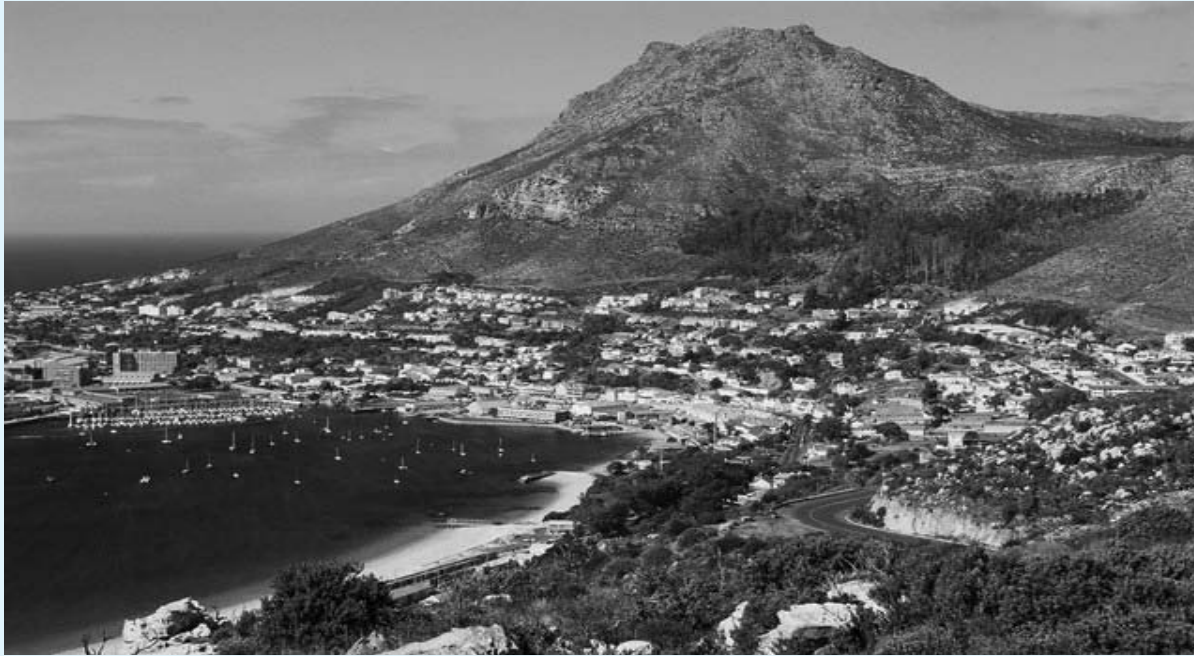


AFTER THE FALL:  
*Reevaluating Whiteness in J.M. Coetzee's Disgrace*

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IN LIGHT OF THE UNFAVORABLE WAY IN WHICH MANY WHITE SOUTH AFRICANS HAVE REACTED TO BLACK MAJORITY RULE IN CONTEMPORARY SOUTH AFRICA, THERE HAS BEEN A TENDENCY TO READ J.M. COETZEE'S 1999 NOVEL *DISGRACE* AS A CONDEMNATION OF THE SOCIAL DISRUPTION THAT HAS CHARACTERIZED SOUTH AFRICAN LIFE SINCE 1994. WHILE THE NOVEL CERTAINLY EXPRESSES A DEGREE OF UNEASE OVER THE POLITICALLY PRECARIOUS SITUATION OF WHITES IN THE NEW SOUTH AFRICA, SUCH READINGS TEND TO IGNORE THE COMPLEXITIES OF BOTH THE NOVEL AND THE POLITICS OF LIFE AFTER APARTHEID. RATHER THAN AN ATTACK THAT DESCRIBES WHITE LIFE AS NOW ESSENTIALLY IMPOSSIBLE, I TRY TO UNDERSTAND *DISGRACE* AS A MEDITATION ON THE MEANING OF WHITENESS IN THE NEW SOUTH AFRICA, ONE THAT SEEKS TO LEAVE BEHIND THE RACIST AND IMPERIALIST DISCOURSES THAT PREVIOUSLY DEFINED WHITENESS AS A SOCIAL IDENTITY.



## INTRODUCTION

Racial segregation has existed in South Africa in various forms from the arrival of the first Dutch settlers in 1652. It was not until the 1930s, however, that a growing Afrikaner intelligentsia began articulating a system of strict racial separation that would, in theory, allow for the self-determination of coherent racial groups within their own political-cultural space while at the same time providing an assurance that Afrikaner identity would not be threatened by the assimilationist tendencies of a modern capitalist economy.<sup>i</sup> The institutionalization of South African identities began in earnest after the 1948 elections in which the Afrikaner Nationalist Party won a majority of seats in parliament and thus seized control of the government under Prime Minister D.F. Malan.<sup>ii</sup> Within two years of the Nationalist victory, the new government enacted the Prohibition of Mixed Marriages Act, the Immorality Act, the Population Registration Act and the Group Areas Act, all of which sought to control interaction among races and in doing so ensured the privileged place of South Africa's minority white population for decades to come.<sup>iii</sup>

It is not at all surprising, then, to witness the tremendous anxiety of many whites in the aftermath of South Africa's transition to democracy. If apartheid as a system sought to separate races and distribute rights along the hierarchical model enshrined in the South African Union, it also sought to do so along the lines of power, something from which all whites in South Africa benefited whether they agreed with apartheid or not. Thus the decline of apartheid is necessarily a challenge to the whiteness it helped to so clearly define. "South Africans, willingly or unwillingly, successfully or unsuccessfully, are engaged in one of the most profound collective psychological adjustments happening in the contemporary world," writes Melissa Steyn in *Whiteness Just Isn't What it Used To Be* a study of whiteness in South Africa after transition.<sup>iv</sup> Those cited in her study frequently speak with anger at the fact that whiteness, formerly a sign of power, has become, in their eyes, a sign of vulnerability. "A few years ago," writes one rather short-sighted respondent, "being white did not have a serious affect on my life, but it is beginning to have an effect now."<sup>v</sup>

It is in the context of this reevaluation of whiteness in the new South Africa that I want to consider J.M. Coetzee's 1999 novel *Disgrace*. While attacked as racist by South Africa's ruling African National Congress, the novel has been widely acclaimed elsewhere as a scathing indictment of the treatment of whites under ANC rule.<sup>vi</sup> These readings, however, have by and large ignored the complexities of what is a profound and telling meditation on the meaning of whiteness in postcolonial South Africa.<sup>vii</sup> The novel, as David Attwell notes, is written with a strong sense of 'post-ness,' a term he uses to describe the post-apartheid, postcolonial and, importantly, post-historical mood pervading it.<sup>viii</sup> In this environment Coetzee traces the relationship between David Lurie, a former Cape Town University English professor, and his daughter Lucy in the aftermath of a brutal attack that leaves him literally burned and she reeling from a vicious rape. Here we see not only a father and daughter trying to come to grips with a horrific trauma, but the attempt of two separate conceptions of whiteness to negotiate the radically altered power relations of postcolonial South Africa and to forge an identity commensurate with life in this new society. Through an examination of the interactions between the two, and in particular their private responses to Lucy's rape, it becomes clear that, while whiteness is not a barrier to life in South Africa after apartheid, as an identity its existence cannot continue on the terms of whiteness as historically constituted. While the theoretical implications of the fragmentation of apartheid's attempt at strict cultural borders will always be complicated by South Africa's complex social and economic realities, *Disgrace* illustrates how the decline of apartheid is also the decline of whiteness as rigorously defined along the lines of Western modernity.

#### POWER AND SUBJECTIVITY

From the outset David Lurie appears as an individual thoroughly defined through the discourse of this modernity and thus, for Coetzee, one thoroughly implicated in a legacy of sexism, racism and imperialism. But there also exists a tension between Lurie's identity, which is constituted through power, and the power relations of the new

South Africa which continually frustrate his attempts at realizing his own subjectivity. After a failed relationship with a prostitute named Soraya, Lurie turns his attentions to one of his students, a girl named Melanie. In his first attempt at seducing her he tells her that she should give herself up "Because a woman's beauty does not belong to her alone. It is part of the bounty she brings to the world. She has a duty to share it."<sup>ix</sup> This "bounty" is something Lurie eventually decides to seize for himself when, in a troubling display of the relationship between power and Lurie's status as a subject, he arrives unannounced at her home. Here Coetzee's choice to relate the story through a close third-person narrator allows him to relate Lurie's thoughts and feelings while simultaneously commenting on them through the language he uses to do so. The scene is carefully described in the language of domination even though Lurie, drawing on a Western poetic tradition thoroughly awash in sexuality, bathes it in the language of desire. "Strange love!" he thinks to himself as she crumples before him, unable to rebuff his advance. "Yet from the quiver of Aphrodite, goddess of the foaming waves, no doubt about that."<sup>x</sup> Yet no matter how fully he masks his urge towards power in flowery language he cannot, in the aftermath of his desire, ignore something of its underlying motivations. "Not rape, not quite like that," Coetzee writes, inhabiting Lurie:

*but undesired nevertheless, undesired to the core. As though she had decided to go slack, die within herself for the duration, like a rabbit when the jaws of the fox close on its neck. So that everything that might be done to her might be done, as it were, far away.<sup>xi</sup>*

Here the language of domination with which Coetzee paints Lurie seems to coincide, if only briefly, with Lurie's own momentary realizations about himself. The image of the crumpled marionette in which Coetzee communicates Lurie's actions at the beginning of the scene matches the image of the rabbit submitting, at the end of the chase, to the fox that will consume the rabbit and further his own existence. The image thus suggests that whatever knowledge Lurie gains about the relationship between power and his

own subjectivity, it is only significant by way of clarifying, not altering, the mode of his existence. The fox, after all, needs to eat.

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In the new South Africa, however, the women upon whom Lurie has preyed are endowed with the power to resist. While his previous falling out with Soraya, the prostitute, was a purely private affair, Melanie is a student and thus the incident is thrust into the public eye. Lurie suddenly finds himself subordinated to the judgment of the community and a panel of colleagues established to decide his fate. In the absence of the power structures that once made possible Lurie's sexual antics he is left vulnerable, in particular, to the women whose subordination has hitherto underwritten his identity. Lurie in short, is put at the mercy of a radically new order. Though the university is prepared to offer leniency, Lurie, out of nothing more than stubbornness, refuses to cooperate and resigns.

Lurie's move to his daughter's small landholding in the fields of the Eastern Cape is not, as it initially appears, a retreat from the complexities of life in postcolonial South Africa. The primary importance of this shift from the cosmopolitan city to the site of South Africa's historical frontier lies in Coetzee's utilization of the conceptual space implied in the term 'frontier,' the space in which whiteness as a modern, Western identity was formed in the crucible of colonial experience. This shift, then, involves for Coetzee an appropriation of the historical relationship between European and African—one defined, by and large, by violence—in the service of a re-inscription of whiteness. Though separated from the increasingly urban life of contemporary South Africa, the countryside forms, in the context of the novel, a theoretical blank slate upon which a new culture is to be formed. The drama that plays out on and around Lucy's tiny strip of land is thus the drama of a South African future, one defined, at its inception, by Lucy's brutal rape.

### “A HISTORY OF WRONG”

It is in the aftermath of this attack that the relationship be-

tween father and daughter becomes a proxy for the decline of one conception of whiteness and the rise to prominence of another. The attack, in which both Lucy and her father are brutalized, signifies, in the course of Coetzee's examination of whiteness, a fundamental caesura in its history as a social identity in South Africa. Indeed in the aftermath of the fire that ravages Lurie's face and head, Coetzee deploys the perfective, in the words of Attwell a “syntactic marker of aspect” that signifies an action carried through to its conclusion, and in particular one that “lies in the recent, rather than the distant past.”<sup>xii</sup> Coetzee writes “Save for a patch over one ear, he seems to have no hair; his whole scalp is tender. Everything is tender, everything is burned. Burned, burnt.”<sup>xiii</sup> The fire that marks Coetzee's most straightforward attack on the character he criticizes throughout also announces the passage into a new kind of ‘post-ness,’ to borrow the term Attwell uses to describe the effect of the perfective, one in which Lurie will face an irreversible decline.

Lurie's reaction to the attack is defined throughout by the way in which its implications contest his own status as a subject insofar as it is constituted through a power whose continued efficacy the attack calls into question. In the face of his inability to control the situation he posits the attack as inevitable, the result of a deterministic historical process over which individual human beings can have no control even though the post-historical mood Coetzee utilizes negates such a sense of history from the outset. “It was so personal. It was done with such personal hatred,” Lucy tells him, trying to come to terms with her attack. “...why did they hate me so? I had never set eyes on them.”<sup>xiv</sup> Though it is not clear that the question is one Lucy meant to be answered, Lurie does so anyway. “It was history speaking through them,” he tells her. “A history of wrong. Think of it that way, if it helps. It may have seemed personal, but it wasn't. It came down from the ancestors.”<sup>xv</sup>

But however inevitable he views the violence of the new South Africa as being, it is not something he sees as justifiable, tolerable, or wholly attributable to the history of vio-

lence defining the history of European colonialism in Africa. The attack, for Lurie, was a fundamental assault on his identity; and unable to uphold that identity through direct and overt expressions of power he continually conceptualizes his African counterparts, regardless of their relationship to those who attacked him, as inherently barbaric. As he is beaten by his attackers, Lurie imagines himself to be alone in a savage, foreign land about to be turned into a meal by the cannibals who besiege him:

*He 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 waiting with clasped hands and upcast eyes while the savages jaw away in their own lingo preparatory to plunging him into their boiling cauldron. Mission work: what has it left behind, that huge enterprise of upliftment? Nothing that he can see. xvi*

The statement regarding Lurie's linguistic prowess can be read equally as Lurie's own admission of his utter alienation from the new South Africa, a place he views as "dark" in the traditional colonial sense and as an instance of the narrator mocking Lurie and his latent racism at the moment his disempowerment is realized. Coetzee's final line, "Nothing that he can see," however, is somewhat easier to grasp insofar as it is a sign that the question is Lurie's own. Still the question itself can be read in one of two ways. The suggestion that the missionary activity whose language he utilizes in describing his attack ultimately failed in its mission of upliftment could be, perhaps, an acknowledgment of the role violence and oppression in counteracting the benefits it sought to accrue. Another reading, however, sees Lurie as negating the possibility of "civilizing" African peoples because they are, in a very real way, prone to violence in a way that Westerners are not. Lurie's relationship with Lucy's Xhosa neighbors suggests that the latter is more accurate.

Suspecting Petrus, Lucy's neighbor, of being involved in the attack, Lurie generates a conspiracy theory in which

Petrus, if he does not plan it, allows the attack to occur with the goal of forcing Lucy off her land. Yet, he qualifies this theory in another instance in which he sees violence as endemic to black South Africa and not a product of the conditions under which it has existed for nearly 350 years:

*The real truth, he suspects, is something far more—he casts around for the word—anthropological—something it would take months to get to the bottom of, months of patient, unhurried conversation with dozens of people, and the offices of an interpreter. xvii*

The narrator's use of "he" to refer to Lurie in the passage indicates fairly clearly that the ideas in question belong to Lurie, preserving distance between narrator and character in a passage that would otherwise muddle the ideological rift Coetzee has worked to create between narrator and protagonist. For Lurie the savages preparing to burn him alive

*“Mission work: what has it left behind, that huge enterprise of upliftment? Nothing that he can see.”*

are not an aberration but an essential part of the cultural fabric of southern Africa. Not only does the attack have meaning in the historical sense, it has a logic rooted in the anthropological foundations of African life. Violence takes on the meaning of a "tribal" gesture he cannot so immediately understand but whose meaning can be uncovered in the course of careful research. Thus Petrus, his family and the Xhosa people who live near them in the Eastern Cape are reduced to objects ultimately under Lurie's own intellectual control.

## POST-COLONIAL PERSPECTIVE

Lurie's racist and typically colonial assumptions and pre-suppositions about the attack in particular and life on the frontier generally are, in almost every instance, countered by those of Lucy, who is unburdened by the rigid constraints of her father's identity and possesses a particular connection to South Africa that he does not. Confronted by the complexities of the new South Africa, Lurie's first instinct is to return to the Europe with which he so deeply identifies. "Lucy, it could be so simple," he tells her. "Close down the kennels. Do it at once. Lock up the house, pay Petrus to guard it. Take a break for six months or a year until things have improved in this country."<sup>xviii</sup> The assumption that flight to Europe is a viable option is itself informed by the assumption that Lurie and his daughter are essentially European but Lucy, from the outset, is not. Her concern is for her relationship with the South Africa she sees as home: "If I leave now, David," she says, calling him by his first name, "I won't come back. Thank you for the offer, but it won't work. There is nothing you can suggest that I haven't been through a hundred times myself."<sup>xix</sup>

This insistence on negotiating her identity as both white and South African governs the whole of her response to the attack. Her distance from the Europe of her father is also a distance from the fractious and destabilizing sense of identity he possesses. She refuses to deal with the abstractions she locates firmly within her father's system of thought: "Be sensible," he tells her, trying to dictate her actions in terms of his own logic. "Things have changed, we can't just pick up where we left off," he says, sensing the shift announced in the attack. When Lucy asks why he tells her simply "Because it's not a good idea. Because it's not safe."

Lurie speaks with an obvious ignorance his daughter immediately corrects. "It was never safe," she reminds him, "and it's not an idea, good or bad. I'm not going back for the sake of an idea. I'm just going back."<sup>xx</sup>

Lucy's insistence on remaining in South Africa and forging an identity commensurate with its post-apartheid, post-colonial and post-historical structures of power lead her to what, in her father's eyes, are incomprehensible extremes. Lucy's consistent evasiveness with regards to whether or not she took the "appropriate measures" to avoid pregnancy culminates in the realization that not only is she pregnant, but she intends on keeping the child of her attacker. The difference between Lucy and her father, and the difference between their disparate conceptions of whiteness, are exhibited even more clearly in the final resolution to the question of Lucy's security at her rural home. Petrus, whose own kin, it is realized, is one of rapists, ultimately proposes marriage, something Lurie views as insanity. It is another instance in which the subject-object distinction structuring Lurie's overtly Western relationship to power enforces rigid and interminable conflict. "You will marry Lucy. Explain to me what you mean," he fumes, unable to process the widely divergent meanings of marriage in Western and Xhosa culture. "No, wait, rather don't explain. This is not something I want to hear. This is not how we do things," Lurie tells Petrus. Coetzee, emphasizing the unbridgeable difference between the two men and the cultures defining them, adds "We: he is on the point of saying, *we Westerners.*"<sup>xxi</sup>

Lucy's manifestly diffuse, hybrid conception of whiteness, however, refuses to see things in the terms of such a rigidly binary logic. "I don't believe you get the point, David" she

*"[Lucy] never ceases, of course, to be white, but her imminent assimilation into the power structures of the new South Africa drastically augments the meaning of the term."*

tells her father. “Petrus is not offering me a church wedding followed by a honeymoon on the Wild Coast. He is offering an alliance, a deal. I contribute the land, in return for which I am allowed to creep under his wing. Otherwise, he wants to remind me, I am without protection, I am fair game.”<sup>xxii</sup> The narrator remains oddly silent for most of the exchange, allowing the debate between Lucy and her father to speak for itself; however, as it becomes clear that Lucy will accept Petrus’s offer, Coetzee reinserts the narrative voice. While the tone of the passage suggests that it should be aligned with Lurie’s own hopelessness about the place of whites in the new South Africa, Coetzee leaves it empty of anything to indicate that the opinion is solely that of Lurie, suggesting, at the very least, an undercurrent of unease on the part of the narrator:

*More and more she has begun to look like one of those women who shuffle around the corridors of nursing homes whispering to themselves. Why should Petrus bother to negotiate? She cannot last: leave her alone and in due course she will fall like rotten fruit.*<sup>xxiii</sup>

Lucy’s acceptance of Petrus’ offer announces, in effect, the impossibility of whiteness as a rigorously defined social identity in a South African context. She never ceases, of course, to be white, but her imminent assimilation into the power structures of the new South Africa drastically augments the meaning of the term. She becomes, in the truest—and perhaps most troubling—sense of the term, a white South African, one whose subjectivity is no longer constituted through a relation of domination but one whose identity exists in a state of true hybridity alongside a plethora of other new, post-apartheid identities. Lucy becomes a part of a transitional new South African culture in which the former distinctions have no relevance. Marrying into the family of one who raped her, she admits, is not dignifying or a thing done without fear, but insofar as her aim, as she says, is to stay on, to forge an existence in postcolonial South Africa, it does not seem that there is any other choice.

Her father, at least, represents the utter impossibility of the alternative being a purely Western existence, insofar as the term has been defined throughout South Africa’s long colonial history. As long as the term “postcolonial South Africa” signifies a place in which the terms “white” and “power” are theoretically disengaged Lurie, whose subjectivity, as we have seen, is constituted through domination, can have no legitimate place within it. This is depicted nowhere as powerfully than in what comes to be one of his primary distractions, the writing of an opera based on the life of one of Byron’s ex-lovers, an overweight, middle-aged woman named Teresa. Alone with only a handful of love letters to console herself she longs for the return of her lost lover. “Come! Come to me, I plead, my Byron!” she calls.<sup>xxiv</sup> The character, with which Lurie increasingly identifies, becomes by the end of the novel nothing less than the projection of Lurie’s dispossessed self in its necessarily female form. Byron, in this context, takes on the position of the West itself, long dead, leaving nothing but a pile of paper and a few dejected lovers. Teresa’s longing for Byron is Lurie’s longing for the West, a culture that in its clearly defined form has vanished from the African continent.

## CONCLUSION

This sense of dispossession has, by and large, defined white responses to the politics of South Africa after apartheid. Many young people claim that jobs are difficult to come by, many professionals claim to have been arbitrarily replaced by less experience, less qualified black employees and many whites have followed Lurie’s suggestion to his daughter emigrate, frequently to Britain or Australia.<sup>xxv</sup> And as I have already said, this sense of dispossession has largely defined responses to Coetzee’s novel and to related examinations of the new South Africa in general. Indeed to paint the country as it exists today in broadly optimistic terms would be to grossly misrepresent the situation there. While whites still enjoy relative privilege, the country’s sizable African population labors in poverty, suffering from continuing violence, the HIV/AIDS epidemic and living in an economy that offers few opportunities beyond mining for the legions of unskilled workers apartheid left behind.

Just as it would be a disservice to paint the new South African in utopian terms, it would not be correct to call *Disgrace*, in most senses, an optimistic novel. But there exists, nonetheless, a glimmer of hope in its pages that in postcolonial Africa an inclusive, hybrid and non-oppositional culture can be formed that erases the rigid social divides erected in the preceding centuries. The collapse of the apartheid regime brought about the decline of whiteness as an institutionalized sign of superiority, laying the groundwork for a democratic, cosmopolitan South Africa in which the power relations inscribed by apartheid become, in theory at least, impossible to uphold. This shift in power relations, this impossibility of whiteness as historically constituted marks a fundamental challenge to the concept of identity as constituted through expressions of power. If so then we find in the structure of truly postcolonial societies, for all their difficulties, the kernel of a world in which subjectivity is not a function of power and in which difference is not a cause of confrontation. Thus in *Lucy* we see, at the novel's end, the expectant mother of a new nation, a new order at the threshold of its being.

## ENDNOTES

i “Afrikaner” is the term used to describe Afrikaans-speaking South Africans of Dutch colonial ancestry. The brutality of the Anglo-Boer War, fought between British and Afrikaner forces between 1899-1902, instilled in the descendents of South Africa’s original colonizers a deep sense of animosity towards the British, with whom they were forced to live as inferiors in the racially stratified South African union that was formed in 1910. At the beginning of the twentieth century, British South Africans controlled almost all of South Africa’s rapidly emerging industrial economy, an economy in which Afrikaners found themselves not only subordinated to their British counterparts but constantly in competition with black migrant workers imported to labor in South Africa’s mines from all over southern Africa. The communal memory of the Anglo-Boer War, which killed some 75,000 people and saw thousands of Afrikaner men, women, and children confined to British concentration camps, coupled with an emerging sense of powerlessness in a growing industrial economy forged a potent Afrikaner nationalism that grew dramatically in the early part of the twentieth century. Louw (28)

ii Davenport and Saunders (369)

iii Davenport and Saunders (378). The Prohibition of Mixed Marriages Act (1949), as the name suggests, outlawed marriages between members of different racial groups. It was

supplemented by the Immorality Act (1950) which outlawed sexual intercourse between unmarried couples of different racial backgrounds. The Population Registration Act (1950) assigned every South African to a specific racial group. The Group Areas Bill (1950) allowed the government to reserve residential and business districts for specific racial groups, paving the way for forced removals that uprooted nearly 30 million people throughout the National Party’s tenure.

iv Steyn (xxi) v Steyn (69)

vi An ANC representative, speaking before South Africa’s Human Rights Commission in 2000, cited *Disgrace* in a speech on the problem of racism in the South African media.

Nonetheless the novel won Coetzee an unprecedented second Booker Prize and likely secured his Nobel Prize in 2003. The text of the ANC complaint can be accessed at

<http://www.anc.org.za/ancdocs/misc/2000/sp0405.html>

vii See for example “Darkness in the Rainbow Nation,” David Sexton. *Yorkshire Post*. 14 October 1999; “Why we run away from the harsh truth about South Africa?” Anne McElvoy. *The Independent*. 28 October 1999; “Braving Cape Fear.” Trevor Royle. *The Herald*. 18 July 1999; “Crying for the Beloved Country.” *The Sunday Times*. 31 October 1999; “Is there a future for the white tribe of Africa?” Fergal Keane. *The Independent*. 22

viii Attwell (865) ix Coetzee (16) x Coetzee (25)

xi Coetzee (25) xii Attwell (865) xiii Coetzee (97)

xiv Coetzee (156) xv Coetzee (156) xvi Coetzee (95)

xvii Coetzee (95) xviii Coetzee (157) xix Coetzee (157)

xx Coetzee (105) xxi Coetzee (203) xxii Coetzee (203)

xxiii Coetzee (203) xxiv Coetzee (213)

xxv Coetzee himself, not long after *Disgrace* appeared in South Africa, left his job as Professor of English at the University of Cape Town and moved to Australia.

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