

The Anticipation of #MeToo in J.M. Coetzee's *Disgrace*

Craig Smith

<https://orcid.org/0000-0002-9446-3537>

Northwestern Polytechnic, Canada

crsmith@nwpolytech.ca

Abstract

In this article, I reconsider J.M. Coetzee's *Disgrace*, often interpreted in the context of South Africa's transition to post-apartheid life and with an eye to the nation's Truth and Reconciliation Commission, by instead reading it in light of the international twenty-first century #MeToo movement. I contend that, in retrospect, *Disgrace* both demonstrates affinities with #MeToo and proleptically envisions, from the postcolonial periphery, the contours of the movement decades before its forceful emergence as a watershed moment in the West. *Disgrace* tells a story echoed in many #MeToo accounts, depicting the public exposure and fall from grace of a privileged white man following his sexual exploitation of a non-white student. My interests lie not in the matter of David Lurie's potential redemption; rather, I explore Coetzee's exposure of the persistence of institutionalised gendered and racial privileges through moments of historical transformation. I argue that *Disgrace*'s highlighting of its own unnarrated perspectives anticipates the forceful challenge to a lingering white heterosexual hegemony that characterises #MeToo, while at the same time exposing the perpetual marginalisation of non-white and non-Western traumas in discourses of transitional justice in South Africa and globally.

Keywords: Coetzee; *Disgrace*; TRC; #MeToo; sexual violence



Journal of Literary Studies

<https://unisapressjournals.co.za/index.php/jls>

2022 | #11054 | 13 pages



<https://doi.org/10.25159/1753-5387/11054>

ISSN 1753-5387 (Online)

© The Author(s) 2022



Published by the Literature Association of South Africa and Unisa Press. This is an Open Access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution-ShareAlike 4.0 International License (<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/4.0/>)

Many readings of J.M. Coetzee's *Disgrace* interpret it in the context of South Africa's transition to post-apartheid life and through the lens of its famous Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC). This critical tendency is unsurprising as *Disgrace* is only the second novel in Coetzee's *oeuvre* to make the immediate context of its composition the backdrop for its narrative. As an author who early in his career (in)famously tended not to write directly about apartheid-era South Africa, much to the chagrin of "a local progressive audience that valued political commitment in its writers" (Brouillette 2007, 117), Coetzee seems especially intent, in *Disgrace*, on emphasising the text's local timeliness. References to "the new South Africa" (Coetzee 2000, 23), "this day and age" (44), "these days" (51), and "this place, at this time" (112) are peppered throughout the novel. It is little surprise, then, that critics are keen to follow the novel's lead, reading it as a text that "reflects contemporary events" (Segall 2005, 40) in South Africa, demonstrating "a rather bleak outlook of post-apartheid conflict" (Bezan 2012, 20). Indeed, *Disgrace* offers a "veritable 'state of the nation' address about post-apartheid South Africa" (Brouillette 2007, 130), "engag[ing] directly with the enormous investment in the rule of law in post-apartheid South Africa" (Kelly 2015, 163). Among other things, the novel responds to a South African situation in which "rapes of white women by black men ... generate a disproportionate amount of media attention" (Mardorossian 2011, 75). As such, "South African politics color the text" (Meljac 2011, 159) more overtly than is customary for Coetzee. Even when the realities of life in the putatively new South Africa are not prominent in critical analyses, the strong temptation to read *Disgrace* in highly local terms is persistent. For instance, Silverstein calls "the South African pastoral novel" the "genre that provides the substratum on which *Disgrace* is composed" (2011, 85); taking a similar approach, Attwell claims Coetzee "reverses the older South African tradition of the farm novel," which typically carries with it "ideological cover for settler colonialism" (2011, 11). As critics tend to interpret *Disgrace*, then, it is a novel deeply rooted in localised South African concerns.¹

The extensive criticism on *Disgrace* illuminates Coetzee's engagement with the historical moment in which his sexually predatory protagonist, David Lurie, is enmeshed and fleshes out the nature of Coetzee's "frustratingly ambivalent" (Post 2015, 142) response to a transforming South Africa. However, even when rooting their interpretations of the novel in South Africa, critics have also been quick to qualify their localised interpretive lenses. The "apparently lucid, three-dimensional realistic narrative that we are following is only apparently so" (Van Wyk Smith 2014, 26). As such, "the reader of *Disgrace* should always be wary of over-simplifying the novel and of resorting to any reductionist interpretation" (Post 2015, 124), for Coetzee "is a writer who refuses to be mired in the pursuit of narrow regional political subjects as an end in itself" (Oriaku 2016, 159). Coetzee's novel thus lends itself to being read meaningfully both

1. Obviously, not all readings of the novel foreground or even acknowledge its overt South Africanness. For Marais, for instance, the novel is an abstracted reflection on (Levinasian) ethics that "indicate[s] that responsibility is an effect of the subject's loss of control over that which it thought it could control" (2001, 133).

within and well beyond the limits of its time and place. Following the suggestion of Rita Felski, for whom reading can be “a matter of attaching, collating, negotiating, assembling—of forging links between things that were previously unconnected” (2015, 173), it becomes possible to see Coetzee’s novel as one with the power to elucidate events and even broad cultural movements separated by time and geography from the specific national milieu at its heart. Accordingly, this discussion seeks to supplement responses to the novel as either an allegorised treatment of the TRC or an engagement with the lived realities of post-apartheid South Africa, as these readings cannot fully acknowledge the extent to which *Disgrace* proleptically envisions, from the postcolonial periphery, the contours of the #MeToo movement almost two decades before its forceful emergence in the West.

That Coetzee’s novel may lend itself to being read in light of the #MeToo movement may be surprising, given that the gender(ed) views Lurie holds are often genuinely loathsome. However, despite *Lurie’s* problematic views making him an extremely unlikely ally of #MeToo, Coetzee’s “immersion in feminist jurisprudence” (Kelly 2015, 172), displayed in his engagement with second-wave feminism² in *Giving Offense*, provides important additional context about what was intellectually engaging the author around the time he was writing *Disgrace*. If “[t]o [Catharine] MacKinnon, male [hetero]sexuality is—and indeed is defined by—the possession and consumption of women as sexual objects” (Coetzee 1996, 71), Lurie would seem the embodiment of a second-wave notion of male heterosexual desire that the #MeToo movement publicly indicts. Moreover, Coetzee’s “thorough knowledge of the arguments surrounding gender, sex, violence, domination and representation that were the mainstay of the radical feminist discourse of the seventies and eighties” (Barnard 2013, 19) makes him a prime candidate to be read with #MeToo in mind. That in *Disgrace* Coetzee could have anticipated the “juggernaut that is #MeToo,” a “fully-fledged ‘movement’ reaching past Hollywood, past only the workplace, reaching in to provoke questioning on the very fabric of gender and power relations” (Brooks 2020, 910), is not so much a testament to any prophetic powers on the author’s part as it is a reminder that “the stories of #MeToo were horrific and riveting ... because they weren’t just *now*, they were *always*” (Gilbert 2018, 14). A primary benefit of #MeToo is thus that it has “ruptured a pervasive silence around sexual assault” (Hsu 2019, 270), dragging into the light of day a “larger cultural commitment aimed at silencing victims [and] protecting those with power” (Enck 2018, 81).

-
2. Second-wave feminism’s relationship with #MeToo is an ambivalent one. Brooks suggests that #MeToo might benefit from second-wave feminist thinking about the law and defends second-wave feminism from some third-wave critiques that would put it at odds with #MeToo (2020). Conversely, Gilbert, who sees herself as “basically a 1970s feminist” (2018, 21), feels “a bit alienated from #MeToo because parts of it seem to be rooted in a sometimes problematic culture of date rape that coexists with an equally problematic hookup culture” (2018, 20).

In retrospect, it is difficult not to see *Disgrace* as a novel that possesses anticipatory affinities with the spirit of #MeToo. Later echoed in the stories of Harvey Weinstein, Matt Lauer, Charlie Rose and others, *Disgrace* depicts the public exposure and fall from grace of a privileged white man following his sexual exploitation and victimisation of Melanie Isaacs, one of his “middling ... but very attractive” (Coetzee 2000, 69) non-white students with whom he becomes “mildly smitten” (11). Significant criticism focuses on Lurie’s potential redemption in the novel’s second half, something Marais describes as his “ateleological development ... toward self-substituting responsibility” (2001, 124); however, *Disgrace*’s ambivalent insistence on recognising the social dimension of a story in which “[p]rivate life is public business” (Coetzee 2000, 66) should not be overlooked. If it is a matter personal to Lurie and a failing on his part that “barely a term passes when he does not fall for one or other of his charges” (11–12), a comment by a member of the panel convened when Lurie’s acts become common knowledge places Lurie’s offence in the context of a “long history of exploitation” (53). Given that women in general, and non-white women in particular, were routine targets of sexual violence in the conflict between the apartheid state and its opponents, the reference emphasises the embeddedness of *Disgrace* in its TRC-era context. Yet this comment *also* points to a broader gendered context that exceeds the (post-)apartheid nation. Within this expanded picture, much harassment “is in fact attributable to serial harassers who use their positions of power to force sexual conduct upon numerous women” (Hébert 2018, 332). Far from being the only man to whom this description could apply, Lurie nevertheless exemplifies the type of serial harasser swept up in the #MeToo phenomenon. Moreover, much like those whose transgressions came to light, Lurie is “taken completely by surprise” (Coetzee 2000, 45) when the private sexual liberties he had previously taken for granted become part of a public record in which he is vilified.

For Hsu, #MeToo has exposed the “ubiquity of sexual violence” (2019, 271), much of which is underacknowledged in daily life. In *Disgrace*, Coetzee portrays this ubiquity of sexual violence in a nation in which, much like the Western epicentres of #MeToo, “[t]he law sees nonconsensual sex as normal” (Brooks 2020, 905). Lucy, Lurie’s adult lesbian daughter who provides him refuge after he leaves Cape Town and who herself later becomes the victim of a brutal gang rape, interrupts her father’s self-pitying hyperbole to highlight the casual acceptance that Lurie and others routinely receive for their transgressions: “Shot? For having an affair with a student? A bit extreme, don’t you think, David? It must go on all the time. It certainly went on when I was a student. If they prosecuted every case the profession would be decimated” (Coetzee 2000, 66). Crucially, Lucy’s words would hardly seem out of place if they were transplanted to a different time and place—say, Hollywood, in the second decade of the twenty-first century. For every Weinstein, Lauer, or Rose whose disgrace becomes part of an international conversation on sexual violence and exploitation, there is an unknown number of producers, reporters, and entertainers with questionable histories whose lives remain undecimated within professions that, much like Lurie’s, continue on (almost) as normal. Though not couched in any overt language of activism, Lucy’s point strongly

resonates with a refrain of #MeToo: that the public denunciation and/or punishment of one sexually transgressive man does not, itself, radically transform the prevailing conditions that gave him licence to force his desires on his victims in the first place. Yet however easily Lucy's words might lend themselves to a critique of academia as an arena in which sexual power plays out in insidiously subtle forms, they also point to definitional problems attendant to discussions of #MeToo.

For what are perhaps understandable reasons, given that she is his daughter and that Lurie is brought before a disciplinary committee on a lesser charge of sexual harassment (Coetzee 2000, 46), Lucy refers to Lurie's wrongdoing as an *affair*, not by the name of his worst offence. This accords with Lurie's own view. During his second sexual encounter with Melanie, the narrative's employment of free indirect discourse communicates Lurie's discomfited-but-exonerating gloss on his actions: "Not rape, not quite that, but undesired nonetheless, undesired to the core" (25). Like Lurie, critics have had difficulty calling his act by its name, a point many feminist analyses highlight. According to Barnard, there is "a general uneasiness about using the word 'rape' for David's sexual act(s) with Melanie" (2013, 22). Indeed, "[m]any of the novel's critics do not even view Melanie's ordeal as rape" (Moffat 2018, 414). This critical lapse may be because Lurie's "actions are elaborated in an institutional register of sexual harassment rather than rape, abuse of human rights rather than crime" (Kelly 2015, 165). Though he becomes subject to scorn and ridicule and ultimately agrees to leave the university, Lurie, like many #MeToo villains, never faces prosecution. This reflects the fact that "[t]he definition of rape is a major conceptual conundrum in *Disgrace*" (Moffat 2018, 409), precisely because "the historic definition of rape is not clear-cut" (410). Nevertheless, as I read *Disgrace*, the novel displays no actual ambiguity about how Lurie's actions should be defined. Resisting his advances, Melanie states her objection clearly: "No, not now!" (Coetzee 2000, 25). Melanie's words are entirely unambiguous, particularly for generations reared on the slogan "No means no," yet Lurie and many of *Disgrace*'s readers have a difficult time acknowledging what he does. After all, the argument typically runs, Lurie and Melanie have sex before the rape (19), and, days later, Melanie shows up on Lurie's doorstep, asking to stay with him (27); if Melanie sees herself as a victim of rape, those most committed to clearing Lurie's name often continue, she would never seek shelter in his home afterwards.

Despite the potentially exonerating objections these details invite, *Disgrace*'s narrative progression unequivocally lends itself to re-enforcing the characterisation of Lurie's actions as rape. Lurie's exploitation of Melanie forms "a structural parallel with the three men's rape of Lucy" (Marais 2001, 127), so that "the two sexual offenses in the novel cannot but be understood in relation to one another" (Mardorossian 2011, 74). In narrative terms, this means that Lurie "realises the seriousness of [his] disgrace only after the rape of Lucy" (Saxena 2017, 127). After talking with his daughter, Lurie acknowledges that "Lucy's intuition is right after all: he does understand; he can, if he concentrates, if he loses himself, be there, be the men [who rape her], inhabit them, fill them with the ghost of himself" (Coetzee 2000, 160). Lurie's willingness to grant a

troubling identification of his own non-criminal(ised), sexually coercive practices with those of Lucy's rapists—who "*do rape*" (Coetzee 2000, 160; italics in original)—marks a striking departure for Lurie. As Marais explains, Lurie's early "relations to others, particularly women, are characterized by a complete lack of concern" (2001, 124). What Lurie's (unwilled) change reveals is not simply a father's sympathy for his daughter's pain but also his apprehension of his own implicatedness in patterns of sexual force.

Writing in the climate of #MeToo, Brooks notes that "[h]eterosex suffers from a paucity of scrutiny into the subtle yet extensive ways in which women are coerced" (2020, 908). Lucy's rape prompts exactly this kind of *self*-scrutiny from Lurie. Before this, Lurie could interpret Melanie's response to being told that "a woman's beauty does not belong to her alone" as revealing that it is "[e]xciting, always, to be courted: exciting, pleasurable" (Coetzee 2000, 16), particularly by someone who, in the fantasy of his Byronic self-perception, is "[m]ad, bad, and dangerous to know" (77). After Lucy's rape, however, Lurie is more receptive to being told "you were always a great self-deceiver, David. A great deceiver and a great self-deceiver" (188). This openness to seeing himself and his past actions anew likely lies behind Lurie's confession to Melanie's father:

In my own terms, I am being punished for what happened between myself and your daughter. I am sunk into a state of disgrace from which it will not be easy to lift myself. It is not a punishment I have refused. I do not murmur against it. On the contrary, I am living it out from day to day, trying to accept disgrace as my state of being. (Coetzee 2000, 172)

It is certainly possible to detect a degree of caginess in Lurie's reference to "what happened between myself and your daughter"—caginess also evident in Lurie's earlier proclamation to the disciplinary panel that he "became a servant of Eros" (Coetzee 2000, 52). However, in confessing to Mr. Isaacs, Lurie seems not to be exhibiting the same smug disregard for the suffering he has caused. Rather, in referring broadly to what happened between Melanie and him, Lurie may be leaving the door open to seeing his wrongdoing as including but exceeding its most sexually violent act. It is arguably no longer "no great matter" (11) to Lurie that he used to believe in his own "[s]mooth words, as old as seduction itself" (16) or that he would go to such great lengths to force his desires on one of his students that he removes Melanie's enrolment card from the department office to record "her personal details: home address, Cape Town address, telephone number" (17). These actions, about which the Lurie of the novel's beginning has no apparent reservations, are tantamount to stalking, and they make possible his eventual rape of Melanie. Like Lucy's assailants, who believe she is "in their territory" and whom she believes "will come back for me" (158), Lurie takes advantage of both his knowledge of Melanie's whereabouts and his presumed impunity to assault her sexually. Even before raping her, Lurie, who thinks of himself as being "in the grip of something" (18), exerts coercive pressure on his student, leaving her "too confused" (18) to reject his unexpected invitation to a lunch that has her "star[ing] out glumly over the sea" (19).

In short, then, the novel is clear about what to make of Lurie's conduct. As a young student, Melanie both feels coerced to meet privately with a man with power over her academic future and explicitly says no when he "thrusts himself upon her" (Coetzee 2000, 24). Even Lurie, who initially identifies with Lord Byron as a "once passionate but now less than passionate older man" (180) but who comes to realise that "[a]mong the legions of countesses and kitchenmaids Byron pushed himself into there were no doubt those who called it rape" (Coetzee 2000, 160), becomes deeply troubled by what transpires. One manifestation of this disturbance within Lurie is his rewriting of a planned opera that "had had at its centre Lord Byron and his mistress the Countess Guiccioli" (180) to focus instead on "a dumpy little widow" (181) who prompts him to wonder if he can "find it in his heart to love this plain, ordinary woman" (182). Marking a "step forward in [Lurie's] ethical development" (Post 2015, 134), this operatic transformation at the very least hints at something bordering on remorse. This is precisely what Lurie lacks when he self-righteously refuses to read a statement prepared for him by the university: "I am being asked to issue an apology about which I may not be sincere?" (Coetzee 2000, 58). Everything thus points to Lurie being both a man with a history of sexual predation and, in (at least) one specific instance, a rapist. But readers and critics who acknowledge Lurie's history continue to balk at this latter characterisation, which naturally raises questions about the source of this lingering resistance.

To these questions, *Disgrace* provides, I think, two answers, both of which reveal the novel's anticipatory affinity with #MeToo. First, in many ways the altered thinking prompting Lurie to reconceptualise his opera is attributable to a new awareness of what consent, and its absence, looks like. Early in the novel, after he stares at Melanie "frankly ravished," he interprets her non-verbal response—a lowering of the eyes and a (quite probably awkward) "little smile"—as evidence of "coquettish[ness]" (Coetzee 2000, 12), seemingly oblivious to other possible reactions that Melanie judiciously manages. It is little surprise, then, that their first sexual encounter leaves Lurie "in a state of profound wellbeing" (19), nor is it shocking that Lurie is "taken completely by surprise" (45) when Melanie files a complaint against him. Near the novel's end, Lurie returns to Cape Town, prompted in part by the feeling that "there is something unfinished in the business with Melanie" and harbouring the wild fantasy that "the affair has not run its course" (190). The lingering language of their relationship being a kind of affair simultaneously recalls Lucy's earlier phrasing and exemplifies Lurie's habitual reluctance to characterise his deeds in the most damning of ways. But, breaking his earlier pattern, Lurie also wonders, "what will she think of him anyway—the dunce with the funny ear, the uncut hair, the rumpled collar?" (190). If Lurie undergoes any kind of a change in the novel, his continuing self-regard and vanity are evident in his concern about the visible injury he suffers when Lucy's rapists set him on fire. Nevertheless, for all that Lurie's attention to his injuries reveals his ongoing inability to deal with "the emasculating effects of aging" (Moffat 2018, 410), that Lurie even wonders what Melanie might think of him suddenly reappearing in her life demonstrates a "nascent awareness of others" (Segall 2005, 41). In this case, this awareness entails a sense that

any future relationship between the two would have to involve Melanie's consent, a consideration profoundly lacking when he was her professor. *Disgrace* thus offers a caution about consent and its often-misunderstood absence, one that might find a welcome home in the discourse surrounding #MeToo.

Similarly, the inability among readers and critics to acknowledge the full extent of Lurie's sexual violence is tied up with gendered and racialised discourses that, while depicted as facets of post-apartheid life, are also very much part of the social terrain into which #MeToo and its concomitant discussion have subsequently interjected themselves. For Mardorossian, the "way in which the two scenes of violence in the novel are read against one another reveals the arbitrariness with which human rights discourse and its attendant Enlightenment ideals are appropriated and applied along different axes of power" (2011, 79). Among other things, this means that Lurie's initial casting of his actions as not-rape, which readers might confuse with an authorially sanctioned reading due to the narrative voice's proximity to Lurie's perspective, is in fact a condemnation of a dispensation in which a privileged white, middle-aged male professor might possess significant interpretive authority over the "complex terrain" (Segall 2005, 47) of represented violence. If the "definition of rape is contingent on storytelling" (Moffat 2018, 409), then the yoking of the narrative to Lurie's dismissive perspective ultimately demonstrates that "it is impossible not to participate in his way of thinking without also taking away from the violence of his act" (Mardorossian 2011, 79). But of course, as *Disgrace* makes clear, Lurie's way of thinking is not his alone, for "regarding rape as seduction" has been "popularized in English literature through metaphors of colonial expansion, hunting, and other masculine pursuits" (Moffat 2018, 415). Not coincidentally, Lurie teaches a course on Romantic poetry, considers Wordsworth "one of [his] masters" (Coetzee 2000, 13), and initially plans on writing an opera on Byron and his time in Italy (15). Romantic poetry is "firmly discredited in the novel" (Post 2015, 132), and in *Elizabeth Costello*, published a few years after *Disgrace*, Coetzee's eponymous protagonist associates Romanticism with violently penetrative activities: "Romantic times ... happen to have been times of unparalleled geographic expansion, of a right to venture into forbidden or tabooed places" (Coetzee 2004, 172). Such Romantic notions of a natural right to venture, collect, and conquer recall MacKinnon's characterisation of male heterosexuality (Coetzee 1996, 71) and underpin Lurie's self-justifications, as he explains to Lucy: "My case rests on the rights of desire ... On the god who makes even the small birds quiver" (Coetzee 2000, 89). Both Lurie's actions and his perspective on them are thus enabled by a high-cultural tradition that typically valorises masculine achievement and renders silent those perspectives that would present a dissenting countervoice.

In terms of dissenting countervoices, #MeToo has offered a salutary challenge to this tradition as it has been driven by "the convergence of many storytellers" (Hsu 2019, 273) who have translated their experiences into "a moment and a cultural narrative" (Curry 2019, 293). Paradoxically, given my argument here that *Disgrace* shares affinities and insights with #MeToo, Coetzee's novel is notably *silent* when it comes to

the stories that its primary victims could tell: in each case, there obviously *is* an experiential narrative to be told, but it is inaccessible to us. Barnard explains, “the reader is not given Melanie’s interpretation of events and must therefore recreate it from David’s limited point of view” (2013, 23). Even this possibility is forestalled when Lurie informs the university committee hearing his case that, when it comes to Melanie, he has no interest in enlarging his limited view, stating “I do not wish to read Ms Isaacs’s statement. I accept it. I know of no reason why Ms Isaacs should lie” (Coetzee 2000, 49). Lurie’s disinterest actively prevents readers from accessing Melanie’s perspective and, more importantly, from becoming the readerly equivalent of empathetic listeners. As Felman and Laub explain, the “absence of an empathetic listener ... another who can hear the anguish of one’s memories and thus affirm and recognise their realness, annihilates the story” (cited in Ross 2003, 3). The annihilation of Melanie’s story leaves room for another’s, and while Lurie *is* interested in his daughter’s perspective, it is Lucy who keeps the narrative we read distant from her experience of events when she emphatically explains to her father “[t]here are things you just don’t understand” (Coetzee 2000, 157). Lurie’s inability to understand is not simply a product of his gender, but of Lucy’s active assertion—one that ironically repeats and inverts Lurie’s earlier defence of his own actions—that “[w]hat happened to me is my business, mine alone, not yours” (133). If Lucy’s refusal simply to satisfy her father’s nascent curiosity about women’s experience of sexual victimisation leaves him and the reader unable to understand why Lucy “cannot go away” (161), it also reflects Lucy’s understanding that her father “[has] not been listening to [her]” (161) when she tells him “I don’t act in terms of abstractions” (112). Against her father’s tendency to co-opt the meaning of her actions in light of the nation’s reconciliation narrative—in Lurie’s eyes Lucy “wish[es] to humble [her]self before history” (160)—Lucy withholds a story she would rather see be not told than mis-told.

Moffat is thus correct to note that *Disgrace* uses “silence as a literary device” (2018, 406). This silence is not coextensive with absence, for the “apparent monologism in *Disgrace* is ... subtly debunked as the reader is constantly made aware ... of how limited David Lurie’s perspective truly is, which suggests that his perspective is only one perspective amongst others” (Post 2015, 128). In a familiar gesture from the author of *Waiting for the Barbarians* and *Foe*, *Disgrace* refuses—in a manner resonant with the #MeToo movement—to presume to speak to the experience of rape, and it refrains from speaking over characters whose perspectives are epitomised by silence. What becomes apparent in *Disgrace*, then, is that the story of David Lurie, a self-styled “conqueror of women” (Moffat 2018, 413), suggestively points to the non-present stories of “women he has known on two continents ... hundreds of lives all tangled with his” (Coetzee 2000, 192). From our current moment, one might well be tempted to wonder how many of them, like Melanie, would today say #MeToo.

Insofar as *Disgrace* raises the spectre of untold stories of sexual assault and rape, it anticipates the #MeToo mo(ve)ment and even, given Coetzee’s hypercanonical status, invests #MeToo with its high-cultural backing. Yet Coetzee’s novel, though it was

published almost two full decades before *Time* made the “Silence Breakers” its 2017 Person of the Year, also anticipates the blindspots of #MeToo and is resonant with its contemporary critiques. For Mardorossian, it “is through the second rape that Coetzee retroactively exposes the masculinist and racist lens through which the first one is represented and naturalized” (2011, 80). That is to say, in narratological terms, *Disgrace* demonstrates that the rape of a white woman by three black men is precisely what enables readers to perceive that what a white man like Lurie does to a non-white student like Melanie is rape. This does not mean that what happens to Lucy matters more than the trauma Melanie undergoes; rather, the novel reflects critically on a readership whose perspective, shaped by many of the same forces as Lurie’s, may be implicated in its protagonist’s inability to see the assault on Melanie for what it is. It may be that Lurie “can only see rape as what black men do to white women” (80), but *Disgrace* identifies in that very blindness a warning sign about the persistence of such culturally conditioned views amidst a background of putative social change wherein “all the coarse old prejudices [are] brought into the light of day and washed away” (Coetzee 2000, 23).

Similar types of critique have been directed at #MeToo and the “primarily affluent women at [its] center” (Hsu 2019, 269). According to Curry, “the driving force behind #MeToo has primarily focused on high-profile celebrity cases and not the disproportionate suffering and sexual violence of minority men and women or girls and boys” (2019, 299). This can be seen as a “racialized dichotomy” that “focuses on white women” (Hsu 2019, 283) so that what has resulted from the high-profile #MeToo narrative “is not a democratic comingling of stories but a vocal configuration that replicates extant social hierarchies” (273). In *Disgrace*, the interrelation of Melanie’s and Lucy’s victimisations similarly replicates dominant racial hierarchies while failing to give rise to a comingling of stories. This is not because Melanie and Lucy do not (improbably) meet, though Lurie’s temporary housing of Melanie “in his daughter’s old room” (Coetzee 2000, 26) manages both to prefigure the structural parallel that becomes apparent after Lucy’s rape and to emphasise the female characters’ shared vulnerability to different versions of toxic masculinity. Rather, Lucy’s and Melanie’s stories do not comeingle because, narratively speaking, the former supplants and draws attention away from the latter. Melanie is central to *Disgrace*’s opening chapters, as Lurie attempts to find a new solution to “the problem of sex” (1) once Soraya—an exotic prostitute with “lustrous hair and dark eyes” (6)—ends her association with him; however, Melanie effectively disappears from the final three-quarters of the narrative, except for a few brief pages when, having returned to Cape Town, Lurie watches her act in a play, separated from her by “twenty rows of seats” (193). Melanie’s appearance on stage underscores her *distance* from what takes centre stage for most of the novel, reducing her to “part of the story of [Lurie’s] life” (198). Like Lucy, who tells her father “I am not minor, I have a life of my own, just as important to me as yours is to you” (198), Melanie has an important story of her own to tell, but the novel’s displacement of *that* story speaks as much to a cultural deafness to it as it does to Lurie’s many self-regarding failings.

In exploring how some voices and experiences remain obscured within grand narratives of post-apartheid realignment, *Disgrace* thus demonstrates how institutionalised gendered and racial privileges persist through historical transformations. The noticeable silences and ambiguities attendant to the experiences and motivations of Lurie's victim contrast with Lurie's horrified fascination with his daughter Lucy's rape by three black men, an event which paradoxically affirms the status of Lurie's transgression *as* rape while displacing his crime from narrative view. Written and set in the early years of post-apartheid South Africa, Coetzee's novel partakes, however idiosyncratically, in an Afro-pessimistic interrogation of the official nation-building optimism underlying the TRC, an authorised body which falls "within the scope of transitional justice initiatives" (Nelaeva and Sidorova 2019, 104). What *Disgrace* may show, more than anything else, is the stalling, at least in gendered terms, of the apparent transition heralded by the historically momentous end of apartheid. *Disgrace* ends with Lurie "giving ... up" (Coetzee 2000, 220) the maimed dog that becomes attached to him, but it is difficult not to notice how, perhaps symptomatically, *Disgrace* gives up on a narrative—Melanie's—which might have brought a more urgent demand for transitional justice to post-apartheid South Africa.

Although the onset of #MeToo in the West did not coincide with a precise moment of change like the end of the apartheid era, it did parallel this epochal shift in South African history in auguring a transition towards a more just dispensation. And in both cases, of course, many casual observers may have been guilty of uncritically accepting the optimism inherent in the moment. A retrospective revisiting of *Disgrace* in light of #MeToo positions this novel of post-apartheid South Africa on the world stage in a fresh way, one that can acknowledge the prescient elements of Coetzee's novel while being receptive to its resistance to prematurely triumphalist proclamations, be they about a new South Africa or about time being up for the David Luries of the world. Ultimately, *Disgrace*'s highlighting of its unnarrated perspectives anticipates both the forceful challenge to a lingering white heterosexual hegemony that characterises #MeToo and the movement's marginalisation of non-white and non-Western traumas.

References

- Attwell, David. 2011. "Coetzee, Controversy and *Disgrace*." *Foreign Literature Studies* 33 (5): 8–14.
- Barnard, Lianne. 2013. "The Politics of Rape: Traces of Radical Feminism in *Disgrace* by J.M. Coetzee." *Tydskrif vir Letterkunde* 50 (2): 19–29. <https://doi.org/10.4314/tvl.v50i2.2>.
- Bezan, Sarah. 2012. "Shame as a Structure of Feeling: Raped and Prostituted Women in J.M. Coetzee's *Disgrace* and Futhi Ntshingila's *Shameless*." *Journal of the African Literature Association* 7 (1): 15–24. <https://doi.org/10.1080/21674736.2012.11690196>.
- Brooks, Victoria. 2020. "Greer's 'Bad Sex' and the Future of Consent." *Sexuality & Culture* 24: 903–21. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s12119-019-09671-x>.

- Brouillette, Sarah. 2007. *Postcolonial Writers in the Global Literary Marketplace*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan. <https://doi.org/10.1057/9780230288171>.
- Coetzee, J. M. 1996. "The Harms of Pornography: Catharine MacKinnon." In *Giving Offense: Essays on Censorship*, 61–82. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press. <https://doi.org/10.7208/chicago/9780226111773.001.0001>.
- Coetzee, J. M. 2000. *Disgrace*. London: Vintage.
- Coetzee, J. M. 2004. *Elizabeth Costello: Eight Lessons*. London: Vintage.
- Curry, Tommy J. 2019. "Expendables for Whom: Terry Crews and the Erasure of Black Male Victims of Sexual Assault and Rape." In "The #MeToo Moment: A Rhetorical Zeitgeist," edited by Kristen Hoerl, special issue, *Women's Studies in Communication* 42 (3): 287–307. <https://doi.org/10.1080/07491409.2019.1641874>.
- Enck, Suzanne Marie. 2018. "Accountability amidst the 'Me Too' Reckoning: Kevin Spacey's Homopatriarchal Apologia." *QED: A Journal in GLBTQ Worldmaking* 5 (2): 80–6. <https://doi.org/10.14321/qed.5.2.0080>.
- Felski, Rita. 2015. *The Limits of Critique*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press. <https://doi.org/10.7208/chicago/9780226294179.001.0001>.
- Gilbert, Sandra M. 2018. "In the Labyrinth of #MeToo: Addressing Sexual Aggression and Power in Contemporary Society Also Means Questioning What the Feminist Movement Has Really Been About." *The American Scholar*, June 4, 2018, 14–25. Accessed May 19, 2022. <https://theamericanscholar.org/in-the-labyrinth-of-metoo/>.
- Hébert, L. Camille. 2018. "Is 'MeToo' Only a Social Movement or a Legal Movement Too?" *Employee Rights and Employment Policy Journal* 22 (2): 321–36. <https://doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.3236309>.
- Hsu, V. Jo. 2019. "(Trans)forming #MeToo: Toward a Networked Response to Gender Violence." In "The #MeToo Moment: A Rhetorical Zeitgeist," edited by Kristen Hoerl, special issue, *Women's Studies in Communication* 42 (3): 269–86. <https://doi.org/10.1080/07491409.2019.1630697>.
- Kelly, Michelle. 2015. "'Playing It by the Book': The Rule of Law in J.M. Coetzee's *Disgrace*." *Research in African Literatures* 46 (1): 160–78. <https://doi.org/10.2979/reseafrilite.46.1.160>.
- Marais, Michael. 2001. "Impossible Possibilities: Ethics and Choice in J.M. Coetzee's *The Lives of Animals* and *Disgrace*." *English Academy Review: A Journal of English Studies* 18 (1): 116–35. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10131750185310031>.

- Mardorossian, Carine M. 2011. "Rape and the Violence of Representation in J.M. Coetzee's *Disgrace*." *Research in African Literatures* 42 (4): 72–83. <https://doi.org/10.2979/reseafritile.42.4.72>.
- Meljac, Eric. 2011. "Love and *Disgrace*: Reading Coetzee in the Light (and Love) of Barthes." *Journal of Modern Literature* 34 (3): 149–61. <https://doi.org/10.2979/jmodelite.34.3.149>.
- Moffat, Nicola. 2018. "Rape and the (Animal) Other: Making Monsters in J.M. Coetzee's *Disgrace*." *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 43 (2): 401–23. <https://doi.org/10.1086/693553>.
- Nelaeva, Galina, and Natalia Sidorova. 2019. "Transitional Justice in South Africa and Brazil: Introducing a Gendered Approach to Reconciliation." *BRICS LAW Journal* 6 (2): 82–107. <https://doi.org/10.21684/2412-2343-2019-6-2-82-107>.
- Oriaku, Remy. 2016. "J.M. Coetzee's *Disgrace* as an Allegory of the Pain, Frustration, and Disorder of Post-Apartheid South Africa." *Matatu: Journal for African Culture and Society* 48 (1): 145–60. <https://doi.org/10.1163/18757421-04801010>.
- Post, Marco. 2015. "The Problematicization of Monologue and Dialogue in J.M. Coetzee's *Disgrace*." *Pennsylvania Literary Journal* 7 (3): 123–45.
- Ross, Fiona. 2003. *Bearing Witness: Women and the Truth and Reconciliation Commission in South Africa*. New York, NY: Pluto Press.
- Saxena, Nishtha. 2017. "J.M. Coetzee's Aesthetics of *Ahimsa*: Towards a Gandhian Reading of *The Lives of Animals* and *Disgrace*." *English in Africa* 44 (2): 117–41. <https://doi.org/10.4314/eia.v44i2.5>.
- Segall, Kimberly Wedeven. 2005. "Pursuing Ghosts: The Traumatic Sublime in J.M. Coetzee's *Disgrace*." *Research in African Literatures* 36 (4): 40–54. <https://doi.org/10.2979/RAL.2005.36.4.40>.
- Silverstein, Stephen. 2011. "The Discourse of Jewish Difference in J.M. Coetzee's *Disgrace*." *Jewish Social Studies: History, Culture, Society* 17 (2): 80–100. <https://doi.org/10.2979/jewisocistud.17.2.80>.
- Van Wyk Smith, Malvern. 2014. "Rape and the Foundation of Nations in J.M. Coetzee's *Disgrace*." *English in Africa* 41 (1): 13–34. <https://doi.org/10.4314/eia.v41i1.2>.