

**Good Housekeeping: Single Women
and Global Feminism in J.M. Coetzee's
In the Heart of the Country
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As the only child of a widowed Afrikaner farmer, Magda, the protagonist of J.M. Coetzee's *In the Heart of the Country*, lives her days on the isolated sheep farm in bitter loneliness.¹ She is a disappointment to her father because she has no prospects for marriage. Because she cannot relinquish her role as the *baas's* daughter and fulfill the roles of wife and mother expected of all women in South African farm culture, Magda is dismissed by her father as a useless member of the farm community. His resentment for Magda plays itself out spatially, for she is not welcome in the dominant farmhouse spaces that her father inhabits. Instead, she lurks in thresholds and obscure locations, spaces whose own marginal status mitigates against anything other than unremittingly devalued configurations for her single status. *In the Heart of the Country* is a series of bitter, angry meditations on how Magda, an abjected member of South African heterosexual hegemony, can make her body matter in Afrikaner farm culture.² In early diary entries, Magda searches through a laundry list of single women's identities in order to find a more palatable subjectivity than that of dismissed daughter. The only identities she discovers are negative renditions located in marginal or erased parts of the farm—" [i]n the shadowy hallway . . . we are bitter vestals" (3), "[a] jagged virgin, I stand in the doorway" (8), "an angry spinster in the heart of nowhere" (4), "in the cloister of my room I am the mad hag" (8). However, Magda soon discovers that the figures she summons to name herself are not static norms whose defining borders are rigorously maintained; rather, they are unstable discursive moments that resonate with ambiguity. It is when she first steps into the farmhouse kitchen—the space that is coded the central locus of Afrikaner female power—that Magda comes to see transgressive potential in the single woman's body

she inhabits. It is from the kitchen that Magda launches her two most radical political moves: the two murders of her father. In the course of the novel, Magda manages to move from forgotten daughter, who only looms in the margins of the farm, to “the crazy old queen,” who manipulates the entire space into her own—albeit distorted—conception of a community (138).

Magda does not succeed in permanently killing her father, even though she makes two grimly valiant efforts. The purpose of this essay is to account for both the successes and the failures of Magda’s particular kind of feminist identity politics. Coetzee constructs space as a crucial component of subject formation in this novel; Magda uses the farmhouse kitchen as a space to reimagine herself as a powerful figure of female singleness, an act that makes her strong enough to commit murder. Space matters in subject formation, for the kitchen provides Magda with a politically productive re-imaginative location in which to effect her differential repetitions of female singleness. Despite these personal successes, however, Magda’s gender politics fail to result in any community with the black servants, Hendrick and Klein-Anna. Many critics of *In the Heart of the Country* have commented on the feminist aspects of Magda’s struggles, but none have yet accounted for the role her status as a single woman plays in the novel.³ Caroline Rody has suggested that Coetzee chose a “mad white colonial daughter” as the protagonist of *In the Heart of the Country* because he found in “feminist critique a subversive way into the heart of the colonial conundrum and the postmodern condition” (162). By employing the trope of the mad-woman of so much feminist fiction, Rody argues, Coetzee can develop “a fertile vocabulary for the horror and absurdity of his own postcolonial condition” (179). While I find Rody’s analysis of Magda’s madness quite compelling, she does not account for the role Magda’s status as a “white colonial daughter”—a single woman—serves in the novel (162). If we situate Magda’s feminist actions within South African politics of the early 1970s, when Coetzee was writing *In the Heart of the Country*, we can see that her single woman status serves as a critique of global feminism. Magda is not just the embodiment of “a feminine aesthetic” (162), or “a feminist voice” (163), as Rody asserts, she emerges from

Coetzee's understanding of a variety of Anglo-American feminism that was struggling for a political foothold in South Africa in the 1970s. Magda's meditations on single women's subject formation, I contend, are also meditations on the usefulness of Anglo-American gender politics for the anti-apartheid struggle. Magda embraces this kind of global feminism's method of privileging gender as the primary constitutive characteristic of her identity, and so cannot come to terms with the racial politics imbricated in her relationship with the two black servants. Magda's single woman status critiques second wave feminism's essentialism, an essentialism that emerged from the mistaken assumption that a female subjectivity conceived in opposition to patriarchy would be the same for all women. Thus, Coetzee's anti-pastoral provides an important critique of global feminism's usefulness for South Africa's anti-apartheid struggle in the 1970s; his representation of Magda as a "crazy old queen" at the end of the novel suggests the limits of singular identity politics for South African feminists (138).

The feminist political climate that Coetzee experienced in England and America, where he lived for nine years in the 1960s, was very different from the South African feminist politics of his youth. During Coetzee's sojourn in the West, many Anglo-American feminists were developing an autonomous conception of gender identity that was distinctly separate from issues of race, class and nation. This is a quite different kind of feminism than was circulating in South Africa, where the strength and importance of gender issues was situational—gender identity assumed a prominent or subordinate role depending on the other political discourses competing for dominance.⁴ Coetzee returned to South Africa in 1971, at a historical moment when feminists there were exploring the usefulness of the newly globalized Anglo-American feminism for their own gender politics. In the early 1970s global Anglo-American feminism was competing for dominance in South African gender politics with indigenous feminisms that had emerged from race, class and national politics (Berger 288). All of these feminisms were aimed, at least in part, at dismantling the *Vrou en Moeder* (wife and mother) ideal that Afrikaner discourse promoted. By making Magda a single woman, Coetzee is able to produce a two-pronged critique—he

can deconstruct the heterosexual hegemony of the *Vrou en Moeder* ideal dominating South African social discourse while also pointing to the limits of global feminism's usefulness for the anti-apartheid movement.

Afrikaner nationalist discourses on female gender identity in the 1970s severely constrained white women's roles in South Africa by mythologizing an ideal of *Vrou en Moeder*—an impossibly elevated role of pure progenitive martyr.⁵ During the Great Trek many women gave up their homes and their possessions to cross the desert in order to set up new farms with their husbands. In history books, monuments, and the nationalist literature, women of the Great Trek were romanticized as strong, resolute pioneers focused only on helping their husbands and raising the many children the culture expected them to produce.⁶ The Afrikaner iconography that existed even in the 1970's when Coetzee was writing *In the Heart of the Country* continued to employ this figuration of the desert farm woman for inspiration and validation (Gallagher 88). The culture's ideals of racial purity, blind obedience to patriarchal law, vehement nationalism, and extreme procreativity continued to be associated with the bodies of Afrikaner females. Notwithstanding the well-publicized feminist and anti-apartheid efforts of many South African white women, the majority of Afrikaner women in the 1970s were still primarily focused on upholding these old-style Boer family ideals (Gallagher 90). This *Vrou en Moeder* feminine ideal was used to both discipline the females of the culture and to promote masculine power and authority. Thus the female bodies that mattered in Afrikaner culture in the 1970s were the long-suffering obedient wife and the prodigiously fecund mother.⁷

Very early in *In the Heart of the Country*, Magda variously locates her mother, her father's second wife, and even herself as *Vrou en Moeder* figures; however, her descriptions deconstruct this ideological disciplining because they are fraught with ambiguous feelings about these cultural constrictions of femininity. For her mother, adherence to this disciplinary structure proves fatal:

My father's first wife, my mother, was a frail gentle loving woman who lived and died under her husband's thumb. . . .

His relentless sexual demands led to her death in childbirth. She was too frail and gentle to give birth to the rough rude boy-heir my father wanted, therefore she died . . . patient, bloodless, apologetic. (2)

Magda's mother holds herself responsible for not being able to maintain the *Vrou en Moeder* ideology even though upholding this identity has led to her death. Magda envisions her father's second wife as torpidly calculating in her fecundity, labeling her a "lazy big-boned voluptuous feline woman with . . . two shrewd black berries" for eyes (1). Both of these *Vrou en Moeder* figures fail to suggest to Magda the palatability of assuming this role herself, although she does desperately want to find a way to function pleasurably in the dominant culture. However, even a feeble attempt to locate herself in one of the "many untapped happy variants" of the female role is circumscribed with discursive negativity:

The Angel, that is how she is sometimes known, The Angel in Black who comes to save the children of the brown folk from their croups and fevers. All her household severity is transformed into an unremitting compassion when it comes to care of the sick. . . . Her heart sings. In war she would lighten the last hours of the wounded. They would die with smiles on their lips, gazing into her eyes, clasping her hand. (5)

This section, prefaced by her ironic disclaimer "[p]ique, pique, pique" and quickly followed by her "love of nature, particularly of insect life, of the scurrying purposeful life that goes on around each ball of dung," suggests that Magda is unable to sustain a belief in the moral potential of this role (5–6).

Coetzee constructs these *Vrou en Moeder* figures as poststructural palimpsests, reconfigurations of the sexual norm that vacillate between positive and negative connotations. Judith Butler, in *Bodies That Matter*, explains how gender and sex performativity resonate with political potential. In Butler's formulation, because "bodies never quite comply with the norms by which their materialization is impelled," repetition of a norm will always be a repetition with a difference (2). Because bodies

“never quite comply,” this produces a gap or space within which bodies are not figured in language; they are reconfigured. Coetzee’s representations of these *Vrou en Moeder* figures produce just such a gap for re-configuration to occur. Because of this gap in compliance, Coetzee is able to foreground the inefficacious aspects of these figures in order to call attention to both their constructed nature and their limits. Magda’s meditations on the *Vrou en Moeder* ideology undergirding Afrikaner female subjectivity make clear that she finds it impossible to base her own gender identity on these dominant cultural constructions.

While Magda’s description of her father’s second wife does call into question the ideology of female identity constituting her, it does nothing to affect the material existence of this rival for her father’s affection; she remains a thorn in Magda’s side. In order to effect a change in her conditions, Magda must do more than just discursively re-invent received ideology; she must act. Butler’s theory of the power of performative action helps to explain how Magda disrupts Afrikaner sexual ideology as an “abject being.” Butler argues that unlivable bodies function as the “excluded and illegible domain that haunts the former domain as the spectre of its own impossibility, the very limit to intelligibility” (xi). As an unattached, unproductive female, Magda rejects the *Vrou en Moeder* ideology undergirding the formation of Afrikaner female subjectivity. Magda is one of Butler’s “abject beings,” “those who are not yet ‘subjects,’ but who form the constitutive outside to the domain of the subject” (3). Butler sees at least two possibilities of action for this abject being:

[W]hat has been foreclosed or banished from the proper domain of ‘sex’ . . . might at once be produced as a troubling return, not only as an *imaginary* contestation that effects a failure in the workings of the inevitable law, but as an enabling disruption, the occasion for a radical rearticulation of the symbolic horizon in which bodies come to matter at all. (23)

Magda’s meditative representations of her mother, her father’s new wife, and herself as *Vrou en Moeder* figures begin the work of disrupting the heterosexual hegemony of Afrikaner culture, however, it is her

two works of parricide that function as “enabling disruption[s]” to that law (Butler 23). Before I analyze these two episodes, though, I turn first to the question of how disruption actually forces a “radical rearticulation,” of hegemonic discourse. Calling performative acts “forms of authoritative speech,” Butler argues that these acts have a history that “not only precedes but conditions [their] contemporary usages” (227). But, because any repetition is always a repetition with a difference, the performative act is always slightly de-formed in subsequent configurations. Butler argues that these deformations can both sanction and shame, but can we control when they do what? While I agree that any identity politics must have as its base move “a turn *against* this constitutive historicity,” I do not think that Butler adequately addresses the question of *how* this turn might become disruptive (227). Arguing that if bodies perform a “citationality” of the very term that has been used to shame them—as in, for instance, the homosexual calling him/herself “queer”—a reversal of that term occurs because this “mimes or renders hyperbolic the discursive convention,” Butler seems to be concluding that every time citationality occurs, a reversal will be effected. Does it necessarily follow, however, that a reversal will effect a consciously positive political change? Butler seems to conclude in the negative when she writes “there is no guarantee that exposing the naturalized status of heterosexuality will lead to its subversion” (231).

It is here that I want to bring a consideration of space into the discussion because I think its political potential is at least alluded to in an example Butler gives of a judge who “*cites* the law” in order to lend the force of historicity to his argument.⁸ I would add to her example that a judge *in her courtroom* certainly does have the power of history behind her when she, for instance, cites a defendant for a traffic violation; however, a judge pronouncing a sentence in the middle of a busy thoroughfare to a teeming mass of indifferent commuters has much less power. *Where* she makes her pronouncements—her citations—matters. Certainly every space of citationality does not guarantee political change, but, I contend that powerfully encoded spaces can make the possibility of change more likely. In order to effect a change in dominant ideology, Magda needs to locate her performative actions, her hyperbolic

reversals, in a powerful space, a space coded with political potential by Afrikaner culture already.

In “DissemiNation: Time, Narrative, and the Margins of the Modern Nation,” Homi Bhabha explains how the uncanny liminal spaces of the postcolonial subject can disrupt hegemonic national narratives. Working from the premise of the “double-writing or dissemi-*nation*” of the national space, Bhabha sees the following political potential in liminal spaces:

Counter-narratives of the nation that continually evoke or erase its totalizing boundaries—both actual and conceptual—disturb those ideological manoeuvres through which “imagined communities” are given essentialist identities. . . . [T]hat boundary that secures the cohesive limits of the western nation may imperceptibly turn into a contentious *internal* liminality that provides a place from which to speak both of, and as, the minority, the exilic, the marginal, and the emergent. (300)

Bhabha’s theory of the postmodern uncanny suggests that the limits and borderlands of a nation can be seen as uncanny spaces invested with the potential to disrupt the essentializing narratives of nationality. Even though the nation seeks to make of its boundaries (as well as its centers) a “unified temporal territory of Tradition,” the very function of the boundary mitigates against the successful completion of this ideological act for, even as the boundary secures the nation, it admits difference. Because his discussion is focused on the transgressive potential of uncanny public spaces, Bhabha does not consider the private spaces that might also serve as loci for the work of identity politics.⁹ I read the kitchen in Coetzee’s novel as an uncanny domestic space imbued with political potential because of the way in which it functions for both Magda and the servants on the farm. For Magda the kitchen is a space where single women and servants toil to ensure the smooth domestic functioning of the patriarchal household, but it is also a space where a single woman can have some power as she dictates what food will be prepared and which of the domestic chores will be done by which of the servants. Unlike the various doorways, hallways, and “nowhere” spaces Magda occupies, the kitchen

has been coded by her culture as a space of female power. For Magda the kitchen becomes just such a threshold battlefield that Bhabha describes; it is a liminal space of the farm that resonates with irredeemable plurality. It is in the kitchen that Magda discovers the power to make singleness matter, albeit in grim fashion, in the economy of farm life, for Magda's decision to murder her father and her stepmother begins in the kitchen, the space where her productive power is strongest. The kitchen does not determine Magda's actions, it is only a setting—a contentious threshold—in which those acts become possible.

The first time that Magda enters the kitchen in the novel she borrows the power patriarchy has bestowed on the kitchen as a space for limited female power to serve up an image of destruction capable of holding the rage she feels for her father. She does this by imagining her fecundity in distorted images of bodily desire: “the spectacle of my bony frame on the wedding-couch, the coat of fur up to my navel, the acrid cavities of my armpits, the line of black moustache, the eyes, watchful, defensive, of a woman who has never lost possession of herself” (10). This anti-blazon of her body parts makes of her an animalistic, warrior body; one that, because she has “never lost possession of herself,” becomes capable of defending her position. The repetition produces a very different kind of *Vrou en Moeder* figure than the one dominating Afrikaner discourse. In the kitchen in her imagination as well as in reality, Magda becomes “a mind mad enough for parricide and pseudo-matricide” (10). Coetzee's narrative technique elides the gap between fantasy and reality, thus allowing Magda to carry over her fantastical power from her mind to her body, into the realm of the real. Magda cannot operate at the center of the *Vrou en Moeder* ideology that her culture inscribes onto women, so she decenters this by moving her own marginal performance of the ‘good’ *Vrou en Moeder*—her “bony frame on the wedding couch”—to the center of the narrative. The “mad”ness of Magda here is a mental imbalance if perceived from the point of view of the dominant culture. But this “mad”ness can also be seen as the anger of the excluded, the marginal, erupting into the realm of the everyday.

The rage Magda conjures in the kitchen, in turn, reconfigures her body, making of it a powerful single female *Moeder* whose body pro-

duces with no discernible partner. Her body becomes capable of fighting the heterosexual hegemony her father is enacting. It is after this kitchen work has been completed that Magda proceeds to “cleaning out” her father’s bedroom. Magda draws upon a specific warrior figure of female singleness in order to effect this first parricide. Standing now in the dim light of her father’s bedroom Magda thinks about the tool she has chosen for the work before her, “I bring not the meat-cleaver as I thought it would be but the hatchet, weapon of the Valkyries” (11). The domestic tool used to hew animal flesh from bone in order that it might become nourishment for the household is not a powerful enough tool to kill her father. Relocating herself as a handmaiden to Odin, the supreme diety in Northern European mythology, Magda becomes a servant of a different sort. The Valkyries were warrior maidens of death charged with deciding which heroes of a battle would be slain and then enshrined in Valhalla. The “weapon of the Valkyries” that Magda has surprised herself in choosing seems a tool appropriate for her newly formed warrior body (11). But who, or what, is the agent of the ensuing bloody acts is called into question by Magda’s own language as she relates the killings:

The axe sweeps up over my shoulder. All kinds of people have done this before me, wives, sons, lovers, heirs, rivals, I am not alone. Like a ball on a string it floats down at the end of my arm, sinks into the throat below me, and all is suddenly tumult How fortunate that at times like these the larger action flows of itself and requires of the presiding figure no more than presence of mind! (11)

It is “the axe,” and not the warrior woman wielding the axe that, seemingly of its own accord, “sweeps up” and “floats down” into the throat of Magda’s father. It is the weapon of her Boer heritage, and not the female figure she has conjured to enact her rage, that actually delivers the death blow to her father. In this scene, the long-suffering Boer warrior woman so valorized by 1970s South African iconography lashes out at the very patriarch who sought to discipline her. The re-configured body that Magda had summoned to perform the deed is effaced by the mind that is “presence[d]” in her telling. Even though her body can be

seen as in control of the actions because it is “presiding” over them, it has lost its material power by becoming a “figure,” a representation of the body. The female warrior figure Magda has summoned out of the depths of her grim fecundity is not a powerful enough body to hold the place of agency in this deed. It is “the weapon of the Valkyries” and the power that Boer culture confers upon this object that delivers the initial blow to her father (11). Thus, because she has relied on the tools of the patriarch to effect her resistance, her new-found agency is short-lived.

However, the warrior body does recover its agency in time to deliver a fatal blow to her stepmother. Magda goes on: “[l]eaning forward and gripping what must be one of their four knees, I deliver much the better chop deep into the crown of her head” (11). Killing her stepmother seems an easier deed than killing her father for she keeps the subject position—the “I”—during the act. However, that action too has taken its toll because the stepmother’s body falls over with Magda’s “dramatic tomahawk still embedded in her” (11). Magda’s attempt to murder the *Vrou en Moeder* has succeeded but has cost her the loss of her weapon. This loss of weapon seems to signal a momentary loss of resolve for Magda, who resorts to cataloguing the obligatory acts that must follow in order to finish the deed, “I must keep a cool head, I must pick them off one by one, recover (with some effort) my axe, and hack with distaste at these hands, these arms until I have a free moment to draw a sheet over all this shuddering and pound it into quiet” (11). Here Magda has switched to planning her actions, rather than actually carrying them out. In this moment her body is vacillating between that of a cleaning woman and a warrior woman; one who is listing her grisly chores and one who is thoroughly killing her enemy. The cleaning woman eventually replaces the warrior woman as she focuses on how to tidy up all the “traces of [her] violence” (11).

We can read Magda’s first parricidal act as a form of birth control. The murder produces a whole new and grimly entertaining set of tasks for this good housekeeper:

For no longer need I fret about how to fill my days. . . . I have
two fullgrown bodies to get rid of besides many other traces

of my violence. I have a face to compose, a story to invent, and all before dawn when Hendrick comes for the milking-pail. . . . How fortunate at times like these that there is only one problem, a problem of cleanliness. (15)

Her actions have aborted the production of another heir for her father, one who might follow in its father's footsteps or even usurp her own fragile significance in her father's life. Magda's actions have also birthed a bloody mass of "two fullgrown bodies to get rid of," as if they are fetuses she has scraped from a womb. The violence that her kitchen conjurings have produced must be hidden away, erased from her body ("I have a face to compose") and reconfigured in language ("a story to invent") before the servant arrives to witness her transgression. Magda does not want the black male servant, Hendrick, to see the results of her rebellious servitude. This need to restore her control highlights the tenuous nature of all powerful positions and makes Magda realize that her actions could serve as a model of action for the other servants on the farm. Ultimately, then, her formidable identity politics is not aimed at liberating all acts of servitude on the farm, she just wants to get her single woman's self out from under the thumb of patriarchy and its oppressive dictates. By choosing to hide her grisly 'housekeeping' from Hendrick, Magda signals that she cannot see how the servant is suffering under the same thumb of patriarchy as she has been. Magda's restrictive focus on her gender identity renders her incapable of reading Hendrick's marginal status as similar to hers, so she misses the opportunity to form an alliance based on this similarity.

It is this almost simultaneous need to cover over her violent acts with a spotless facade of normalcy that ultimately prevents Magda from completely succeeding in her first parricidal chore. The fantastical deaths begin to lose their finality when Magda longs for a "strong-thewed accomplice" to help her clean up and dispose of the bodies (16). Magda vacillates between her desire to be rid of the dictates of her culture which tell her that only married, fertile woman matter and the desire to be one of those very women. She is located at the margins of her culture, but she is not always intent on centering that margin. Sometimes, she

wants to become part of the center, to be welcomed as a valuable woman by the very culture that dismisses her. It is this desire for approval that makes her observe, “he does not die so easily after all,” and returns her to the role of dutiful daughter who, if she can “unsay the bad words,” may even be granted the role of good daughter, an identity that is at least acceptable to Afrikaner culture, even though it’s not part of *Vrou en Moeder* iconography (16).

This first attempt fails because Magda still exists in both worlds, the one that places her at the margins and the one that materializes her parricidal fantasies. She desires the center but can only achieve it in terms too grisly to perpetuate. Magda’s first act of parricide does not hold because she too quickly invokes convention against the liberatory act she has just committed. Once Magda moves out of the uncanny space of the kitchen and into her father’s bedroom, the mad single mother disappears and the Valkyrie of Boer tradition takes her place. She initially locates her deed in a catalogue of conventional Afrikaner forebears (“All kinds of people have done this before me” [11]), and her terminal invocation of servile cleaning lady further undercuts the parricidal renaming of her singleness. Even though she has used the space of the kitchen to effect a bodily transformation, she still relies on patriarchal conventions to do her work for her. These weapons do succeed in permanently removing the stepmother from the narrative, but they neither get rid of Magda’s father nor convince him to locate her at the center of his own *Vrou en Moeder* ideology. It is only a matter of time before her father seeks out another woman—the black servant wife of Hendrick, Klein-Anna—to have sex with.

Before Magda tries to kill her father a second time, she retreats to the kitchen to cook up two different single women identities she hopes will be acceptable. However, she produces two contradictory results within its confines. The first time she approaches her father’s bedroom door, she has just come from the kitchen where she has seen the dishes he and Klein-Anna have left for her to wash. Standing in the passageway, she makes an appeal to his role as father by placing her daughterly needs before him. In one of the few moments in the novel when actual conversation is recorded, Magda says “Daddy” repeatedly until he finally

emerges from the bedroom (54). These gestures seem to suggest that Magda is trying to (re)place her role as servant that the dishes in the kitchen sink name her with her role as the *baas'* daughter. However, this action is not a deterrent to her father's actions because he forcibly escorts her back to her own room and exhorts her to remain there. Playing the role of daughter does not succeed. The second time Magda moves from the kitchen to the door of her father's bedroom she mimics the role of the dutiful female servant coming to summon the family to a meal. Grabbing a dinner bell from the sideboard, Magda stands once again in the passageway outside her father's bedroom and repeatedly rings it. Summoning the family to partake of nourishment is an act any good servant might perform. Rather than resist the role of servant, she embraces it, hoping that this might stop her father from consorting with Klein-Anna. She is rewarded for this acquiescent act with "a heavy blow on the head" from her father (57). This violent bloodletting makes of her pleasurable domestic act a kind of happiness that is "forever irrecoverable" (59).

Operating in the roles her culture has carved out for her undercuts Magda's power, so she goes to the kitchen a third time to search for new figures to inhabit, ones that are outside of the dominant culture:

In grotesque pink slippers I stand in the centre of the kitchen floor. . . . How can I possibly, out of the somnolence and banality of my life, out of ignorance and incapacity, whip up the menace of an outraged daughter confronting an abashed or arrogant father, a brazen or trembling servant girl? My heart is not in it, nothing has prepared me for this part. Life in the desert teaches nothing if not that all things are permissible. (39)

In the kitchen once again, Magda realizes that she needs to become something else in order to stop her father from replacing her with Klein-Anna. Once again the position of daughter, a position characterized by singleness and subservience to the father, is not an adequate figuration for her rage, for even an "outraged daughter" is not "prepared . . . for this part." However, the last line of the quote suggests that she

begins to think about the power of other marginal spaces outside of the house (“in the desert . . . all things are permissible”). Fighting against an ideology that would reduce her to “a machine with opposed thumbs that does housework,” Magda instead focuses on “quite another sense” of herself:

as a sheath, as a matrix, as protectrix of a vacant inner space. I move through the world not as a knifeblade cutting the wind, or as a tower with eyes, like my father, but as a hole, a hole with a body draped around it, the two spindly legs hanging loose at the bottom and the two bony arms flapping at the sides and the big head lolling on top. I am a hole crying to be whole. (41)

All three of these figures—sheath, matrix, and protectrix—are enveloping structures set up to protect what is inside of them. A sheath surrounds a blade, protecting its sharpness, its functionality. A matrix is a womblike substance that surrounds spaces of origination or development. A protectrix guards the leader’s space in the case of his absence or incapacity. Her body’s real function is to protect these spaces of functionality, of origination, and of incapacitated patriarchy, spaces which can each be seen as the “hole crying to be whole.” It is as this conglomeration of problematic protesting figures that Magda performs her second parricide.

The kitchen has not only functioned as a space where Magda can gain power, it also seems to suggest to her the power of marginal spaces in general; because of this, Magda approaches her second parricide from outside of the house rather than from the passageway that has so recently reinforced her servile status. However, this second act is also fraught with contradictory impulses. The gun she chooses seems a better weapon than the hatchet she used before. Ironically, she finds the gun on “the hatrack by the front door,” a space used to store such items as hats, coats and umbrellas meant to protect the farm’s inhabitants from the harshness of life in the desert (58). The gun she chooses, a “Lee-Enfield . . . graduated to 2000 yards,” was the weapon of choice for the British who fought against the Afrikaners in the Boer War (58). Even though it is her father’s weapon, it resonates with ambiguity because of its origins. She

finds the “.303 cartridges with sharp bronze noses” that are the appropriate ammunition for the gun “in the little drawer of the hatrack where they have lain for years among odd buttons and pins” (58). The domestic location of these bullets would seem to belie their function, but, instead, they contribute to the paradoxical construction of Magda as “an implausible figure, an armed lady” (59). Thus equipped, she moves outside to her father’s bedroom window to commit the deed.

Magda’s agency again vacillates in this act of murder as it had in her previous attempt. Initially, she maintains control:

I slide the barrel of the rifle between the curtains. Resting the stock on the windowsill I elevate the gun until it points very definitely toward the far ceiling of the room and, closing my eyes, pull the trigger. (61)

She is the possessor of the subject position in all of the actions in this passage. She also makes clear that her aim is not the murder of anyone because she points the gun away from the two figures in the bed. She is simply trying to scare the room’s inhabitants into foregoing their liaison. While marveling at the incredible noise of the gun, its acrid fumes, and the screams of terror emanating from her father’s bedroom, however, Magda’s agency begins to vacillate:

The bolt comes back, the spent case tinkles at my feet, the second cartridge, cool, alien, slips into the breech. . . . I elevate the barrel, close my eyes, and pull the trigger. At the same instant the rifle jerks out of my hands. . . . The whole rifle leaves me, surprisingly. It snakes through the curtains and is gone. I rest on my knees empty-handed. (61)

It is not she who reloads the rifle; it seems that the weapon and its bullets perform those deeds themselves. She is the one who takes aim, but her blind triggering lurches her agency out of her own hands and locates responsibility for this cartridge’s trajectory in the rifle. Once again, she has created a figure of single female power (“an armed lady”) who is capable of initiating the parricide but who is not strong enough to maintain agency throughout (59). And, just like the last set of mur-

ders, her actions leave her without further access to the weapon she has chosen, making it useless for any further defenses she might wish to make. This second cartridge, however, does succeed in mortally wounding her father.

In this second parricide, Magda starts inside, in the kitchen, but must move outside of the farmhouse to complete her deed. By standing at the window, “[r]esting the stock on the windowsill,” she locates her new parricide precisely on the threshold between the house and the farmyard (61). The window becomes a newly contentious space from which to act. It places her outside of farm culture but within a marginal space powerful enough to enact her grisly deed. When the gun falls inside and out of her reach, this suggests that this kind of weapon is a tool of those still inside patriarchy and thus will not fully serve her desire to step outside. Unlike last time, Magda does not worry about tidying up her mess before the servants arrive; in fact, this act of parricide has been witnessed by Hendrick, the very servant whose discovery she feared in her earlier actions. On her way to shoot the gun into her father’s bedroom window, she hears a “whining and growling and panting” sound coming from a figure, Hendrick, “[i]n the shadow against the kitchen door” (60). His specific location in relation to the kitchen—at its threshold as if he is ready to enter—is important to note because, in the lengthy ensuing time between Magda’s father’s death and his eventual return, Hendrick uses the space of the kitchen to effect his own revolt against Magda’s newly acquired power.¹⁰

Magda’s quest for a livable single woman’s body points to the limits of global feminism’s usefulness for the anti-apartheid movement. The inclusion of Hendrick in both the parricidal scenes serves as a nexus of Coetzee’s allegorization of Afrikaner heterosexual hegemony and the politics of anti-apartheid struggle. At this stage in the novel it seems clear that Magda has succeeded in killing her father; however, she cannot read the servants as fellow marginal revolutionaries, instead, she can only see them in racial terms. When Hendrick starts wearing her father’s clothes, she reads this as a cooptation of her too tenuous power rather than a form of resistance similar to hers. Hendrick, too, only reads Magda in gendered terms, seeing her as in need of masculine domination, not as

an ally. They are two transgressive agents in the same marginal space but are unable to recognize the commonalities of their separate transgressions. Magda is unable to reconstitute the differences between herself and the servants into a strategic alliance and forge a community because her feminist politics have been too exclusively focused on the gender inequities in her relationship with her father. Magda's emancipation project, like the work of many Anglo-American feminists that was circulating in South Africa in the 1970s, fails because it is singularly focused on being a woman, rather than considering the multiple and often conflicting identities that people have.

Despite this failure, there are two ways in which Magda's parricidal project has been successful. First, Magda has successfully deconstructed the *Vrou en Moeder* iconography dictating the role of white women in South African culture, demonstrating the uninhabitable aspects of these so-called "livable" bodies. Heterosexual hegemony has been exposed as partial and overturnable, it is just that Magda has not been able to accomplish a complete transformation. Second, Magda's productive use of the kitchen emphasizes the subversive political potential some cultural spaces can foster. I have been arguing that an abject member of society is more likely to effect a political change if she performs hyperbolic reversals in an uncanny space. In doing this work, Magda is participating in a politics of disidentification, a way of thinking that is as important to "the rearticulation of democratic contestation" as identificatory practices have been (Butler 4). Her disidentifications serve to "reconceptualize which bodies matter, and which bodies are yet to emerge as critical matters of concern" (Butler 4).

Despite these successes, *In the Heart of the Country* ends on a note of deleterious optimism. After Hendrick and Klein-Anna leave, the father returns once again—"perhaps my father is not dead after all"—but his power over Magda is substantially reduced (122). Family in the end is a triad of mother-father-child, but these positions are interchangeable in two bodies. Magda is still the daughter, but she is also the mother who changes her father's "old napkin . . . and pins on a new one" (137). Her father still demands that she take care of him, but his demands emanate from the helplessness of his decrepit body rather than from the sono-

rous harshness of his commandments. In old age, Magda still identifies herself primarily in gendered terms, (“a maiden lady,” “a desiccated old maid,” Cinderella’s “ugly sister,”) but she hopes she will have the courage to die a “crazy old queen in the middle of nowhere” (122–139). The kitchen has disappeared from the narrative, for it is not a subversive enough space to completely erase Afrikaner patriarchy’s “totalizing boundaries” (Bhabha 300). Now Magda lives outside, in a “petrified garden,” where she maintains she is “corrupted to the bone with the beauty of this forsaken world” (139). This optimistically suggests to the reader that the South African landscape holds subversive political potential; however, the “sweet . . . closing plangencies” of the novel retain Magda’s devotion to a dangerously singular identity politics (“*my* own voice,” “*my* own destiny”) that does not consider the “ghostly brown figures” haunting the margins of her beautiful, forsaken world (139; emphasis added).

Notes

- 1 My thanks to Enda Duffy and Candace Ward for their generous and insightful feedback on earlier versions of this article.
- 2 My theoretical apparatus for analyzing Magda’s quest for a livable single women’s identity draws, in part, on Judith Butler’s concept of livable and unlivable bodies in *Bodies that Matter*. Livable bodies are the sexual identifications condoned by heterosexual hegemony and thus dominate the center of the culture; the unlivable bodies are the disavowed sexual identifications that are relegated to the margins, the abjected spaces, of the culture. South African farm culture constructed unmarried women as abject subjects.
- 3 Feminist critics of *In the Heart of the Country* include Alison Lockhart, L.V. Graham, Chiara Briganti, and Sheila Roberts.
- 4 My sources for the history of feminism in South Africa include Iris Berger, Hilda Bernstein, and Marianne Cornevin.
- 5 My sources for information on *Vrou en Moeder* ideology include T. Dunbar Moodie and Susan VanZanten Gallagher.
- 6 In “A Feminine Story: *In the Heart of the Country*” Susan VanZanten Gallagher briefly summarizes the role assigned to women in Afrikaner national consciousness and then reads Magda as “one of the ‘mothers’ of South Africa” (84). Although her subsequent close reading of Magda locates her as a single woman, Gallagher reads Magda’s singleness as “the feminine absence that completes the masculine presence” (96). This configures Magda’s identity as a reaction to patriarchy rather than an assertion of feminist individuality (96).

- 7 Two visual spectacles of the *Vrou en Moeder* iconography that are among the most popular tourist attractions in South Africa are the Vrouemonument, or The National Women's Monument, that was opened near Blomfontein in 1913, and the Voortrekker Monument, unveiled in Pretoria in 1948 (Gallagher 85–89). There are numerous websites, in Afrikaans and in English, commemorating these tributes to Afrikaner history.
- 8 Geographical theorists whose work has contributed to my thinking on the function of space in identity formation include Michael Keith and Steve Pile, Edward Soja, and Doreen Massey.
- 9 Bhabha goes on to note that for “the migrants, the minorities, the diasporic,” the city functions as a liminal space with political potential: “it is the city which provides the space in which emergent identifications and new social movements of the people are played out. It is there that, in our time, the perplexity of the living is most acutely expressed” (320).
- 10 Both Hendrick and his wife, Klein-Anna, use the kitchen to either change their status or radically reconfigure the power dynamics at work on the farm. For example, in the kitchen Hendrick secures work for his wife, lounges while waiting for the *baas* to die, becomes the new patriarch of the farm, and rapes Magda. It is in the kitchen, too, that Klein-Anna seduces (or is seduced by) Magda's father.

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