

LANDMARKS: Reading Coetzee's Maternal Lines

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There is a direct road from Willowmore, which lies just north of Uniondale but within the boundaries of the Eastern Cape near Baviaanskloof, just over the Western Cape border. The road is gravel and little marked, inhabited by a scattering of homesteads, some sheep and goats and, eventually, a prosperous ostrich farm. There are windmills, foundations of erstwhile buildings, and dry riverbeds. From Wehmeyer Street in Willowmore, it's just a matter of a quick left around the petrol station onto the main road, and then a quick right. You can stop at the old cemetery on the way.

Vera Wehmeyer, the mother of the Nobel Prizewinning author J. M. Coetzee, was born in this district – or at least she was born in the Uniondale district. It is true that, aside from the Wehmeyer street sign, the only family connection I can find is that she might have played school hockey and tennis matches here. Nevertheless, I pursue it as a destination, even going so far as to stay in a cottage belonging to the Willow Historical Guest House, before heading west back to Coetzee's father's Karoo roots and the Swartberg Hotel.

Grandfather Gert Coetzee, born in the Piketburg, bought the farm Voëlfontein near Leeu-Gamka exactly 100 years ago, in 1916. From Willowmore, it is as straight a route as you could make or take, if you want to stop over in Prince Albert, where Grandmother Lenie de Beer was raised, and where she and Gert later owned a house (now for sale). The road is the R407, and it is paved once you reach Klarstroom. All in, it is some 92 km.

This visual essay explores the ways in which Coetzee's genealogies intersect with Cape geographies, for on his mother's side there are Rhenish missionaries in Namaqualand too. Focussing on his parents' brief diaries from the 1940s and his mother's undated memoir about her childhood on an (eastern) Cape farm, these documents, now held with the Coetzee archives at the Harry Ransom Center, University of Texas, offer a fascinating reading of Coetzee's women from his earliest days – from his birth in Mowbray Maternity Hospital at the beginning of the Second World War to his nomadic war-time childhood between Victoria West, Warrenton, Prince Albert, Plettenberg Bay, and Johannesburg, through to his schooldays back in Cape Town and Worcester.

With its focus on ideas of origins, architecture, archives and auto/biography, the essay also considers the ways in which Vera Wehmeyer Coetzee is active in the archives – in a very real way she curated her son's earliest records, acting as co-archivist for the family photo albums, and as guardian of her son's juvenile drawings and stories, school notebooks and reports, which have left their mark on *Scenes from Provincial Life*.