

Imperial Fictions: J. M. Coetzee's *Disgrace*

Florence Stratton

J. M. Coetzee's eighth novel, *Disgrace*, is the first of his novels to be set in South Africa after the 1994 elections. Awarded the 1999 Booker Prize, *Disgrace* has furthered the process of the canonization of Coetzee, a process that has been well underway since Coetzee's fourth novel, *Life & Times of Michael K*, won the 1983 Booker. One of only two authors to have been awarded the prize twice, Coetzee is also the subject of hundreds of scholarly articles and of at least six book-length studies, as well as being regularly studied in university literature courses. Though his work is generally highly regarded, especially in the west, for its polished and precise language and its rich intertextuality, Coetzee's critical reception has not been without controversy. Charges of evading the political realities of South Africa and of ideological complicity with colonial structures have been laid by Nadine Gordimer and Benita Parry among others. Nor has Coetzee been without his defenders on this question of his cultural politics. For example, in the view of such prominent Coetzee scholars as Graham Huggan and Stephen Watson, Coetzee's fictional strategies constitute "a radical questioning of the very discourses of power that upheld brutal and unjust social systems" (3-4).

At least in part because of its status as a Booker Prize winner, *Disgrace* has already received considerable critical attention. While its gender codes have been the focus of some commentary,¹ however, very little attention has been paid to its race codes.² Indeed, with very few exceptions, the critics display what appears to be an almost willful blindness to the racial implications of Coetzee's narrative.³ That is the project of my essay—to consider the status of the narrative strategies Coetzee adopts in *Disgrace* in relation to colonial discourses of power. I also briefly consider the question retrospectively: What light, if any, do the

race codes of *Disgrace* throw on the political affiliations of Coetzee's earlier novels?

Like Coetzee's earlier fiction, *Disgrace* is a parable of South African history and society. The opening chapters take the form of a double allegory, using Lacanian psychoanalytic theory to encode colonial history. The novel's protagonist, David Lurie, is, as his name might suggest, "caught up in the lure of spatial identification" (Lacan, *Écrits* 4), an illusion of completeness and wholeness. White, male, and middle class, a university professor of literature at a Cape Town university, David has for most of his life occupied a position of centrality in relation to the South African symbolic order—a world of white patriarchal distinctions, rules and logic. In terms of characterization, David is the exact opposite of the protagonist of Coetzee's *Life and Times of Michael K*, who, as Teresa Dovey observes, "has none of the usual attributes one expects in a character," no surname, no heredity, no possessions, no sexuality (274-78). To use Dovey's Lacanian terminology, in contrast to Michael K, David is "fixed in the Symbolic as a subject of utterance" (310). Over the past several years, however, David has found himself being pushed to the periphery of the cultural structures of South Africa. By the end of the narrative he will have become like Michael K, having been stripped of all of the conventional markings of identity.

The primary determinate of David's identity is sexuality, as is suggested by the novel's opening sentence: "for a man of his age, fifty-two, divorced, he has, to his mind, solved the problem of sex rather well" (1). For most of his adult life, whenever David has cast a desiring gaze, he has received perfect confirmation: "If he looked at a woman in a certain way, with a certain intent, she would return his look, he could rely on that. That was how he lived; for years, for decades, that was the backbone of his life." But then suddenly "his powers fled. Glances that would once have responded to his slid over, past, through him" (7). David's solution to the problem is to have regular weekly meetings with a prostitute called Soraya about whom he has begun to have narcissistic fantasies. When, however, during a chance encounter in the street,

"Soraya's eyes meet his," (6) the look reveals "the place in which he sees her" (Lacan, *Four* 111) and she cancels the arrangement. Experiencing a profound sense of inadequacy and lack, David initiates an affair with a student, Melanie Isaacs, who is thirty years his junior. Becoming obsessed with Melanie, David takes to stalking her and, on one occasion, forces himself on her. At least in David's equivocal definition, it is "not rape, not quite that, but undesired nevertheless, undesired to the core" (25). David soon finds himself before a university disciplinary committee.

That these opening scenes encode an allegory of colonialism becomes much more evident later in the narrative during the novel's second rape scene in which Lurie's daughter is sexually assaulted by three black men.⁴ There are, however, in the opening chapters themselves, a number of indications of a quite explicit narrative engagement with South African history. For example, the specification of David's age in the novel's first sentence makes it apparent that he would have been born around the time of the 1948 elections which brought the Nationalist Party to power and instituted its regime of increasingly totalitarian control over South Africa's majority population. There is also the question of the racial designation of Soraya and Melanie. Soraya is explicitly defined in the text as "racially other." In Jane Poyner's reading of the novel, Melanie is assumed to be "black, or 'coloured,' since Lurie renames her Meláni, meaning 'the dark one'" (68). In the pointed contrast he sets up between Melanie and one of her classmates, "a wispy blonde" in whom David has no interest (29), Coetzee does make Melanie into a metonym for the exotic/ethnic/racial/colonized Other. Coetzee's narrative strongly resists, however, any move to assign Melanie to a specific racial category, making each and every attempt an exercise in racial stereotyping.⁵ This is one of Melanie's functions in the narrative: to subvert the notion of racial categories, the fundamental assumption of apartheid South Africa.

In his figuring of colonial history, Coetzee himself confirms, however, some of the myths and stereotypes which underpin colonial ideology. For his colonial allegory has the effect of "mythologizing [...] Africa as

Other, as Female,” to use the phrase employed by Kathleen McLuskie and Lyn Innes to describe the gender dynamics of any number of colonial narratives including Joseph Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness* (4). In his deployment of this colonial trope, Coetzee is particularly insistent on the passivity of the (feminized) colonial subject. Soraya is described as “quiet and docile” by temperament (1) and also as “[a] ready learner, compliant, pliant” (5). Melanie too is submissive and yielding, “passive throughout” her first sexual encounter with David (19) and unresisting when he rapes her (25). In Coetzee’s rendering of colonial history, then, all traces of anti-colonial resistance are obliterated from the record.

David’s subjecthood is also partly dependent on his professional status. The university he teaches at has recently been made into a polytechnic, a change which, in David’s estimation, has “emasculated” the institution (4). Once a professor of modern languages, David is now, “since Classics and Modern Languages were closed down as part of the great rationalization, adjunct professor of communications”:

Like all rationalized personnel, he is allowed to offer one special-field course a year, irrespective of enrollment, because that is good for morale. This year he is offering a course in the Romantic poets. For the rest he teaches Communications 101, “Communication Skills,” and Communications 201, “Advanced Communication Skills.” (3)

Looking back on the last few years of his teaching, David considers himself as having spent his time “explaining to the bored youth of the country the distinction between *drink* and *drink up*, *burned* and *burnt*” (71). The impression given in these and other passages in the novel is that recent changes in higher education in South Africa have resulted in a deterioration in educational standards. While the views of neither David nor the novel’s narrator necessarily coincide with those of Coetzee, there is nothing in the narrative to challenge their evidently cynical view of the revised curriculum. At the same time, the narrative glosses over altogether the issue of the decolonization of education in South Africa.

Rather than raising questions about a model of education which takes European culture as its central object of study, the narrative laments the repositioning of Wordsworth on the margins of the new syllabus. Playing on white fears about declining standards, it also plays into racist notions about culture and education by implicitly linking educational reform with falling standards. Does African literature have a place in the new curriculum? The narrative shows not even the slightest interest in this question.

As has been noted by others, Coetzee analogizes the university's disciplinary committee before which David is made to appear to South Africa's Truth and Reconciliation Commission.⁶ This parallel is pointedly drawn when David, whose actual crime is rape, or at the very least sexual harassment, is charged instead by the disciplinary committee with "serious abuses of the human rights of the complainant" (57). By assigning sexism mere metaphoric status in the narrative, Coetzee evinces a lack of interest in the crimes of patriarchy. More crucially, by employing the figure of the female victim to represent the oppression of Africans under apartheid, Coetzee allows racism as an issue to vanish from the storyline, a seemingly strategic evasion of any reference to the crimes of apartheid. That several of the reviewers of *Disgrace* read the scene of David's arraignment as an attack on "political correctness" is, perhaps, indicative of the political impairment of this section of the narrative—a trivialization of questions concerning both racism and sexism in South Africa.⁷

Stripped of his job and pension, Lurie takes refuge with his daughter Lucy who has a small farm in the Eastern Cape. This is where the novel's second rape scene takes place—the gang-rape of Lucy by three black assailants. In *Waiting for the Barbarians*, the magistrate, contemplating the signification of the barbarians, exposes the habitual colonial narrative of black men raping white women as a legitimating psychosexual myth which perpetuates the notion of barbarianism: "there is no [...] man [living along the frontier] who has not frightened himself with visions of the barbarians carousing in his home, breaking the plates, setting fire to the curtains, raping his daughters" (8). But in

Disgrace, barbarianism no longer resides in the repressed desires of the colonial unconscious. Rather, white nightmare visions of black rape become a reality. What would prompt Coetzee to make the rape of a white woman by black men the central incident of his narrative? The short answer to this question is that rape is a handy metaphor for colonial and state relations of power.

In those portions of *Disgrace* which are set in the Eastern Cape, the narrative exhibits a manifest intertextuality with Olive Schreiner's *The Story of an African Farm*, first published in 1883 and considered by many to be "the founding novel of white South African writing in English" (Parry 53). As the narrative details of both novels indicate, the central female character in each case is figured as an embodiment of the South African landscape. Thus, like Tant' Sannie, the owner of the eponymous farm of Schreiner's story, Lucy is an unmarried woman who is attempting, with the help of hired labour, to make a commercial success of a farming operation in the Eastern Cape. Thus, too, like Tant' Sannie, Lucy is vulnerable to the predations of unscrupulous men who wish to gain control over her resources and is willing to marry for reasons of property and security. Coetzee rewrites Schreiner's classic colonial narrative, a narrative in which Africans are excluded from the representation of the struggle for power, transforming it into a parable of the situation in South Africa after the 1994 elections.

As David Attwell has observed, in his earlier fiction Coetzee has been disinclined "to 'complete' the historical trajectory of decolonization" ("Problem" 116). Even in the novel immediately preceding *Disgrace*, *Age of Iron* published in 1990, the ending is left hanging. One of the most obviously striking features of *Disgrace* is the continuity of theme and form with Coetzee's previous novels—the concern with the question of being white in South Africa, the employment of Lacanian psychoanalytic theory, the narrativization of the Hegelian master/slave dialectic, the allegorical mode of writing, the intertextual networking. There is, however, one major departure from the previous novels. In *Disgrace* the historical trajectory of decolonization is completed and a post-apartheid South African nation is imagined. This is what the rape

of Lucy signifies in the narrative—a shift from white to black power and authority in South Africa.

With its two rape scenes, *Disgrace* clearly confirms Graham Huggan's view that Coetzee shares with Foucault an understanding of history as nonprogressive, his narratives underwriting a history in which "humanity does not gradually progress from combat to combat until it arrives at universal reciprocity, when the rule of law finally replaces warfare, [but rather that] humanity installs each of its violences in a system of rules and thus proceeds from domination to domination" (Foucault, as cited in Huggan, "Evolution" 206). As he has been in the past, Coetzee may be rebuked for not embracing a more revolutionary or at least hopeful view of history.⁸ But it is not Coetzee's assumptions about the course of history that are at issue in this paper, but rather the way in which he has encoded those assumptions. The rape scenes in *Disgrace* are problematic even when they are read allegorically as depicting the dynamic of historical change, its movement "from domination to domination."

As several critics have noted, Coetzee's narrative constructs a number of parallels between the two rape scenes, "the inference to be drawn" being, in Michael Marais's words, "that the two acts are identical" (175).⁹ Perhaps Coetzee hoped he could get away with his portrayal of black men as rapists by pairing it with a scene of white rape. But the two acts of rape are far from being identical. Most obviously, perhaps, there is a marked difference in the type and level of violence. After all, unlike Melanie, Lucy is gang-raped by unknown assailants who also trash her house, douse her father with methylated spirits before setting him on fire, and shoot in their cages all the dogs under Lucy's care. What is to be inferred from the excessiveness and apparent gratuitousness of the violence here: That African majority governance in South Africa will be more brutal and terroristic than colonial power? That the dismantling of the apartheid state's security apparatus can only result in a return to African anarchy, savagery, and darkness?

Nor are the two images of rape identical in their ideological determinations. The construction of black men as rapists is a recurring feature of colonial discourse—a discourse in which, as Frantz Fanon has

observed, "the Negro represents the sexual instinct (in its raw state). The Negro is the incarnation of a genital potency beyond all moralities and prohibitions [...] The Negro is taken as a terrifying penis" (177). Is Coetzee deliberately fostering old colonial myths in his use of the rape metaphor? Whatever the case, the power of the trope is, as Dionne Brand observes, quite extraordinary: "how it eradicates, here in Coetzee's text, a century of brutal injustices; how its possibility comes to justify, intentionally or not, 'keeping the blacks down'" (134).

Moreover, reading retrospectively, it becomes apparent that Lucy's rapists have an almost palpable presence in Coetzee's earlier narratives. Though they are most evidently anticipated by John in *Age of Iron*, the teenaged revolutionary who masturbates while waiting for the police who will shoot and kill him, they are also lurking in the shadows of such figures as the sexless Michael K and the apparently castrated Friday, waiting for the right historical moment to make their presence known. The sexualization of black men in Coetzee's narratives, their definition by their sexual parts, is in itself problematic, an endorsement of racist views and assumptions. There is, in addition, the question of the connection repeatedly established between black sexual potency and black political power, a fictional strategy which also offers ideological reinforcement to racist myths and assumptions. It is, however, in their retroactive impact on Coetzee's oeuvre that Lucy's assailants do their most serious political damage. For when the rapist hidden within Michael K bursts forth in *Disgrace*, the implication is that all black men are potential rapists.

In colonial discourse, the othered body is not only conventionally constructed as hypersexual but also as the bearer of frightening disease. As Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri note in *Empire*, this "commonplace of colonial consciousness" finds contemporary expression in the identification in western discourse of Africa as the source of AIDS, the terms of the identification being "reminiscent of the colonialist imaginary: unrestrained sexuality, moral corruption, and lack of hygiene" (135-36). There is one reference to AIDS in *Disgrace*: "there's the risk of HIV," David says, expressing one of his concerns about Lucy fol-

lowing the rape (106). Coetzee is, here, evidently treating his character ironically. For in the narrative, he deconstructs the colonial differential between the morally pure European and the depraved African by characterizing David, himself, as hypersexual. The identification of Africans with HIV/AIDS remains, however, intact in the narrative. For though David apparently engages in unprotected sex—condoms are only mentioned with reference to David's affair with Bev Shaw (149-50)—and though he has multiple (literally hundreds of) sexual partners (192), no suggestion is ever made, not by his ex-wife who berates him on other topics, or even by Melanie's enraged father, that David might be a source of HIV/AIDS infection. As Richard and Rosalind Chirimuuta observe in their study of the construction of AIDS in western scientific and media discourse, the notion that "white people could infect Africans with AIDS and not the reverse" is simply unimaginable (135). As they also point out, the widespread belief that AIDS originated in Africa has no scientific basis and has had the effect of providing further support for racial discrimination against black people.¹⁰

One of the major concerns of Coetzee's later fiction is to register the "discursive conditions under which white South African authorship must operate" and to provide "a clear-eyed representation of its own historical positioning and the limits of its power" (Attwell, *J. M. Coetzee* 103, 119). In both *Foe* and *Disgrace*, Coetzee adopts the strategy of foregrounding the tropes and conventions of colonial discourse as a means of making his fiction acknowledge the discursive conditions of its own production. A particularly striking instance of Coetzee's handling of this technique is provided by his treatment in *Disgrace* of the conventional white/black, good/evil binary oppositions of colonial discourse. These binary codes appear regularly in David's unreflective use of language, as in the following: "the worst, the darkest reading" of the attack on Lucy would be that Petrus, Lucy's African neighbour, "engaged three strange men to teach Lucy a lesson" (118); and, "Lucy must work her own way back from the darkness to the light" (107). David also sometimes quite consciously draws on the resources of colonial discourse, finding in them a convenient shorthand, as in his use of

the phrase "darkest Africa" (95, 121) and his renaming of Melanie as "the dark one." The novel's narrator, too, occasionally resorts to racially coded language, using, for example the descriptor "remarks darkly" to characterize a comment made, with special reference to Petrus, by Lucy's Afrikaner neighbour: "not one of them you can trust" (109).

Having placed such racially coded language on full display, Coetzee, then, with the same self-conscious intent, sets out to undermine it. Thus, near the end of the novel, David is able to see himself from the perspective of Melanie's parents as "the man whose name is darkness" (168). It is, Lucy, however, who is the key figure in Coetzee's deconstructive strategy. For through her name, Lucy is associated not only with light, but also quite explicitly with Lucifer, "the dark angel," as Lurie calls him in his lecture on Byron (32).

The narrative's deconstructive project is, however, not successful. The "white-and-black, light-and-darkness dichotomies of racist fantasy," as Patrick Brantlinger calls them (263), retain a strong hold on Coetzee's narrative, finding reinforcement in the novel's most memorable characterization of Africans: as gratuitously violent and savagely brutal. But the main reason for the project's failure is that even when Coetzee subverts the standard imagery, "dark," as in the examples above, continues to be identified with evil. As Coetzee makes evident through David's consideration of the extent to which the English language has been contaminated by the power relations of colonialism and apartheid, he is not unaware of the problem:

The language [...] is [...] tired, friable, eaten from the inside as if by termites. Only the monosyllables can still be relied on, and not even all of them. What is to be done? Nothing that he, the one-time teacher of communications, can see. Nothing short of starting all over again with the ABC. By the time the big words come back reconstructed, purified, fit to be trusted once more, he will be long dead. (129)

But the question remains as to whether in his treatment of the conventional white/black, good/evil binary oppositions of colonial and apartheid discourse, Coetzee does not inadvertently shore up the binary logic of that discourse.

In the course of showcasing the tropes of colonial discourse, Coetzee inevitably makes reference to cannibalism, colonialism's pre-eminent signifier of African primitiveness, savagery, and otherness. But in this case, no attempt is made to subvert the binary distinction. On the contrary, the notion that Africans are backward and savage is actively promoted in the narrative by the context in which the reference to cannibalism occurs: during the time of the attack on Lucy's house, while David is locked in the lavatory and Lucy is being raped by the three men. Not knowing the language of their assailants, David likens his situation to that of "a missionary in cassock and topi waiting with clasped hands and upcast eyes while the savages jaw away in their own lingo preparatory to plunging him into their boiling cauldron" (95). Perhaps Coetzee intended the remark to be seen as one more example of David's habit of falling unreflexively into the patterns of colonial discourse. But during this scene of terror the ironic distance between Coetzee and his focalizing character is considerably narrowed. Or perhaps Coetzee thought that in contemporary culture the figure of the African cannibal would, regardless of the context of its occurrence, be instantly recognized, and hence immediately dismissed, as a racist stereotype, long since outmoded. But as Bill Ashcroft and his colleagues observe, "to this day, cannibalism has remained the West's key representation of primitivism, even though its first recording, and indeed most subsequent examples, have been evidence of a rhetorical strategy of imperialism rather than evidence of an objective 'fact'" (29). As if to prove the point of Ashcroft *et al.*, the mayor of Toronto, Mel Lastman, recently made the following remark in response to an interviewer's question about whether he planned to travel to Africa to support Toronto's bid for the 2008 Olympics: "what the hell do I want to go to places like Mombasa. [...] I'm sort of scared about going there. [...] I just see

myself in a pot of boiling water with all those natives dancing around me" (*National* 11 July 2001).

Coetzee also foregrounds the conventional colonial identification of Africans with animals, on the one hand, reinscribing the association in terms of Lucy's rapists and, on the other, undermining it by portraying David as animalistic in his sexual behaviour. But he also shows Africans to be less than human in their treatment of animals. There is the killing of the caged dogs by Lucy's and David's assailants. There are the dogs suffering from neglect and malnutrition which are brought from the village to Bev Shaw's animal clinic at which David begins to do volunteer work. And there are the two sheep which Petrus has bought for the party he is giving. The problem is not, the narrative makes evident, that Petrus is planning to butcher the sheep for the party, but rather that, with casual disregard and unnecessary cruelty, he tethers them for the three days before their slaughter on barren ground where they cannot graze and do not have access to water.

In *Disgrace*, animals take on the role of absolute other, since Africans, "the historical Other of colonialism" (Attwell, *J. M. Coetzee* 121), have acquired both voice and power. Given the dehumanization of Africans in colonial discourse, the implied comparison with animals is especially problematic. There is also a certain tendency in Coetzee's narrative toward a blurring of categories. "Too many people, too few things," David thinks, after he has lost his car and shoes to his and Lucy's attackers (98). "'The trouble is, there are just too many of them,' says Bev Shaw. 'Too many by our standards, not by theirs. They would just multiply and multiply if they had their way, until they filled the earth'" (85). Bev is, in fact, referring to dogs, but because her discourse so nearly replicates that of western policy and media statements on the need for population control measures in "Third World" countries, the referent seems also to be "Africans." Perhaps Coetzee is parodying western discourse on the so-called "population problem."¹¹ But to what end, would be the question? And what would such a reading make of David's work at the animal clinic, putting down unwanted dogs and honouring their corpses—work through which, according to Marais

(176) and others,¹² he finds his redemption? Or is Coetzee attempting to demonstrate the slipperiness of the signifier within the Lacanian chain of signifiers? The effect in any case is to reinforce already well-entrenched western views of Africans.

Is there any other way to read the population discourse in *Disgrace*? Coetzee's previous book, *The Lives of Animals*, which also treats the issue of animal rights, might help to answer this question. *The Lives of Animals* is a metafictional account of an elderly novelist and academic, Elizabeth Costello (a stand-in for Coetzee?) addressing an audience of university faculty and students on the abuse of animals. Costello repeatedly draws an analogy between the treatment of animals in contemporary society and the treatment of Jews in Nazi Germany: "we are surrounded by an enterprise of degradation, cruelty, and killing which rivals anything that the Third Reich was capable of, indeed dwarfs it, in that ours is an enterprise without end, self-regenerating, bringing rabbits, rats, poultry, livestock ceaselessly into the world for the purpose of killing them" (21). Relying on self-reflexivity as he does so frequently, Coetzee does not let this (to say the least) highly problematic comparison with the Holocaust go unchallenged in his narrative (49-50). Nor does it pass unnoticed in the essays on Coetzee's *The Lives of Animals* provided by four prominent scholars, Marjorie Garber among them, which appear in the same volume. There is, however, at least one gap in Costello's discourse about which neither the usually self-conscious Coetzee nor either Costello's or Coetzee's interlocutors shows any awareness, a gap which is, perhaps, particularly telling for this reason, and one which has some bearing on my discussion of the population discourse in *Disgrace*. Examining the assumptions which underlie the population control measures which human beings impose on other species, Costello maintains that "the only organism over which we do not claim this power of life and death is Man" (54). But, of course, in the "real world," some people are excluded from this definition of "Man." And I am not referring to Coetzee/Costello's provocative use of gender-exclusive language here, but rather to the high priority placed by western countries on limiting birth rates in "Third World" nations.¹³

In the final scene of *Disgrace*, David selects to help put down an abandoned dog with whom he has formed a particularly close bond. "Bearing him in his arms like a lamb," he takes him into Bev's clinic (220). As the dog is not only male but also has "a withered left hind-quarter" (215), the symbolism is quite explicit: David is sacrificing his already impaired sexuality, his power as a white middle-class male in South Africa. By the end of the novel, David has been stripped of all of the conventional markings of identity: his job, his possessions, his sexuality, even his surname which is misprinted as "Lourie" in a newspaper article (115-16). He now spends his time sitting in a corner of the yard outside Bev's clinic writing an opera about Byron in Italy. It is a piece on which he has been working for years but has been unable to make much progress until he discovers himself adopting the voice of Byron's betrayed and abandoned mistress.

In Lacanian or Cixousian terms, it is easy enough to see what Coetzee is up to. Because of David's now marginal status, he is able to gain access to the repressed feminine facet of language, an aspect of language which is capable of disrupting or subverting the symbolic order. As Cixous puts it: "[The feminine practice of writing] will always surpass the discourse that regulates the phallogocentric system. [...] It will be conceived of only by subjects who are breakers of automatisms, by peripheral figures that no authority can ever subjugate" (253). But, on the level of historical allegory, what is the meaning of David's adoption of a deprived subject position in relation to the phallus? David's nearly derelict state at the end of the novel does not reflect the actual condition of the majority of whites in South Africa. As Poyner says, "such a redistribution of 'capital' in South Africa is a fallacy where whites continue to maintain their position of economic dominion" (72). Indeed, in its confirmation of myths and stereotypes, Coetzee's representation of Africans provides a rationale for preserving the economic equalities that existed in South Africa under apartheid, as well as for maintaining global inequalities.

Perhaps Coetzee intended David to be a model for South Africans in the "post-" apartheid era? Such an understanding of David's role is

encouraged at various points in the narrative, perhaps most strongly in the scenes in which the inversion of the master/slave dialectic is played out through the relationship between David and Petrus. When David first meets Petrus, Petrus introduces himself as “the dog-man” (64), a post which, as he gains power in the new South Africa, he abandons to David. Later, following Lucy’s rape, Petrus asks David to help him lay pipes on his land—“where ‘pipes’ assume Freudian [or Lacanian] connotations” (Poyner 72). As the dialogue indicates, Petrus does now, indeed, “possess the phallus.” “Do you need me here any longer?” David asks Petrus. To which Petrus replies: “no, now it is easy, now I must just dig the pipe in” (139). Evidently Petrus is merely going to repeat the modes of oppression of the former master. By contrast, David, in attempting in his opera on Byron’s mistress to locate himself in the feminine space of marginality in relation to the phallus, seems to suggest a way of getting beyond the master/slave dialectic: a deconstruction of the binary hierarchy that does not merely invert the categories but offers resistance to any and every dominant order. The problem is that, by privileging David’s political values over Petrus’s, Coetzee, himself, reconstructs the binary hierarchy. Moreover, if David comes to occupy the place of the novel’s moral centre, then Coetzee’s narrative underwrites the myth of the civilizing role of the Europeans, “one of the most tenacious and persistent myths of European liberal tradition” (Parker 85).

Poyner approaches the narrative’s “representations of loss of authorial and colonial authority” from a slightly different angle, reading David’s story as “an allegory for truth and reconciliation in the new South Africa” (73-4). As Poyner’s essay demonstrates, however, particularly in its struggle to deal with the rape metaphor,¹⁴ Coetzee’s inability to move beyond the assumptions and oppositions of colonialism and apartheid makes such a reading extremely difficult to sustain. A major part of the problem is that, as Edward Said has shown, colonial discourse is, itself, a form of authority, a style of domination. What this would seem to mean for South Africa, as well as other “post-” colonial nations, is that the dilemmas of reconciliation cannot even be mean-

ingly addressed until the discursal (as well as economic) structures of oppression have been dismantled.

Lucy's situation at the end of the narrative raises the same kind of issues. Lucy who, as a result of the rape, is now pregnant, agrees to marry Petrus, even though he already has two wives and is quite evidently in connivance with her rapists, and also to give him her land, in exchange for which he will offer her security and protection. She will, she says, continue to live on the land as Petrus's tenant (204). Since land ownership in South Africa "remains much as it did in the final years of apartheid—the white population (14% of the population) own[ing] around 85%" (Mngxitama 2), Lucy's landless state is not indicative of an actual change in land-tenure patterns in South Africa following the 1994 elections. Perhaps, rather like the boy in Coetzee's *Boyhood: A Memoir*, Lucy has been able to develop a relationship with the land which is not based on personal private ownership. To rephrase slightly the suggestion Jennifer Wenzel makes about *Boyhood*: Would it be going too far to suggest that Coetzee intended Lucy "to be a model for white South Africans in an era of land reform" (111)? But there is still a need to account for the comparison made implicitly in the narrative between the ways in which Lucy and Petrus treat the land: Petrus using it as an exploitable resource (136-39, 151) and Lucy establishing a less proprietorial, more reciprocal relation (217). Is the narrative once again establishing a racially coded hierarchy of values?

But more than anything else, Lucy's role in the novel is, like that of Soraya and Melanie, the allegorical one of embodying the territory or state of South Africa. As I suggested earlier, the representation of Africa as female, and hence as in need of paternal rule by a European power, is a colonial trope. And just as the figure once justified the perpetuation of colonial rule, so it now helps to rationalize the maintenance of neo-colonial relations between western and African nations. But the figure is also a mainstay of patriarchal discourse, justifying the perpetuation of male domination. Thus, in feminizing Africa, Coetzee deconstructs his own "post-" colonial narrative: the critique he offers through his

portrayal of the two patriarchs, David and Petrus, of the modes of operation of male power.

In an article on Coetzee and the politics of canonization, Derek Attridge asks the question: "What is it about [Coetzee's] novels that has propelled them at least into the ante-chambers of the literary canon in the English-speaking world?" (169). Attridge answers this question first by listing three characteristics of Coetzee's fiction which make it amenable to canonization: its overt intertextuality, its self-consciously chiselled style, and its thematic focus on traditional humanist concerns. But, Attridge argues, these features should be regarded, not as constituting an implicit claim to membership in an existing canonic tradition, but as "drawing attention to the way the text, like any text, is *manufactured* from the resources of a particular culture in order to gain acceptance within that culture" (172). What I have tried to show in this essay are the connections, not always at an ironic distance, between one of Coetzee's more recent novels and another one of the resources of western culture: a literary genealogy of colonial discourse. In being awarded the Booker Prize, *Disgrace* acquired considerable cultural capital, thus effectively illustrating the process by means of which discriminatory cultural codes continuously reaffirm their legitimacy and hence remain capable of providing a rationale for discriminatory systems:¹⁵ systems such as the one which has come to be called "global apartheid" which involves, among other things, "the international practice of double standards that assume inferior rights to be appropriate for certain 'others,' defined by location, origin, race or gender" (Booker and Minter 11). But as Foucault says, and as Coetzee himself sometimes demonstrates, "there are no relations of power without resistances" (142).

Notes

- 1 See especially the "Symposium on *Disgrace*" featured in a recent issue of the South African journal *Scrutiny*2 (7.1, 2002). Writing in 1996, David Attwell noted that "feminist readings of Coetzee have been slow to develop" (Afterward

- 215). Contributors to the *Scrutiny*2 symposium, have begun to fill this gap. See, in particular, Georgina Horrell and Louise Bethlehem.
- 2 A notable exception is Dionne Brand's reading of *Disgrace* in *A Map to the Door of No Return* (125-34). It is the only reading I have encountered which makes the question of race the focus of its examination.
 - 3 See, for example, Lucy Graham, who argues that *Disgrace* is a self-reflexive narrative which problematizes theories of radical alterity, and Georgina Horrell, who reads *Disgrace* as a narrative that inscribes the guilt of apartheid on the body of a white woman.
 - 4 In Michael Marais's reading of the novel, "Lurie's attempt to possess his student is emblematic of the relations of power that pervade South African society as a whole" (174), including those of "post" political apartheid South Africa. This assignment of paradigmatic status to David's relationship with Melanie ignores Coetzee's quite specific use of race to differentiate between two periods in South African history: the pre and post 1994 elections eras. It also conveniently allows Marais to gloss over the difficulties raised by Coetzee's representation of these historical eras.
 - 5 Any attempt to demonstrate this point becomes in itself an exercise in racial stereotyping.
 - 6 See Poyner 70 and Brand 129.
 - 7 Writing in *the New York Review of Books*, John Banville sees David as being "required to abase himself at the feet of the monitors of political correctness" (23). See also Sandra Martin's review in *The Globe and Mail*, D-18.
 - 8 See, for example, Nadine Gordimer's review of *Life and Times of Michael K* which appeared in the *New York Review of Books*.
 - 9 Two other critics who share this view of the rape scenes are Lucy Graham, who speaks of "mirror-like concurrences" (13), and Ariella Azoulay, who uses the phrase "mirror images" (37).
 - 10 In the nineteenth century, "in an age of colonialism and black slavery," similar unsubstantiated claims were made about Africa being the origin of syphilis. See Gilman 250.
 - 11 The population density in most African countries is considerably lower than that of European countries. In persons per square kilometre: Nigeria 137.1; Sierra Leone 75.6; Kenya 52.8; South Africa 35.8; France 108.6; Germany 230.8 UK 245.6 ("The Nations of the World," 2002 *Britannica Book of the*

Year, 605, 612, 647, 693, 722, 728, 751). The real “problem” is the distribution of wealth and resources both within and between nations.

- 12 See Poyner 73 and Gora 7.
- 13 See Susan George, *How the Other Half Dies*, 31-45.
- 14 Poyner begins by observing that the representation of “African agency [...] in the act of rape” has “devastating implications for a nation in which whites have regarded miscegenation with abhorrence and the black man as the natural rapist” and then concludes by saying that “such a portrayal perhaps [is] made possible with the demise of apartheid” (71).
- 15 As Graham Huggan points out in his very informative essay on the Booker Prize, there is also “a residual conservatism playing about the Booker’s edges” which is evident in the themes of prize winning novels (418) and which is not unrelated to the history of the sponsoring corporation, Booker plc, which began in the nineteenth century as a British sugar company in Guyana.

Works Cited

- Ashcroft, Bill, Gareth Griffiths and Helen Tiffin. *Key Concepts in Post-Colonial Studies*. London: Routledge, 1998.
- Attridge, Derek. “Oppressive Silence: J. M. Coetzee’s *Foe* and the Politics of Canonisation.” *Critical Perspectives on J. M. Coetzee*. Eds. Graham Huggan and Stephen Watson. New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1996. 168-90.
- Attwell, David. Afterward. *Critical Perspectives on J. M. Coetzee*. Eds. Graham Huggan and Stephen Watson. New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1996. 213-16.
- . *J. M. Coetzee: South Africa and the Politics of Writing*. Berkeley: U of California P, 1993.
- . “The Problem of History in the Fiction of J. M. Coetzee.” *Rendering Things Visible: Essays on South African Literary Culture*. Ed. Martin Trump. Athens: Ohio UP, 1990. 94-133.
- Azoulay, Ariella. “An Alien Woman/A Permitted Woman: On J. M. Coetzee’s *Disgrace*.” *Scrutiny* 2 7.1 (2002): 33-41.
- Banville, John. “Endgame.” Rev. of *Disgrace* by J. M. Coetzee. *New York Review of Books* 21 Dec. 2000: 69-72.
- Bethlehem, Louise. “Pliant/compliant; grace/*Disgrace*; plaint/complaint.” *Scrutiny* 2 7.1 (2002): 20-24.

- Booker, Salih and William Minter. "Global Apartheid." *Nation* 9 July 2001: 11-15.
- Brand, Dionne. *A Map to the Door of No Return*. Toronto: Doubleday, 2001.
- Brantlinger, Patrick. *Rule of Darkness: British Literature and Imperialism, 1830-1914*. Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1988.
- Chirimuuta, Richard C. and Rosalind J. Chirimuuta. *Aids, Africa and Racism*. London: Free Association Books, 1989.
- Cixous, Hélène. "The Laugh of the Medusa." *New French Feminisms: An Anthology*. Eds. Elaine Marks and Isabelle de Courtivron. New York: Schocken, 1981. 245-64.
- Coetzee, J. M. *Age of Iron*. New York: Random House, 1990.
- . *Boyhood: A Memoir*. London: Secker & Warburg, 1997.
- . *Disgrace*. London: Secker & Warburg, 1999.
- . *Foe*. London: Secker & Warburg, 1986.
- . *Life & Times of Michael K*. London: Secker & Warburg, 1983.
- . *The Lives of Animals*. Princeton: Princeton UP, 1999.
- . *Waiting for the Barbarians*. 1980. Rpt. London: Penguin, 1999.
- Dovey, Teresa. *The Novels of J. M. Coetzee*. Craighall: Ad. Donker, 1988.
- Fanon, Frantz. *Black Skin White Masks*. Trans. Charles Lam Markmann. New York: Grove, 1967.
- Foucault, Michel. *Power/Knowledge: Selected Interviews and Other Writings 1972-1977*. Ed. Colin Gordon. Trans. Colin Gordon et al. New York: Pantheon Books, 1980.
- George, Susan. *How the Other Half Dies: The Real Reasons for World Hunger*. Totowa, New Jersey: Rowman & Allanheld, 1977.
- Gilman, Sander. L. "Black Bodies, White Bodies: Toward an Iconography of Female Sexuality in Late Nineteenth-Century Art, Medicine, and Literature." *"Race," Writing, and Difference*. Ed. Henry Louis Gates, Jr. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1986. 223-61.
- Gordimer, Nadine. "The Idea of Gardening." *New York Review of Books* 2 February 1984: 3-4.
- Gorra, Michael. "After the Fall." Rev. of *Disgrace* by J. M. Coetzee. *New York Times Book Review* 28 Nov. 1999: 7.

Imperial Fictions: J. M. Coetzee's *Disgrace*

- Graham, Lucy. "Yes, I am giving him up': Sacrificial Responsibility and Likeness with Dogs in J. M. Coetzee's Recent Fiction." *Scrutiny* 27.1 (2002): 4-15.
- Hardt, Michael and Antonio Negri. *Empire*. Cambridge: Harvard UP, 2000.
- Horrell, Georgina. "J. M. Coetzee's *Disgrace*: One Settler, One Bullet and the 'New South Africa.'" *Scrutiny* 27.1 (2002): 25-32.
- Huggan, Graham. "Evolution and Entropy in J. M. Coetzee's *Age of Iron*." *Critical Perspectives on J. M. Coetzee*. Ed. Graham Huggan and Stephen Watson. New York: St. Martin's Press, 1996. 191-212.
- . "Prizing 'Otherness': A Short History of the Booker." *Studies in the Novel* 29.3 (1997): 412-33.
- Huggan, Graham and Stephen Watson. Introduction. *Critical Perspectives on J. M. Coetzee*. Ed. Graham Huggan and Stephen Watson. New York: St. Martin's Press, 1996. 1-10.
- Lacan, Jacques. *Écrits-A Selection*. Trans. Alan Sheridan. London: Tavistock, 1977.
- . *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psycho-Analysis*. Trans. Alan Sheridan. Ed. Jacques-Alain Miller. New York: Norton, 1978.
- Marais, Michael. "'Little Enough, Less Than Little: Nothing': Ethics, Engagement, and Change in the Fiction of J. M. Coetzee." *Modern Fiction Studies* 46.1 (2000): 159-82.
- Martin, Sandra. "A post-apartheid dinosaur." Rev. of *Disgrace* by J. M. Coetzee. *Globe and Mail* 2 Oct. 1999: D-18.
- McLuskie, Kathleen and Lyn Innes. "Women and African Literature." *Wasafiri* 8 (1988): 3-7.
- Mngxitama, Andile. "South Africa: Land Reform Blocked." (2000, April 4—last update). [Online]. Available: <http://jinx.sistm.unsw.edu.au/-greenlift/2000/406/406p25.htm> [2001, July 18] 4pp.
- The National*. CBC. 11 July 2001.
- "The Nations of the World." *2002 Britannica Book of the Year*. 2002.
- Parker, Kenneth. "J. M. Coetzee: The Postmodern and the Post-colonial." *Critical Perspectives on J. M. Coetzee*. Ed. Graham Huggan and Stephen Watson. New York: St. Martin's Press, 1996. 82-104.
- Parry, Benita. "Speech and Silence in the Fictions of J. M. Coetzee." *Critical Perspectives on J. M. Coetzee*. Ed. Graham Huggan and Stephen Watson. New York: St. Martin's Press, 1996. 37-65.

Poyner, Jane. "Truth and Reconciliation in J. M. Coetzee's *Disgrace*." *Scrutiny2: Issues in English Studies in South Africa* 5.2 (2000): 67-77.

Said, Edward. *Orientalism*. New York: Vintage, 1979.

Schreiner, Olive. *The Story of an African Farm*. 1883. Rpt. Oxford: OUP. 1992.

Wenzel, Jennifer. "The Pastoral Promise and the Political Imperative: the *Plaasroman* Tradition in an Era of Land Reform." *Modern Fiction Studies* 46.1 (2000): 90-113.