

Difference and J.M. Coetzee's *Disgrace*

Neville Smith

Summary

In this essay, I would like to argue that *Disgrace* (1999) is part of a transition in South African writing,¹ from the fictional representation of difference among people based on the biological notions of blood and genes to notions of difference based on culture and social origin. For South African writers after 1990, this shift signalled incorporation into the global order. Coetzee contemplates South Africa during its emergence from centuries of colonialism and settler racism and reflects on the notion of being in post-apartheid South Africa. As both an internationally recognised writer and a prominent South African academic, he inscribes a view of region and nation in his works that I would suggest is indebted to the cadastral gaze of Empire.² In this novel, Coetzee's view is significantly marked by a postmodern appreciation of culture and society reflected in his extensive allusions to classical and modernist art and literature. In this essay I outline key shifts in postmodern racism and consider how a range of critics have responded to *Disgrace*. Following this I examine the way in which Coetzee circumvents typologies based on race by inscribing a more nuanced typology based on cultural difference and social history. Finally I look at how the violation of women and the consequences of such deeds are represented in this novel.

Opsomming

In hierdie essay voer ek aan dat *Disgrace* (1999) deel is van 'n oorgang in Suid-Afrikaanse skryfkuns, van die fiktiewe uitbeelding van andersheid tussen mense op grond van die biologiese opvattinge van bloed en gene na opvattinge van andersheid op grond van kultuur en sosiale oorsprong. Vir Suid-Afrikaanse skrywers

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1. Shared by Zakes Mda, *Heart of Redness* (2000); Breyten Breytenbach, *Dog Heart* (1999); and Andre Brink, *Imaginations of Sand* (1997)
 2. Ashcroft, Griffiths & Tiffin describe modern surveillance of imperial nation states, which implies a viewer with an elevated vantage point from which it objectifies and interpellates the colonised subject. Following Lacan, this gaze fixes the identification, objectification and subjection of a subject simultaneously within a system of power relations which confirms its subalterity and powerlessness (1998: 226). I suggest that the gaze of Empire, which views the world in a different way, has emerged. Since 1990 various forms of this media, history and political discourse have been reflecting the operation of the gaze of Empire no longer linked to the sovereignty of imperial nation states and colonies but to a cadastral network of surveillance which operates simultaneously across all borders. We have a deterritorialised compound eye of multinational corporations, nation states, the IMF, WTO and other institutions linked to the cybernetic chain of networks.

na 1990 het hierdie skuif inkorporasie in die globale orde ingelui. Coetzee besin oor Suid-Afrika tydens die land se verrysing uit eeue se kolonialisme en setlaarrassisme en oor hoe post-apartheid-Suid-Afrika ervaar word. As sowel 'n internasionaal erkende skrywer as 'n vooraanstaande Suid-Afrikaanse akademikus, skryf hy 'n beskouing van streek en nasie in sy werk in wat na my mening veel te danke het aan die kadastrale empire. In hierdie roman word Coetzee se standpunt oorwegend gekenmerk deur 'n postmoderne waardering van kultuur en samelewing wat deur sy uitgebreide toespelings op klassieke en modernistiese kuns en literatuur weerspieël word. In hierdie essay skets ek kernskuiwe in postmoderne rassisme en neem ek die reaksies van 'n reeks kritici op *Disgrace* in oënskou. Vervolgens ondersoek ek die manier waarop Coetzee tipologieë op grond van ras omseil deur 'n meer genuanseerde tipologie op grond van kultuurverskille en sosiale geskiedenis in te skryf. Ten slotte kyk ek na hoe die ontering van vroue en die gevolge van sulke daede in hierdie roman uitgebeeld word.

In order to contextualise this transition within a global framework, I wish to utilise insights of the critical theorists Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri in *Empire* (2000). In what Fredric Jameson has described as a “theoretical synthesis of the new millennium”, the authors trace the shift from the modern territorial sovereignty of the nation state to the deterritorialised imperial sovereignty of Empire.³ In this study of the nature and trajectory of globalisation in today’s “imperial society”,⁴ the authors argue that post-modern forms of racism have changed their foundations from a “theory based on biology to one based on culture” (2000: 191). In the late 1980s, on a global level, the notion of biological essentialism was abandoned and differences among races were seen as constituted by social and cultural forces. Consequently representations of racial hatred and fear are now ascribed to sociological and cultural signifiers. In a world where races are no longer viewed as biological units, the behaviour of individuals, their abilities or aptitudes can not be calculated on the basis of blood and genes.

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3. Hardt and Negri argue that we have become part of a “global order, a new logic and structure of rule [which] effectively regulates global economic and cultural exchanges in a global market and within global circuits of production” (2000: xi). In this diagnosis of the contemporary state of world affairs the rule of a new imperial order differs from earlier ones which were based on overt military domination. The new order has no centre and coincides with the postmodern phase of capital accumulation. For the remainder of the essay I will refer to the term Empire in this sense.
 4. Hardt and Negri draw a clear distinction between their concept of Empire and imperialism in that the latter was “an extension of the sovereignty of the European nation states beyond their own boundaries ... throughout the modern era”, while the former “establishes no territorial centre of power and does not rely on fixed boundaries or barriers” (p. xii). For an example of the imperial gaze see *Imperial Eyes: Travel Writing and Transculturation*. Mary-Louise Pratt examines how “travel books by Europeans about non-European parts of the world ... Euroimperialism” (1992: 4).

It is to historically determined cultures that we now ascribe flexible differences that hinge on effects of social history. In a context in which “all humans are equal in principle” (2000: 191), I argue that *Disgrace* is a fictional work that is designed to signal differences which function according to the imperatives of this new order.

In the new racism of Empire, Hardt and Negri argue that culture inherits the role played by biology in the nineteenth and early twentieth century. In the latter period, nature and biology were considered as fixed, whereas since the 1980s, culture was seen as subject to historical change resulting in an infinite number of hybrids. However, genocide in Kosovo (1999) and Rwanda (1992) set definite limits on the compatibility of cultures. While pluralist theory regards all cultural identities as equal in principle, it only “accepts all differences of who we are so long as we act our race” (2000: 192). Under the sovereignty of Empire, racial differences are required as practical markers of social boundaries. Even though the new global order is silent about the inferiority or superiority of different races or ethnic groups, the substitution of culture for race amounts to a strategy for preserving race. Significantly, the origins of the new racial hierarchy are seen to be the effect of social and cultural circumstances. So, after all, there is still racial supremacy and subordination, but now it is seen to arise from free competition, or a “kind of market meritocracy of culture” (2000: 193).

I suggest that much of the critical reception the novel *Disgrace* has received is indicative of an order of race interpreted as the effect of social and cultural circumstances. The dismissal of allegations of racism based on biological difference against Coetzee, which I consider below, also reflect this theoretical substitution of culture for race at a time when South Africa becomes enmeshed in the new global order. However, as Hardt and Negri argue above, this substitution of culture for race insidiously re-enacts a theory for the preservation of race as a marker of social separation.

In arguments which address aesthetics, the ethics of reading, ontology, race and gender in the novel, David Attwell (2002), Michael Marais (2000, 2006), Derek Attridge (2002), Mark Sanders (2002), Michael Holland (2002), Rita Barnard (2002), Elleke Boehmer (2002), and Lucy Graham (2003) defend Coetzee by asserting that a reductive reading of the text impoverishes interpretation of a literary work and undermines aesthetic norms.⁵ Most of these critics argue that difference is predicated on the basis of culture and social history rather than on race in this finely wrought fictional narrative imbued with a distinctly postmodern aesthetic. They advocate a shift from reductive readings of South African novels that rely on racialised markers founded on biological racism to identifiers linked to

5. In doing so they seem to challenge Jan Mukařovský's assertion that aesthetic norms are “characterised by general consensus and spontaneous agreement rather than by an agreed statement or formulation” (Garvin 1964: 44).

culture and social history. What we see in *Disgrace* then is the narrator-focaliser enmeshed in global discourses of difference based on culture and social history, which a contemporary globalised readership appreciates and values. This is accompanied by a number of effects such as the substitution of cultural identity for that of racial identity. However, instead of dissolving race as a mark of difference, this pluralist theory actually ends up preserving it. This transition can be linked to the processes which accompany the chameleon-like gaze of Empire⁶ directed at developing economies in Africa, Latin America and in Asia.

When this gaze of Empire shifts to the African continent on the eve of the millennium, like David Attwell suggests, "Coetzee's sense of history ... is gloomy" (2002: 338) and the novel ponders over David Lurie's "dead-end in consciousness" (pp. 339-340). Attwell provides insight into the way the novel manages rather than propagates racial discourse⁷ by absorbing race into broader categories of historical and cultural meaning (p. 335). He points out Coetzee's "enduring revulsion for both racialised discourse and racialised politics" and dispels the notion that the events portrayed in the novel "can be read as a reflection of the real" (p. 332). Attwell argues that Coetzee is engaged in a search for value and the ontological grounds for ethical action which require an "imaginative act of ... circumventing a

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6. In media, political and historical reportage this outlook is usually interpreted in terms of the expansion of capitalism into a global market economy and accompanied by the political and economic ideology of neoliberalism. It is also neoconservative in that it often judges others using a "values"-based morality which embraces a commitment to free markets, individual rights, and political democracy. Neoconservatives characteristically attempt to show that economic and political inequalities (class system, power of the ruling class) are based on performance and therefore well justified. On an international level, where Western political alliances are arraigned against "rogue regimes" (which are seen to threaten democracy), this gaze translates into an activist foreign policy which includes military intervention and the occupation of territory.
 7. Attwell deplores the fact that representational politics predominate in South Africa and racialised readings of the text receive the support of the governing party. It is most unfortunate, Attwell concedes, that while the novel "sublimates race by drawing it into larger patterns of historical and ethical interpretation" (p. 340), this goes unnoticed among those who are too firmly entrenched in a history dedicated to the achievement and maintenance of "political, material and sexual power" (p. 340). Attridge also sounds a warning to "irresponsible" readers who fail to engage with the novel as a literary work and venture to regard it as "historical reportage, political prescription, or allegorical scheme" (p. 319). He cites Coetzee's "career-long endeavour to assert literature's distinctive value and significance in relation to other discourses more wholly governed by pragmatic imperatives" (p. 319).

corrupt history” (p. 339). Graham Pechey has also suggested the novel is a “high-cultural intertext which deserves as much attention as the process of social transformation in South Africa” (2002: 374). Attridge sees the excitement created by the novel internationally as “testimony to the power literature possesses to intervene in the global arena through its effect on readers” (2002: 320). As a complex narrative endowed with sophisticated stylistic techniques, the text presents a challenge to exclusive regional and iconic national discourses.

Derek Attridge focuses on the literary impact of *Disgrace* in the global context (2002) and notes how the novel generated serious debate and media attention nationally, besides achieving immediate international recognition. He attests to a critical reception of the novel that has varied enormously and stimulated productivity in the academy and considerable interest within a broad range of postcolonial and postmodern readership. Attridge alludes to the novel’s emerging iconic status, its enigmatic style and provocative engagement with post-apartheid South Africa. Given the text’s complex and often deeply ambiguous representation of fictionalised contemporary historical, social and cultural events of the 1990s, he is not surprised that it has been read allegorically and reductively. Here, at the level of the linguistic sign the protagonist stages resistance to the global urgency to rationalise language to a point where all communication is purely functional, a factor of productivity related to its market value.

The role of the imagination in the novel is foregrounded by Michael Marais who notes that the narrator-protagonist embarks on a problematic “ethical trajectory” in search of the sympathetic imagination (2006: 79). In what Marais terms the “anti-Bildungsroman” structure within the narrative, Lurie fails to achieve this transformation because “the self’s desires and antipathies are not pure, but located by the self’s location in a particular cultural and historical context” (p. 80). The act of reading here is seen as a culturally determined operation where the knowledge contained within the text is made available to the reader by “integrating it into those signifying codes that culture makes available” (p. 84). *Disgrace* can thus be regarded as a system of signs which constitute a place where the act of reading occurs. This commentary implies that *Disgrace* is located in the particular cultural and historical context which I suggest is that of Empire. In addition, Marais identifies archetypal postmodern stylistic features such as the narrator’s unreliability, his “ironic misreadings”, the “ironic contract with the reader” and the author’s “disavowal of authority” (p. 85). The novel is seen to challenge with current aesthetics of reading while everyday speech is related to elevated themes from the Romantic period.

The performative open-endedness of *Disgrace*, for Mark Sanders, speaks about the capacity of language to alter itself and its speakers long after losing articulateness for those who have claimed privileged ownership of it (2002: 372). Sanders argues that the narrator-focaliser is engaged in “silent

resistance to the instrumentalisation of language and learning” (p. 365). It is when language is reduced to functional communication that Coetzee is opposed to the “new global imperialism” (p. 366). Sanders refers to Coetzee’s commentary on aspects of transformation at UCT.⁸ Notwithstanding these public avowals to the contrary, I suggest that by embracing stylistic and narrative devices of the postmodern in his fictional works, he is implicated in the culture of Empire. Coetzee maintains a silence in *Disgrace* on the formidable global perception that Africa is a continent eternally mired in debt, poverty and disease.

Lucy Graham illustrates that the novel incorporates a subversion of the “black-peril” narrative by scripting the hidden sexual exploitation of black women by white men. She compares this with the narrator-focaliser’s sexual violation of a student, and considers elements which expose inequality and harassment in the campus novel structure. For Graham, Coetzee’s employment of the anti-pastoral mode also “breaks with colonial mappings of the female body and land, depicting instead feudal systems of claiming and reclaiming where there is contempt for women as owners of property and land” (2003: 439). Graham asserts that by imbricating his narrative in a specifically “Western (male gendered) artistic tradition which may condone unethical acts” (p. 441), Coetzee lays himself open to the charge that his notions of difference are those of the emerging rule and logic of Empire. Along with Boehmer and Eagleton, Graham questions Coetzee’s ethical responsiveness to the feudal status which women seem to occupy in the narrative; as goods or property belonging to men.⁹

The transformation in the novel from a “defunct language of western masculinity” to that of a “new means of being in the present” is documented by Michael Holland (2002: 395). He considers this to be a sign that the global social and cultural order now overshadows that of region or nation. He notes that the “random intertextuality” of the novel and the fact that the

8. In particular, Coetzee finds that “intellectual colonisation” is an aspect of United States centred globalisation and neoliberal policies. He points to Lurie’s effective demotion within the university as part of “the great rationalisation” and that he subsequently becomes a “figure of silent resistance”. Coetzee argues that

there is a process of intellectual colonisation going on today that is far more massive and totalising than anything that Victorian England could muster. It originates in the culture factories of the United States This colonising process is the cultural arm of neoliberalism, of the new world order.

(Coetzee 2000: 111)

9. Boehmer calls the state of subjection/subjugation as “abjection” which is forced upon Lucy. Furthermore her “self-substitution involves becoming reconciled to the position of conventional object” open to further violation (2002: 349).

reader is “powerfully gendered as male” perpetuate an uncomfortable relation between the reader and the text (p. 397). By its foregrounding of language, syntax and referentiality in the global order, Holland understands that the novel points towards cultural formations and social origins as the basis on which differences between characters are predicated.

In the following textual analysis I wish to provide evidence that Coetzee moves away from a typology based on race towards a nuanced typology based on cultural difference and social origin in *Disgrace*. In 1988 Coetzee suggested Sarah Gertrude Millin had failed to provide a radical rethinking of the novel form.¹⁰ As a recognised South African writer, he noted:

Representation of personal appearance by the novelist is never disinterested. It is an act of composition masquerading as an act of reading: pretending to read face, body, and dress as a constellation of signs, the novelist is in fact engaged in composing a figure out of them. What distinguishes Millin is her eye for ethnicity as she reads appearances.

(Coetzee 1988: 156)

In this commentary, Coetzee indicates his sensitivity to the stylistic techniques of a modernist writer and, implies his own strategies would be actively diverted from them by embracing the performative and many other aspects of postmodernist writing. As Attwell indicates, when reflecting on works of literature from the perspective of the wider global culture, we have to be alert to “authorial ironies” which underlie the performance of the narrator and his entrapment within social and cultural history. The novel is imbricated in “overarching cultural shifts” and a “historical consciousness” which Attwell ascribes to an “increasing economic rationality ... which is global in its implications” (2002: 338). One needs to be aware of the distance Coetzee places between himself and the utterances of the narrator-focaliser, David Lurie. Nevertheless it is also clear that the process of substituting cultural identity for race ironically ensures the preservation of race. David remains white, Petrus remains black.

This deeper focalising process is evident when the young student, Melanie Isaacs, is described in *Disgrace*, as “small and thin, with close-

10. In an essay entitled “Blood, Flaw, Taint and Degeneration in the Novels of Sarah Gertrude Millin”, J.M. Coetzee describes her writing as an archetypal colonial racism “founded on nineteenth-century notions of Social Darwinism” (1988: 145). According to such race typologies and colonial practices of segregation, Europeans in South Africa were constructed in opposition to African Others. For Millin, blood and genes supported notions of superiority based on skin colour. Coetzee shows how, in novels such as *God’s Stepchildren* (1924), Millin represented Africans and people of mixed race as other than human, as a different order of being. For her and others this pointed to an ontological difference – a necessary, eternal and immutable division in the order of being.

cropped black hair, wide, almost Chinese cheek bones, large, dark eyes" (p. 11). Her behaviour is also categorised as in some way devious; her "smile is sly rather than shy" (p. 11), and when she "lowers her eyes, [she] offer[s] the same evasive ... little smile" (p. 12). Lurie portrays Melanie with identifiers marked by difference based on culture and social origin. However, as Boehmer has pointed out, these observations are part of a "highly conventional patriarchal and colonial prerogative of possession over the silent body of woman" in the narrative (2002: 344). Lurie later encounters Melanie's younger sister in a narrative space informed primarily by desire.¹¹ The narrator observes that Desiree has "Melanie's eyes, Melanie's wide cheekbones, Melanie's dark hair" (p. 163). In doing so, he reveals a desire for the possession of her silent body. David Lurie indulges himself vicariously with the two sisters:

Melanie the first born, the dark one, then Desiree, the desired one ... fruit of the same tree, down probably to the most intimate detail. Yet with differences: different pulsings of the blood, different urgencies of passion. The two of them in the same bed ... an experience fit for a king.

(Coetzee 1999: 164)

Particularly in the city, the narrator embarks on a predatory sexual mission. The genre of erotica is suggested when he frequents escort agencies, pays for the services of prostitutes and seeks out Melanie in the Gardens. David's violation of his young student is portrayed as something altogether human, something almost lyrical and even vaguely romantic.¹² Marais has pointed out how the rape of Lucy is a "structural parallel" of Lurie's rape of Melanie Isaacs (2006: 76). The violation is set in the leafy suburban Mediterranean environs of the Western Cape metropolis. We are presented with a Byronic hedonism: "[T]hrough she is passive throughout, he finds the act pleasurable" (p. 19). David is the "intruder who thrusts himself upon her"... and she "does not resist" (pp. 24-25). Lurie enacts a parody of other amoral figures in colonial fiction,¹³ when he relishes the moment: "[N]ot rape, not quite that, but undesired nevertheless, undesired to the core" (p. 25). Ultimately this leads to his bizarre confession to the Isaac family, and

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11. J.M. Coetzee's review of Gabriel García Márquez's *Memories of My Melancholy Whores* in *New York Review of Books* indicates his appreciation of Márquez's employment of erotica as one of many genres that operate in the novel. I suggest Coetzee also deploys erotica as one of many competing genres in *Disgrace*.
 12. Like Florentino Ariza's violation of the school-girl America Vicuna in Gabriel García Márquez's *Love in the Time of the Cholera*.
 13. In Pauline Smith's *The Beadle* (1926) the Englishman seduces/violates the young Andrina before he returns to England to marry another woman.

prostration in front of an obviously Christian family parodies the Muslim act of worship. Mortified, and wallowing in self-pity to a point of flagellation, he admits: "I am sunk into a state of disgrace from which it will not be easy to lift myself" (p. 172). By juxtaposing the violation of Lurie's daughter with his violation of a young student, Coetzee is questioning the ethical effects of behaviours as well as the motivations of his protagonist. This strategy is conducted in a world of difference marked by culture and social origin. The characters in the novel are portrayed as equal in theory, as long as they perform specific roles traditionally assigned to them. There are no black characters who show interest in the Romantic movement, Byron and opera.

When Lurie enters provincial space in the Eastern Cape, the spectrum changes. For Pechey, this move "constitutes a migration between the old frontier territory and the open frontier of decolonisation" (2002: 375). As the action shifts from the metropolitan to the rural Eastern Cape town, a weekly farmer's market punctuates bucolic space. Lurie inscribes another iconic colonial space (that of a Port Elizabeth landmark) within the text when he describes a hierarchical range of stallholders at the market in Donkin Square. In the process, he transforms this replica of imperial time into a decolonised space on a Saturday morning. Without the institutionalised order of white privilege in a structured racial paradigm, the narrator-focaliser observes individuals and groups marked by a new range of differences based on social and cultural origins. Lucy has washed potatoes and flowers that sell steadily, Koos and Miems display a variety of typical Boer kitchen products. The next stall is occupied by anonymous African women with "milk, masa, butter to sell; also, from a bucket with a wet cloth over it, soup bones" (Coetzee 1999: 71). While the wares of the whites come from the settler farms, the latter group sells goods from rural villages indicative of a struggle for survival which necessitates co-operation among extended families and clans. Habitation, methods of production in the home and rural settings, geographical and historical location are the basis on which individual identity is established at this point in the novel. Ultimately these indicators fall under cultural and sociological origins. Nevertheless, the racial identity of individuals is still seen to determine where they live, what they can produce.

Later in the text this sign of the collective obedience and traditional conformity of rural women is repeated when Petrus's wife is described as a "handsome woman ... with her long skirt and her headcloth piled high, country fashion" (p. 114). And at Petrus's celebration; a "band of women, half a dozen strong, wearing what looks to him like churchgoing finery" begins to boil offal (p. 127). In the evening, Petrus's wife is depicted as "young – younger than Lucy – pleasant-faced rather than pretty, shy, clearly pregnant" (p. 129). To David Lurie she appears a woman who has been raised in a rural culture and social order – she does not speak English. Her

silence as well as her gestures and behaviours could be seen as an aporia in the text, which signals the continued oppression of women in the outlying districts of the new South Africa. This shift in the writing of Coetzee from the constraints of typical “white writing” in South Africa to a global perspective of difference based on cultural and social markers illustrates how, like other South African writers, he has been incorporated into the cultural network and sovereignty of Empire. According to this globalised order, racial supremacy and subordination are now seen to be based on performance. Petrus’s new wife is an agrarian peasant or paysan who is moving up the scale from wife of landless agrarian worker to lady of the house which belongs to a small-scale agricultural landowner.

The narrator-focaliser zooms in on the body of women in a particular way, providing coarse detail and focusing on age and body shape. Coetzee’s narrative also questions contemporary media images of the perfect body of fashion in a media industry which dictates ever younger and thinner models. Lucy is described as a flower-child/New Age traveller and peasant wannabe, who ironically does “not want to come back in another existence as a dog or a pig and have to live as dogs and pigs live under us” (p. 74). In Lurie’s continuing physiological inscription of the female body, she occupies space like some kind of overripe fruit. She has “put on weight ... her hips and breasts are now ample, comfortably barefoot” (p. 59). Lurie deplores the fact that parents who are urban intellectuals have produced this throwback, this sturdy young settler ... a solid countrywoman, a boerevrou” (pp. 60-61). Instead of interpreting Lucy in purely racial terms related to genetic purity, the term “throwback” is linked to social, cultural and historical origins. For the narrator, Bev Shaw is even more pear-shaped; a “dumpy, bustling little woman with black freckles, close-cropped, wiry hair, and no neck” (p. 72). Mrs Isaacs occupies a kind of margin between settler womanhood and rural paysan in Lurie’s taxonomy of woman described above. She is “a short woman, grown dumpy in middle-age, with bowed legs that give her a faintly rolling walk” (p. 169). However, from his lecherous vantage, the narrator concedes that she must have been a “real beauty ... in her day” (p. 169). David Lurie establishes a gendered taxonomy of the women of the Eastern Cape based on cultural and social indicators – a parody of descriptions common to seventeenth- and eighteenth-century travel narratives which recorded taxonomies of fauna, flora and the local inhabitants of the Cape for their European audiences.

In *Disgrace*, the central protagonist, David Lurie, and his “other” Petrus X, are differentiated by cultural and social indicators. In his analysis of the way the novel represents people, Attwell notes that “blackness” is a very insignificant feature of the way black people are actually represented (2002: 335). Indeed he argues that Coetzee represents blacks in a far more subtle and differentiated manner. For Attwell these are historical, social and

cultural signifiers that we are reading and not anthropological stereotypes.¹⁴ Lurie is the voyeuristic intellectual, weakened by lust, but bearing all the hallmarks of a neocolonial white male figure who moves between city and country in search of postmodern fictional erasure. Essentially Lurie's trajectory constitutes a parody of white male domination during the imperial and colonial era. Petrus, the former farm-labourer turned landlord is described as the powerful, calculating type who reverses history in that he claims ownership of both Lucy and the farm. Ironically, the postmodern narrator is preoccupied with his occasional research into the Romantic poet Byron's adulterous liaison in an exotic Mediterranean landscape. The white academic engages in aesthetic reverie at the cultural-historical artefact while the black peasant regains his grip on the land of his ancestors.

Initially Petrus is described as a "tall man in blue overalls and rubber boots and a woollen cap" (p. 63); he has a "lined, weathered face; shrewd eyes" (p. 64). Here, descriptions of rustic garb serve to define the unsophisticated peasant or paysan (Attwell 2002: 335). His speech is often deficient in syntax and contrasts sharply with the introverted, confused and sardonic utterances of Lurie: "I look after the dogs and I work in the garden. Yes.' Petrus gives a broad smile. 'I am gardener and the dog-man.' He reflects for a moment. 'The dog-man', he repeats, savouring the phrase" (p. 64).

Although the descriptions of Petrus's speech and appearance parody an imperial way of seeing Africans, he has a strategy to acquire legal title of the land. What is clear in this description is that the focus is on Petrus's "intentions and behaviour", his "historical role as paysan, peasant" as well as his historical mission of becoming a landowner rather than on any crude racial stereotypes. Lucy describes Petrus as an archetypal patriarchal African who "has another wife in Adelaide, and children, he goes off and spends time there occasionally" (p. 64). This description from Lucy shows her keener sense of the historical injustices suffered by generations of men who were forced into migratory labour on settler farms to escape starvation in the former Bantustans such as the Ciskei. The engagement between David and Petrus begins as one between master and servant. It progresses to a point where Petrus becomes the *de facto* master and David the disempowered intruder into the new order of rural subjugation to which Lucy has consigned herself. Significantly, when Petrus utters the final sentence which will confirm David's exclusion from the farm, he uses the future perfect tense: "I will marry Lucy" (p. 202). Illustrating what he sees as the "interminable quality of the novel", Holland insists that we "witness a resistance to the perfective" (2002: 371) In this way the novel comments on

14. Likewise, he notes that the panel of the disciplinary inquiry about the disgraced narrator includes people of colour and yet where "none of these characters act out racial stereotypes" (p. 335). Instead, they are differentiated purely on grounds of culture and society.

the limits of institutional commissions such as the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) or the university committee of inquiry. As in Chile after Pinochet, social and historical processes of Empire surface and begin to inscribe a new order which operates across all borders. The text's silence about race does not mean that race has disappeared; it has been supplanted with culture as the boundary that divides individuals. However, at no stage in the narrative is it suggested that race does not count.

It is evident that the self-description of his protagonist confirms Coetzee's shift from the use of purely biology criteria in the determination of difference to the problematic non-presence of the individual within a postmodern culture.¹⁵ The self-conscious narrator-focaliser describes himself as a caricature and signifier rather than as something signified. He describes his apparent weakness as his lack of relevance, because he is "old-fashioned" (p. 66) "obscure and growing obscurer. A figure from the margins of history" (p. 167). It is clear that the corporatisation and rationalisation of the Cape Technical University, which absorbs the narrator into a lesser role as communications teacher, is the original cause of his loss of self-esteem. Attridge acknowledges that the resulting situation, where all employees are audited as units of cost-to-company, is indicative of the "globalised economy of which South Africa is increasingly part" (2002: 318). Holland insists that Lurie's story becomes dislocated and empty of any content. Ultimately Lurie finds himself excluded and "confined to a silence beneath which there is nothing" (2002: 399). This trend in the deterioration in status is exacerbated during the crisis in the plot when Lurie finds himself emasculated and helpless: "[H]e speaks Italian, he speaks French, but Italian and French will not save him here in darkest Africa. He is helpless, an Aunt Sally, a figure from a cartoon, a missionary in cassock and topi" (p. 95).

Under the sovereignty of Empire, the postmodern narrator-focaliser parodies the role of the nineteenth-century missionary in Central Africa. Alternately Lurie's self-description is described by Marais as an "interstitial non-position" (Marais 2006: 82) which emphasises both the postmodern and the global trends in Coetzee's writing. For Marais, Lurie's "desires and antipathies are not pure, but located by the self's location in a particular cultural and historical context" (p. 80). This implies that Lurie's failure "to transcend the discursively-inscribed relations of contestation within his culture" (p. 82) links him with the legions of other dislocated protagonists of postmodern fiction of the new millennium. Holland explores these typically postmodernist stylistic features of the global indicated by "the way the novel writes this silence without story" (2002: 399).¹⁶ These fissures in

15. Coetzee's writing in the postmodern moment may lead us to consider how it constitutes a radical departure in narrative form from earlier modernist writers such as William Plomer's *Turbott Wolfe* (1926).

the psyche of the narrator result in a typically postmodern gutted and deboned narrative. Its effects on history include the imaginative search for alternative fictional discourses to contest the enduring monopoly of overworked regionalist and nationalist ideological discourses. In a context where many multinational corporations occupy positions in the top hundred economies of the world, emergent nation states occupy marginalised locations in global reality. The text thus invites deterritorialised readings of place, time and event according to the sovereignty of Empire. The ethical trajectory of Coetzee's narrator is encased in a particular cultural and socially defined terrain. I suggest this order stretches beyond national and regional boundaries into the labyrinthine cultural networks of Empire.

Lurie's taxonomy of character on the open frontier of decolonisation includes the portrayal of Bill Shaw as the archetypal genial squire: "squat, drinking tea at the kitchen table, with a beet-red face and silver hair and a sweater with a floppy collar" (p. 73). In *George*, another decolonised outpost of the Cape, the narrator describes Mr Isaacs as some vulturine apparition with the clothing markers of a nineteenth-century missionary who "is wearing the same overlarge suit: his neck vanishes into the jacket, from which he peers out like a sharp-beaked bird caught in a sack. The windows are closed, there is the smell of stale smoke" (p. 165).

Here appearances differ substantially from the cluster of signifiers and signifieds which Coetzee identified in Millin's "naturalistic tragedy of victims subject to a biologised fate" (1988: 156). In the interview in the headmaster's office and during subsequent conversations, Isaacs's temperance and moderation parody the modes of missionary types in Millin's novels. The differences here are social and cultural – Lurie the free-thinker and philanderer, Isaacs the Christian fundamentalist and wronged parent.

In the rape scene the reader is not presented with the archetypal racial paranoia of the white settlers in the early decades of the twentieth century but with a postmodern reworking of male sexuality and dominance on a psychological, social and cultural level.¹⁷ This multifaceted reply to the

16. Holland illustrates features such as – "third person present tense mode" and where the "narrative breaks free of the free indirect mode" (2002: 400) and the "free indirect style ... switching unpredictably between past, present, narrator and protagonist ... an immediate presentness where words, sentences and quotations float repetitively in disarray" (p. 402).

17. The rape scene has become a commonplace of American television crime serials – representations of male sexual violence are cultural commodities which continue to sell in a booming televised detective-crime-scene market. Like the documentary of the TRC in South Africa would apparently not sell internationally unless the Afro-American Hollywood male star did not become sexually involved with the white woman co-star in the recently

colonial violence of the past is not neutral. Lurie, himself a perpetrator of male sexual violence, reflects on the actions of the rapists. After centuries of white male violence on black women we now have an “ironic reversal of master-servant relations” (Attwell 2002: 337). Moving from his awareness that the violence of black rape has historical character, Lurie considers

the gang of three. Three fathers in one. Rapists rather than robbers, Lucy called them – rapists cum taxgatherers roaming the area, attacking women, indulging their violent pleasures. Well Lucy was wrong. They were not raping, they were mating. It was not the pleasure principle that ran the show but the testicles, sacs bulging with seed aching to perfect itself seed driven into the woman not in love but in hatred, mixed chaotically, meant to soil her, to mark her, like a dog's urine?

(Coetzee 1999: 199)

These rapists are described in terms of cultural difference; their use of violence is seen as normal, almost perfunctory. Marais also finds that the rapist's response to Lucy is “determined by their location in a culture in which difference among people has been constructed by the discourse of race” (p. 80). Firstly the rapists are located in a culture, and then we have a notion of difference which emerges from a discourse of race. Difference is no longer based on biological notions of blood and genes. Difference comes from somewhere else. The protagonist and all his anxiety stem from his “being of another world” but wandering around in a fictionalised landscape in a certain nation state. Lurie is a misunderstood creature of Empire, equal to all other ethnic groups in principle, but acutely sensitive to his own racial identity.

In my consideration of the consequences of rape I begin by examining Lurie's lament that his family line faces cultural erasure; it is about to “run out, like water dribbling into the earth” (p. 199). When Pollux, the boy who participated in the rape of Lucy, returns to the farm, Lurie is horror-struck by the idea that he is both a disturbed child (p. 208), and a “father without sense to have a son” (p. 199). Mary Eagleton (2001) suggests that Lurie's subsequent enraged assault on the boy using Lucy's dog echoes the brutality of white on black violence in the colonial period. In a subsequent conversation with Petrus on this matter Lurie is horrified when initially informed that the boy will marry Lucy: he refers to Pollux as a “dragon child ... a young thing ... a jackal boy” (p. 202). For Lurie, Pollux appears as a threat, which introduces undesirable cultural and social difference into the Lurie family: “his ugly opaque little eyes, his insolence, but also the thought that like a weed he has been allowed to tangle his roots with Lucy and

televised film on SABC (February, 2007) of the regional hearings of the TRC in the 1990s.

Lucy's existence" (p. 209). Lurie here illustrates his anxiety with Pollux, who refuses to "act his race".

Mary Eagleton argues that Lucy's refusal to report or discuss the rape seems to imply that "in post-apartheid South Africa the white woman's word can re-ignite a racist legacy" (2001: 190). She also suggests that the "silence of the white woman about rape might, in certain historical circumstances, be a condition of political progress" (p. 191). Ultimately for Eagleton, the narrative is troubled by the silence of Lucy concerning her experience of rape. As Lucy becomes a field labourer and peasant bonded to Petrus, Lurie bemoans that a "line of existence in which his share, his gift, will grow inexorably less and less, till it may as well be forgotten" (p. 217). Lurie refuses to acknowledge the similarities between his violation of Melanie and the violation of Lucy. Lurie's notion of social and cultural degeneration leads to his realisation that some humans in the text are Valkyrised.¹⁸ Lucy has become "like a dog" (p. 205). I suggest that *Disgrace* is a text which makes imaginative demands on the reader, including the ability to see mythical and symbolic significance in the everyday. Boehmer is critical of the type of atonement suggested in the text, which results in the situation where Lucy "becomes the human body-in-pain of the text" and her abnegation to a point where "she must make herself available for more violation" (2002: 349). By inscribing their actions as those of "rapists cum taxgatherers", Lurie assumes a vantage, a point of surveillance aligned with that of the gaze of Empire.¹⁹

In conclusion, as a writer, Coetzee is trying to understand the moment of transition between an old colonial-apartheid order and the new democratic South Africa which is now part of Empire in *Disgrace*. Fictional works such as this are definitely a part of the process of historical change whereby individuals are now differentiated on the grounds of their location in culture and society and not according to differences based on biological notions of blood and genes. The situation in which South Africa now finds itself is marked by the end of all borders, and a move towards the ultimate placelessness in which the regional and national has been superseded. In my examination of his writing I have demonstrated that he employs parody and locates the narrative in an ironic landscape. Ultimately, in *Disgrace*, Coetzee reflects on our current cultural-historical condition and implies that we need to develop new approaches and directions for understanding our

18. Either one could refer to Coetzee's fascination with Kafka as a source of this process or even possibly by looking to Norse mythology, according to which 12 handmaids of Odin ride their horses over the field of battle and escort the souls of slain heroes to Valhalla (Encarta).

19. From this vantage, South Africa is often seen as overcome by violent criminals who somehow have the right to assault and violate men, women and particularly children.

fictional landscape within a shifting world culture. At the moment of globalisation Coetzee seeks to raise South African fiction from the narrow confines of region and nation. Henceforth he suggests our fiction should relocate to the definite networks and indefinite nodes of the global formation of Empire.

While it is true that *Disgrace* embodies a pluralist theory of Empire which regards all people as equal in principle, this is a provisional measure depending on the acceptance of all differences of who we are on condition that we do not forget to “act our race” as Hardt and Negri imply (2000: 191). As many of the critics I have referred to above clearly indicate, culture is substituted for race in demarcating difference. However, instead of moving to a world free of race as the basic unit of measure for difference, such criticism unwittingly preserves race in a “market meritocracy of culture” (p. 193). Lurie is portrayed as a moribund academic and libertine on cultural and sociological grounds; but clearly he is a moribund white academic and libertine.

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