

Desire at the End of the White Line: Notes on the Decolonisation of White Afrikaner Femininity, by Azille Coetzee

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Azille Coetzee's *Desire at the End of the White Line: Notes on the Decolonisation of White Afrikaner Femininity* was published in 2025. In the book, Coetzee explores the historicity of sexual desire and its ongoing racialisation in the present. The introductory chapter is a breathtakingly extensive mapping of the history of sex and race. The book blends scholarly histories, contemporary theories of race and racism, analyses of novels and films, and semi-fictionalised autobiographical vignettes. In this, *Desire at the End of the White Line* takes shape as a vulnerable and deeply personal account of one woman's attempts to interrogate the cultural logics that shape her own practices of desire. She sets out the impetus for the book when she asks: "How is the kind of sex I want incited by regulatory discourses? How is my desire productive of white power?" (Coetzee 2025, 7). She argues further that:

we renew apartheid identities and racial politics in the present by self-regulating our intimate lives in accordance with the rules and lines that colonialism and apartheid drilled into the psyches and bodies of our parents, grandparents and other ancestors; rules and lines that we inherit and, in turn, pass on. (Coetzee 2025, 24)

At its strongest moments—and there are several—the book can be read as a methodologically innovative exploration of how race, gender, and sex are not only co-articulated but also deeply productive of one another.

However, despite the author's good intentions, the book often veers uncomfortably close to the pathologisation of desire. Indeed, at its worst moments, the book is a dangerously prescriptive call about who and how we should desire—a call that has been

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the bedrock of conservative politics for centuries. If desire can be disciplined to be queer and “interracial” (in instances where a person has not experienced that desire previously), as she suggests, then it can surely also be disciplined into monoracial heterosexual monogamy. And this is a political logic—where desire can be reshaped to serve a political ideology—that has had deadly consequences for the LGBTQ community, and which should make us all uncomfortable.

The author is aware of these risks. In an attempt to counter them, she paraphrases Amia Srinivasan and explains that “what she is suggesting is not the disciplining of desire but, rather, liberating sex from the distortions of oppression, or the distorted forms that politics shapes it into” (Coetzee 2025, 27–28). But this disclaimer, and the similarly vague text that follows it, appears to use rhetorical density to conceal the inescapably problematic logic underpinning the argument. She similarly acknowledges that “we should be very careful and self-aware in how we are doing it [interrogating desire]; cognizant of, and willing to take responsibility for, the good and the bad of our projects” (Coetzee 2025, 30). But again, this disclaimer appears disingenuous as she unconvincingly attempts to distance herself from the inescapable implications—“the bad of our projects”—of her argument without actually countering the fundamental problem. While the book successfully makes the case that desire is always already political and historical, it never quite escapes a deeply pathologising impulse. For if the logic of her attempts to “liberat[e] sex from the distortions of oppression” (Coetzee 2025, 28) are followed through, then what other sorts of desires are deemed unacceptable to her political project? What sort of kink-shaming might she unintentionally be leading us to? For example, does her argument not risk shaming men and women who find pleasure in the dominant and submissive roles, respectively, in BDSM because of the ways in which such desire must echo structural relations of gendered power? In an even more provocative sense, I am reminded of Dorothy Allison’s *Two or Three Things I Know for Sure* in which she insists that recognising the possible connection between her abuse and her desire should not result in its pathologisation:

[This] is the one [thing] I am not supposed to talk about, how it comes together—sex and violence, love and hatred. I’m not ever supposed to put together the two halves of my life—the man who walked across my childhood and the life I have made for myself. I am not supposed to talk about hating the man when I grew up to be a lesbian, a dyke, stubborn, competitive and purposefully lustful. (Allison 1995, 45)

And it is viewpoints such as this that Coetzee’s book seems unwilling to countenance: One can acknowledge the ideologically and historically contingent nature of desire without needing to ally oneself with a discursive apparatus that designates some sexualities as more acceptable than others.

My second major concern is how the book inadvertently perpetuates discourses of Black exoticism that were central to intimate imaginings of the broader colonial project. This is evident, firstly, in the argument of the book, in which interracial sexual desire is

valorised as an exploratory response to the lack of societal integration (she asks “Why haven’t we changed more yet? Why are our lives still so white and so separate?”) (Coetzee 2025, 4). But it is also evidenced in the linear narrative structure of the book (in which anecdotal vignettes are interspersed with scholarly argumentation). Several short vignettes narrate her shift from her monogamous relationship with a white man to her relationship with a Black woman. For example, she writes:

She asked for my number and messaged me soon after, inviting me out on the date. We meet at Clarke’s for brunch. I had real doubts that it could lead to anything, anticipating that she will see through me straight away—my cosy postgraduate student life, the lukewarmness of my activism, the sheltered middle-class upbringing, the string of white boyfriends. And I am right. (Coetzee 2025, 101)

The narration later shifts to the more intimate second-person perspective:

It is a Sunday night in a bar, we are here for a friend’s birthday. I am sitting next to you, we are sharing a bottle of wine. It is the beginning of summer, it is hot inside and after a while I take off my jacket. (Coetzee 2025, 110)

The structure of the book, in which these linear personal narratives intersperse the text creates suspense that reaches crescendo in the metafictional cliffhanger as to whether she will indeed “write the Afrikaans love plot” built on monogamous marriage with a white man or whether she will choose “the queer love story” (Coetzee 2025, 215). Ultimately, the ending of this narrative is ambiguous, in which a speculative dream is used to reveal that the narrator now shares a house with both her white boyfriend and her Black queer lover. This narrative structure builds up to her sexual and intimate encounters with a Black woman, positioning (on a narrative level, at least) the Black character as a mere prop for her own sexual awakening and her personal project of identity formation. To be fair, the author is not unaware of the political implications of this. She offers something of a disclaimer when she writes:

Positing “interracial” and queer sex, intimacy, sociality and counter-publics as a solution to the problem of Afrikaner whiteness would be presumptuous (and problematically so) because it expects of Black people to receive white women in a specific way and it assumes Black people’s willing participation in white people’s attempts at their own betterment. (Coetzee 2025, 132)

But her acknowledgement here is inadequate and unconvincing, especially when read against the text that immediately precedes this in which rhetorical flourishes conceal an inherently imprecise response to the very concern that she so correctly articulates:

I’m exploring the possibility of white women’s refusal to play their part in maintaining the symbolic and material structures that keep white privilege and power in place. At stake is an attempt to build a different kind of life, to try to be here with others on new terms. (Coetzee 2025, 132)

In my estimation, the book's greatest strength and greatest weakness can be summarised in the following assertion by the author: "if desire is a vector for political power, if it has been conditioned to serve certain political agendas, do we not have a moral obligation to condition it otherwise?" (Coetzee 2025, 26). It is Coetzee's argument in favour of the conditional clause here ("if desire is a vector of political power") that is the book's greatest strength. The author convincingly shows that sexual desire cannot be separated from ideological violences of history. But it is the second prescriptive part of her assertion that is most troubling to me: Claims that sexual desire can be disciplined or redirected for purposes of political ideology (no matter how principled that ideology may be) are deeply, deeply dangerous.

References

Allison, Dorothy. 1995. *Two or Three Things I Know for Sure*. New York: Plume.