself that I talk to Friday to educate him out of darkness and silence. But is that the truth? There are times when benevolence deserts me and I use words only as the shortest way to subject him to my will. At such times I
understand why Cruso preferred not to disturb his muteness. I understand, that is to say, why a man will choose to be a slaveowner. Do you think less of me for this confession?”

Confessing to Foe her desire to dominate Friday, Susan ironically inserts herself into the regulatory discourse of confessional truth by assuming the subjugated role of the confessee. In fact, this passage is doubly ironic: she expresses an awareness of the potentially coercive function behind her demand for Friday’s expression, yet she betrays a correlative compliance to discursive power by openly confessing her desire to a white man.

Whereas Susan conceives speech as divided between expressive and repressive forms of power, she views silence as unfailingly repressive. Her fleeting cognizance of discursive and confessional power thus fails to dislodge the equation of silence with oppression to which she largely subscribes. However, as Foucault argues in *The History of Sexuality*:

Discourses are not once and for all subservient to power or raised up against it, any more than silences are. We must make allowance for the complex and unstable process whereby discourse can be both an instrument and an effect of power, but also a hindrance, a stumbling-block, a point of resistance and a starting point for an opposing strategy. Discourse transmits and produces power; it reinforces it, but also undermines and exposes it, renders it fragile and makes it possible to thwart it. In like manner, silence and secrecy are a shelter for power, anchoring its prohibitions; but they also loosen its holds and provide for relatively obscure areas of tolerance.

In her reading of this passage, Brown clarifies that silence may resist regulatory discourses, but “practices of silence are hardly unfettered.” In this regard, we should avoid the naive temptation to view Friday’s silence as occupying an apolitical space utterly insulated from colonial power. Not only does silence not equate to the absence of speech—as the activity of internal monologue demonstrates—but this ostensibly pure expressivity cannot separate itself from the indicative world, which is to say that it cannot withdraw from alterity. Although Brown identifies as potentially fetishistic the compulsion to speak in the name of an emancipatory politics, this characterization is less a nod to Freud than it is a cautionary warning to eschew excessive devotion to the promise of liberatory speech. Yet, the wanting-to-say of signifying practices is inherently fetishistic insofar as the desire to align saying and meaning—whether the meaning of internal soliloquy or of spoken utterance (my own or that of the other)—always strives for an unachievable plenitude.
The Dumb Sovereign

The resemblance that Susan identifies between her demand for responsive speech and the master’s subjugation of the slave recalls Charles Chesnutt’s short story, “The Dumb Witness” (1897). Set in the nineteenth-century American South, the story centers on a slave named Viney whose tongue is maimed by a master named Murchison in retaliation for sharing with his betrothed a secret that causes her to call off the wedding. The content of the secret is never revealed, though the story strongly indicates that Murchison and Viney are involved in a miscegenous, perhaps even incestuous, relationship. She is described as a “young quadroon” with a “dash of Indian blood,” and is also said to be “of our blood [my emphasis],” a phrase that ambiguously signifies both race and family, implying that she is genetically kin in addition to being part white. Murchison manages the property for an absentee uncle who wills it to his nephew shortly before the former’s death. The location of the will is known only to Viney, but her mutilated condition, combined with her illiteracy and Murchison’s failed efforts to teach her to write, prevents her from disclosing its whereabouts.

The story begins in the postbellum South when a white enterprising Northerner named John calls on the old Murchison property to inquire about purchasing some lumber. John observes Murchison entreating Viney to reveal the location of the will, only to receive a response of “discordant jargon.” We learn that this scene has played out for many years to no avail and Murchison eventually dies without receiving his inheritance. The following summer when John pays Murchison’s son a visit, he is greeted by Viney, who miraculously seems to have recovered the power of speech. As John’s coachman Julius reveals, however, she never lost her capacity to speak, but had feigned its loss in order not to reveal the location of the will, which turns out to have been hidden in the seat of a large oak chair where Murchison sat for many years.

What initially appears to depict solely a horrific scene of violence and linguistic deprivation turns out to have also been a contest of wills whereby Viney chooses silence. Beyond the obvious parallels with Coetzee’s novel, “The Dumb Witness” shares with Foe a preoccupation with interiority and unfathomability: namely, the numerous holes that Murchison burrows in the ground in hollow pursuit of his will, holes that metonymically evoke the mouth to which Viney woefully points when he asks her to reveal the will’s location. When Murchison is not “digging, digging furiously” in the ground, like a dog struggling to unearth a bone, he barks orders at Viney to reveal the location of his “princely inheritance.” That he never looks
under the large oak throne from which his demands vainly issue raises the question: who is the real dumb witness of the story? Is it not the witless master who fails to ascertain that he is sitting on his own will? This power reversal speaks to the unexpected symmetry that Derrida captures with the phrase *la bête et le souverain*: the beast and the sovereign. Derrida notes that the homophony of *et* and *est* permits us to hear this phrase as the beast is the sovereign. The phrase thus bears witness to a mute distinction that can only be “heard” textually. This linguistic coincidence reflects a larger political structure by virtue of which the beast and the sovereign occupy parallel positions outside the law: the sovereign is “above” the law insofar as he exempts himself from it, the animal is said to be “below” the law, ignorant of it and therefore deprived of freedom and agency. Viney is similarly below the law because slaves are not considered legal subjects. Yet she no doubt derives satisfaction from knowing that the sovereign physically sits above the law—or at least above the documents that certify his legal entitlement—only insofar as he rests ignorant of it.

The story’s tragic-comic irony derives not only from the revelation of the will’s proximity to the master, but also from our retrospective realization that his repeated pleas to Viney betray fragility rather than strength. Viney weakens the master precisely by enjoining him to speak, to engage in a “dialogue” that leaves him increasingly exasperated. As discussed in chapter 1, the “reason of the strongest” exempts one from the obligation to provide explanations. Sovereignty means never having to give reasons. As Derrida observes, pure sovereignty “always keeps quiet in the very ipseity of the moment proper to it, a moment that is but the stigmatic point of an indivisible instant.” Sovereignty undermines itself as soon as it speaks, as soon it announces itself as such. That sovereignty is absolute as long as it is “dumb” is also to say that it is never absolute. Viney weakens the auto-affective fantasy of the master by forcing him to beg for assistance. To be sure, the would-be sovereign almost always holds the upper hand within racist power structures even if he is always almost sovereign, even if the purity of his sovereignty is compromised from the beginning. By contrast, the exceedingly tenuous character of slave sovereignty is registered when Viney chooses to remain on the plantation after slavery is abolished, as well as when she discloses the will’s location to Murchison’s son, thereby ensuring the transfer of inherited white wealth.

The role that Julius plays in the story is equally relevant to the nexus of sovereignty and silence. Chesnutt’s stories typically employ a framing device in which John temporarily cedes the standard English of his narrative voice to Julius, who relates in black dialect various tales of antebellum
slavery. Eric Sundquist suggests that Chesnutt’s anomalous decision to withhold Julius’s voice stresses “American culture’s exclusion of the folkloric oral world of black culture” as well as implies an analogy between the different modes of silencing to which Julius and Viney are subjected. The dialect that Viney employs when she finally speaks bears out this connection. When John asks Viney if the young Murchison is home, she replies: “Yas, suh . . . I’ll call ‘im.” As Richard Broadhead notes, an earlier version rendered her speech in standard English. Speaking in dialect, Viney resur rects the black vernacular that John has suppressed by claiming to retell the tale in “orderly sequence,” as if to associate Julius’s dialect with Viney’s “meaningless cacophony.” Sundquist suggests that Julius “has played ‘dumb’ all along,” but the intentionality of this play remains ambiguous. Julius is not “playing” in the same way that Viney feigns an inability to speak. As Sundquist makes clear, Julius’s silence is imposed through John’s act of cultural appropriation. Yet Julius may indeed be intentionally playing dumb in a manner that Sundquist does not consider. John informs us early on that Julius was “ignorant” of “some of the facts” of the story, but if the former gleaned these facts from “other sources,” then the information they provided must not relate to Viney’s linguistic capacity, which Julius divulges to John when he returns to the plantation. Does Julius learn the truth only after Murchison dies, or was the former in on the ruse of Viney’s dumb show all along, in which case John turns out to have unwittingly played the fool? Julius has held his tongue regarding Viney’s true condition, the knowledge of which we might surmise passed freely among the black community through what Booker T. Washington called the “grape-vine telegraph,” a word-of-mouth network hidden from whites. According to Washington, during the Civil War “often the slaves got knowledge of the results of great battles before the white people received it.” Viney’s name communicates not only this tangled network of speech withheld from whites, but also Chesnutt’s “The Goophered Grapevine,” a story in which Julius fails to dissuade John from purchasing a vineyard whose grapes had sustained the former’s income for many years. Julius attempts to protect his interests by telling John that the grapes have been “goophered” (bewitched) by a conjure woman. As Robert Bone suggests, “Julius is a kind of conjurer, who works his roots and plies his magic through the art of storytelling.” Viney can also be read as a “conjurer” who employs silence rather than speech to challenge the authority of the master. At bottom, she thrusts him off his “ancestral seat,” leaving him only to dig his own hole(s). Chesnutt’s editor, Walter Hines Page, reportedly excluded “The Dumb Witness” from the first edition of the collection
of stories published as *The Conjure Woman*. Claiming that it lacked both the supernatural element of conjure and the black vernacular storyteller, Page apparently was unable to hear the silent conjure that winds its way through Viney’s doleful yarn.73

“There is no world, there are only islands”

Notwithstanding their disproportionate power, the silence of the sovereign and the silence of the “beast” disclose a shared impurity, an impossible absolution thanks to which silence is never utterly silent, is never simply the opposite of speech. The plenitude of an unfettered speech or silence would only be achievable in the imaginary space of an absolute solipsism, the preoriginary language of an unqualified private idiom, the sovereign sphere of a nonshareable, indivisible language. In *Foe* Cruso’s apathy toward being rescued, as well as his general disinterest in verbal communication, can perhaps be too easily scorned for its apparently solipsistic or autistic traits. As Susan remarks, “I used once to think, when I saw Cruso in this evening posture, that, like me, he was searching the horizon for a sail. But I was mistaken.”74 Later Susan recalls his reflection that “the world is full of islands,” a remark that parallels Derrida’s claim in *The Beast and the Sovereign*, volume 2:

[No one] inhabit[s] the same world, however close and similar these living individuals may be. . . . between my world and any other world there is first the space and the time of an infinite difference, an interruption that is incommensurable with all attempts to make a passage, a bridge, an isthmus, all attempts at communication, trope, and transfer that the desire for a world or the want of a world, the being wanting a world will try to pose, impose, propose, stabilize. There is no world, there are only islands.75

These comments may seem to advance a purely isolationist view of the world, yet they can be interpreted thus only by reading them in isolation. If we bridge these comments to the sentence that immediately precedes it, however, we confront the following paradox: “Incontestably, animals and humans inhabit the same world. . . . Incontestably, animals and humans do not inhabit the same world.”76 What Derrida says of interspecies relations also applies to intraspecies ones. All humans both do and do not inhabit the same world. Since I never have direct access to you, to your world, I can only ever carry you within “my” world. I can only bear the trace of you and your world within the worldless world in which I dwell but to which I
only have partial access, this veiled world whose opacity owes precisely to
the existence of other worlds, spheres whose presence I encounter only
appresentationally through the traces those worlds imprint on me.

“There is no world, there are only islands” thus amounts to saying:
there is no one world that we all share, a world without differ
tance, a world
without the interruptions of time, language, and iterability, however much
the flow of language may appear to connect us from one end of the earth
to the other. The phantasm of one united world to which all subjects
belong promotes the worst kind of (quasi)solipsism, a pregiven world that
fully transcends those living subjects who are thereby reduced to a sec-
ondary role of participation without intentionality, the latter understood in
the phenomenological sense as consciousness directed toward an alterity
that we experience as for us, as in some sense constituted by and dependent
on us. The principle of one shared world is solipsism by stealth: it promises
to transcend the apparent enislement of the monadic ego through a lan-
guage of unity that disavows our appresentational relation to alterity. To
say that “we all inhabit the same world” is really to say, “we all inhabit my
world.” However I imagine it, the world that I posit as the world in which
I dwell with others masks the monospheric character of this world—the
extent to which this world originates in me.

This immanent transcendency that Husserl identifies in our relations
with others ironically unsettles his conception of interior monologue,
which presumes precisely a subject who is proximate and present, here
and now, to its own meanings. That this view of signification is funda-
mentally fetishistic does not mean that we can or should abandon the desire to
mean to say. The absolute coincidence of sign and meaning may be an
impossibility, yet the abandonment of all signifying practices is neither
desirable nor achievable. Nevertheless, the desire for the absolute diapha-
neity of the sign can and ought to be curtailed precisely in the name of the
alterity that no politics or ethics can do without—in the name, that is, of
a weaker solipsism.

When Husserl writes that the mental acts of interior monologue are
“experienced by us at that very moment,” his own language undoes its
aspiration to pure immanence. Husserl employs the German phrase im
selben Augenblick, “in the blink of an eye,” an expression that Derrida seizes
upon in order to counter the assertion of an absolute idiom that could
bracket itself both temporally and spatially. No less so than in spoken lan-
guage, interior monologue requires that I “speak” across temporal moments
that introduce a hiatus, no matter how minimal or immeasurable, between
speaking and hearing. “In the blink of an eye,” my words become available
to iterability and therefore stop being mine, even though, of course, they were never fully mine to begin with. While Husserl maintains that every punctual now bears within it a retentional element of the past it has just superseded and a protentional (anticipatory) element of an incipient future, he wants to distinguish retention from memory by insisting on the former’s nonrepresentational status. The retentional phase would open onto an immediate relation to the past that is subsequently represented through secondary memory. Yet Derrida remains skeptical that the retentional phase can be isolated from representation: “As soon as we admit this continuity of the now and the non-now . . . we welcome the other into the self-identity of the Augenblick, non-presence and non-evidentness into the blink of an eye of the instant. There is a duration to the blink of an eye and the duration closes the eye.” As a visual trope, “the blink of an eye” stresses the spatial, appresentational dimensions of this alterity, whereas the temporal interval between the opening and closing of the eye introduces the possibility of repetition in the wake of my absence.

Susan employs a trope identical to Husserl’s when she gives in to Cruso’s unwanted sexual advances, even though she believes she could have overpower him with her superior physical strength. After their encounter she wonders if she should regret what she has allowed to occur before quickly settling on acquiescence: “We yield to a stranger’s embrace or give ourselves to the waves; for the blink of an eyelid our vigilance relaxes; we are asleep; and when we awake, we have lost the direction of our lives. What are these blinks of an eyelid, against which the only defence is an eternal and inhuman wakefulness? Might they not be the cracks and chinks through which another voice, other voices, speak in our lives? By what right do we close our ears to them? The questions echoed in my head without any answer.” Susan presents hospitality as an ethical obligation whose passivity is veritably Levinasian in its apparent selflessness. Given the context of male sexual domination in which she voices this passivity, her selflessness is especially troubling. She frames her refusal to resist male aggression as a form of hospitality, as if resistance to Cruso would have been unethical. In this sense, her thoughts are prescriptive. Yet she also hints at the impracticability of an “eternal and inhuman wakefulness.” Aligned with the sexual act, this relaxed vigilance implies the possibility of additional openings, bodily orifices through which the other physically enters, thus supplementing the sites of penetration that I enumerated earlier (eye sockets, mouths, ears, rooms, and deep-sea shipwrecks). Is it not so much a question of whether we have the right to close our ears to others
as it is a question of whether closing ourselves off to the other is finally possible?

Certainly a woman not only has the right to make her herself unavailable sexually, but is also physically able to do so—at least under “normal,” noncoercive or nonviolent circumstances. Yet unlike sites of sexual penetration, our ears are completely open and exposed, a vulnerability that Husserl’s optical metaphor disavows. We can always close our eyes, but we can at best dull or mute the sounds that forever penetrate this most passive of our senses. In contrast to Husserl, Coetzee’s synesthetic trope introduces precisely the hiatus that Derrida identifies: a lapsed awareness that allows the voices of others to be seen or heard. Ironically, Susan ruminates about such external voices through interior monologue: “The questions echoed in my head without any answer.” She hears herself speak, pondering whether one has the right to shut out other voices entirely. Yet if a constant wakefulness is not humanly possible to maintain, then we are firmed by alterity from the beginning. Prior to the question of our right to inhospitality, a certain originary “yes” to alterity conditions the possibility of our deciding whether we are ethically authorized to mute our ears to others.79 We must have already “said” yes to others in order to be able to say no. The o that seems to circumscribe us is always punctured by the traces of others whom we can never entirely envelop within us. We thus do not live according to Susan’s vision of the whales, floating leagues apart from one another. We live more like spiders, sitting at the center of our webs, the 0° position from where we fall prey to other webs, worlds, or islands, an unhomely home insofar as we are drawn out from ourselves, exposed—shipwrecked, for better or worse, on one another’s shores.