

**“Does he have it in him to be the woman?”:
The Performance of Displacement
in J. M. Coetzee’s *Disgrace*
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This “being a man” and this “being a woman” are internally unstable affairs. (Judith Butler “Gender is Burning”)

Saying . . . is performative, interlocutory . . . a relational process rather than a fixed relationship; it is movement, not stasis. (James Meffan and Kim L. Worthington on Emmanuel Levinas “Ethics before Politics: J. M. Coetzee’s *Disgrace*”)

In South African author J. M. Coetzee’s *Disgrace* (1999), the waiting that Brian May calls “an ethical alternative to empire” (414) and that informs South African fiction of the 1980s, including Coetzee’s *Waiting for the Barbarians* (1980) and *Life & Times of Michael K* (1983), has come to an end, and the reader is positioned squarely in the “now” beyond the “not yet” of the interregnum, as Nadine Gordimer calls it, that characterizes those earlier works. *Disgrace* is situated “in this place, at this time” (112), South Africa at the current post-apartheid moment, and focuses on the disgrace of David Lurie, a white South African academic who is forced to resign from his university teaching position after he engages in a questionably consensual sexual relationship with a young female student. After his resignation, Lurie leaves Cape Town to live with his daughter Lucy in the Eastern Cape and to work at the Animal Welfare League with Bev Shaw, a middle-aged woman whose job includes euthanizing some of South Africa’s superfluous pet and livestock population. In terms of Coetzee’s literary opus, the lesbian character of Lucy is the culmination of both the Magistrate and Michael K’s modes of resistance in the 1980s era texts mentioned above. As the feminine principle that denies male determinism, she is a woman who works for change

from within existing structures, a gardener who, unlike her predecessor Michael K, is able to partake of the tentative “bread of freedom” that she grows on the land she shares with Petrus, a black man who helps her care for the dogs she kennels. Such “freedom” is complex and uncertain, and when Lucy is raped by three black men she proclaims her decision not to report the crime a “private matter” (112). As an experience about which she will share no confession, her silence ends when she discovers that she is pregnant with a child she refuses to abort. Therefore, *Disgrace* leaves us with two aspects that were impossible for Coetzee to depict more than a decade earlier: a living (yet co-opted) garden and a living (yet unborn) child.

At its core, I read *Disgrace* as a text that engages with the concept of performance as a specific kind of narrative displacement, one that is dialogic and allows Coetzee to pose questions to his audience about any individual’s ability to experience the alterity of the other. My reading of *Disgrace* involves an examination of two specific performances, David Lurie’s and J. M. Coetzee’s, as ultimately illustrative of David Lurie’s realization—however tentative—that one can never “be” the other, even if one can “write” the other into being. But there is also a third performance that takes place outside of the scope of *Disgrace*, J. M. Coetzee’s performative reading of the Elizabeth Costello Lectures, and I will foreground my discussion of *Disgrace* with a brief analysis of these lectures, particularly *The Lives of Animals*. While much has been written about the alterity of animals in *Disgrace* and *The Lives of Animals* (see Attridge and Graham), no critic has examined the performative aspects of these works as a dual exercise in the enactment of trauma experienced in the lives of others—both for David Lurie in *Disgrace* via the opera he writes, and for Coetzee via Elizabeth Costello, the elderly, feminist novelist whose voice argues in *The Lives of Animals*, Coetzee’s 1997–98 Princeton Tanner Lectures, that the meat industry in the industrialized West is analogous to the murder of Jews during the Holocaust. In *Disgrace*, because he is present but “offstage,” locked in the bathroom during his daughter’s rape, Lurie attempts to imagine, through the writing of an operatic performance, the trauma experienced by Lucy. For Coetzee, present through persistent dialogic ques-

tions asked by the narrative voice, particularly “does [David] have it in him to be the woman?” (160), yet also “offstage” in the metafiction, female bodies in *Disgrace* allow for a narrative performance about the limitations of the sympathetic imagination. After his daughter’s rape, David embarks upon the perhaps impossible quest to embody the other—in the form of black South Africans, women, and animals—through the medium of a specific staged performance, an opera he struggles to write (but tellingly never completes) for Byron’s onetime lover, Teresa.

I.

Displacement, claims Trinh T. Minh-Ha, is a mode of resistance in that it “involves the invention of new forms of subjectivities . . . of relationships, which also implies the continuous renewal of values to which one refers in fabricating the tools of resistance” (217). The displacement that characterizes *Disgrace* is performative. It serves to shed light on subject positions that the author does not occupy by presenting the interaction of multiple subjectivities as performed dialogue between not only the characters within the novel, but also between the inquisitive third-person narrative voice and the reader, who must attempt to construct some answers. Coetzee, therefore, writes dialogically in the Bakhtinian sense, as one who refuses to claim the narrative position of the monologic insider, the textual presence that has access to contested notions of the truth. Indeed, in discussing Dostoevsky’s status as a practitioner of the dialogic novel, Coetzee makes a case for the importance of the performative in terms of dialogism:

writing dialogically means writing in a manner which respects the knowledge of all who participate in the fiction. It’s a notion that comes quite naturally to drama but doesn’t come so naturally to long works of fiction, because in drama there is a natural dialogue between the characters. In fiction . . . there tends to be some controlling position, either latent or patent, someone who knows what’s going on in a way that the characters don’t. (Wachtel 44)

While Coetzee does not write drama, most of his novels do refuse a controlling narrative position and raise questions about embodiment as a kind of performance—acting as an alternate subjectivity—that is potentially possible through imagined identification with the suffering of the other. In *Disgrace*, David Lurie attempts to imagine the subjectivity of his daughter after her rape, a task that is revealed as what I call “dialogic drag” by Coetzee’s performance of the narrative position of Elizabeth Costello in *Elizabeth Costello* (2003), a work that comprises various lectures presented by Coetzee and attributed to the fictional, feminist novelist for whom the collection is named. Such attempts at imagined identification with the other, we learn from Elizabeth Costello’s example, will always result in a performance that parodies the “real.” Included in *Elizabeth Costello* is *The Lives of Animals* (1999) a work that, because of its separate publication as a philosophical text/novella immediately preceded the publication of *Disgrace* and because of its implicit/explicit animal rights narrative, is often read as a “companion piece” to that novel.

In *The Lives of Animals*, the pair of lectures she presents at the fictional Appleton College, the female persona of Elizabeth Costello—“a Coetzeean figure” (Poyner 73)—compares the Holocaust in Germany to the treatment of animals in industrialized societies. The character of Elizabeth Costello has also been performed by Coetzee in other lectures as well including the 1996 Ben Belitt Lecture at Bennington College, “What is Realism?”; the 1998 Una’s Lecture at the University of California, Berkeley, “The Novel in Africa”; and the 2002 Nexus Conference Lecture in the Netherlands, “Elizabeth Costello and the Problem of Evil.” In October of 2003, just after Coetzee was awarded the Nobel Prize in literature, he gave the Troy Lecture at the University of Massachusetts, Amherst. His reading, “At the Gate,” along with the other Costello lectures listed above, are constituents of the “Eight Lessons” that comprise *Elizabeth Costello* (2003). In each of these narratives, Costello/Coetzee explicitly acknowledges the role of performance in the construction and presentation of non-fictional lectures by a fictional persona through a non-fictional author about works of fiction. As Costello tells fictional Nigerian novelist Emmanuel Egundu

after he presents an exposition of the role of the body in uniquely African oral literature, “what you seem to be demanding is not just a voice but a performance: a living actor before you, performing your text” (“The Novel” 13). Furthermore, Coetzee addresses the author’s role as a performer of the narrative by disrupting his own presentation of Elizabeth Costello’s argument in “What is Realism?” by claiming that despite the fact that “generally speaking it is not a good idea to interrupt the narrative too often,” he must skip certain aspects of her story in the interest of time: “the skips are not part of the text,” he claims, “they are part of the performance” (68) in the context of a postmodern moment when, according to the voice of Costello, “[writers] are just performers, speaking our parts” (71).

In terms of performance, such interruptions function as a narrative *Verfremdungseffekt* or alienation-effect characteristic of Brechtian theatre:

in performance the actor ‘alienates’ rather than impersonates her character, she “quotes” or demonstrates the character’s behavior instead of identifying with it. Brecht theorizes that if the performer remains *outside* the character’s feelings, the audience may also and thus freely analyze and form opinions about the play’s “fable.” (Diamond 45, my emphasis)

In the context of the Costello lectures, the fable, a story that literally teaches lessons, is constructed as eight “lessons” in *Elizabeth Costello*, but the “moral” can only be determined by the audience’s dialogic engagement with the issues that Costello raises; Costello/Coetzee does not provide easy answers but posits various and often objectionable options, thereby establishing grounds for debate and discussion. In these lessons, the act of embodiment is treated as performance, and the acknowledgement of the mimicry inherent in the performance of another gender—Costello as Coetzee—is also an acknowledgement of the limitations of the sympathetic imagination, the enactment that will never be “the real” but will always be, at best, a parody.

Coetzee discussed the concept of parody in October of 2003, right after he won the Nobel Prize in Literature. He delivered another Costello lec-

ture at the University of Massachusetts, where I was a graduate student. The lecture was the final lesson from *Elizabeth Costello*, “The Gate,” a narrative in which the eponymous Costello finds herself in a purgatory of sorts, a self-conscious Kafkaesque “literary theme park” (208) (as the narrator claims, “Kafka reduced and flattened to a parody” [209]) within which she examines and critiques the obviousness of the performance that takes place all around her, asking “why is the make-up so poor? Why is the whole thing not done better?” (208). Coetzee’s awareness of the parody that he enacts when he performs Elizabeth Costello was brought to the forefront when Coetzee stood before his audience in a packed auditorium and read Costello’s admission that “I do not give shows . . . I’m not an entertainer” (214). The audience was, no doubt, entertained by Coetzee’s reading, but the statement, made by Costello via Coetzee (or vice versa) created a space for discussion of the role of the writer, a space for dialogic interaction. Furthermore, Coetzee’s various Costello readings as performance raise questions about the role of performance in his other works, as well as about the role that performance can play in gaining an understanding—without out usurping the voice—of an alternate identity. For Coetzee reading Costello, that performance takes the form of a male author voicing the narrative of a female author to whom Coetzee has attributed many of his own characteristics—particularly vegetarianism, a quality that is prominent in *The Lives of Animals* as well as in David’s examination of his daughter’s rape in *Disgrace*. Whenever Coetzee speaks before an audience, he tends to tell the story of Costello, of her speeches before other, fictional audiences. Where is Coetzee’s voice in all of this, one wonders? I contend that it is the dialogic voice that exists behind the veneer of the woman who raises topics with which the audience must engage, who asks questions that the audience is compelled to answer. This particular kind of uniquely Coetzeean performance is a tool that I have termed “dialogic drag.”

Judith Butler claims that “drag is a site of a certain ambivalence, one which reflects the more general situation of being implicated in the regimes of power by which one is constituted and hence being implicated in the very regime one opposes” (“Gender” 125). As a form of

displacement and renegotiation of power, she claims that drag is not always a form of ridicule nor is it merely a way of “passing” as something that one is not. Furthermore, and perhaps most important to a study of *Disgrace* and the Costello lectures, drag is not exclusively the realm of male, homosexual performance. The performance of a gendered position, however, is an attempt to understand the unintelligible aspects—or alterity—of the other, and as such illustrates an exercise in the enactment of the sympathetic imagination. In the case of the Costello Lectures, “drag” is theoretical, a dialogic device that allows the author to appear as himself but to perform a voice through which he can raise questions and, possibly, incite controversy and debate without providing any concrete answers—that is, without occupying the position of monologic insider. In the Costello Lectures, Coetzee can “be” the woman, but only because that woman is a male-authored creation, a self-conscious parody of womanhood, and a dialogic catalyst for discussion, particularly discussion about one’s ability to know or be the Other, the very dilemma that unsettles David Lurie in *Disgrace*.

II.

In *Disgrace*, David Lurie, a “representative of the dislocated post-apartheid white writer” (Poyner 68), is displaced by virtue of his status as white, academic, and male in a political context that no longer treats such attributes as definitive. Further, by virtue of an illicit sexual relationship with a young female student named Melanie, Lurie is displaced (and disgraced) when he is driven from a university that will not “in this day and age” (44)—post-apartheid South Africa—tolerate such behavior, especially given Lurie’s refusal to grant a confession of any wrongdoing despite his admission of guilt, that he “became a servant of Eros” (52). But after Lucy’s rape on her smallholding in the Eastern Cape, it becomes impossible to view David’s interaction with Melanie as mere seduction, his treatment of her as anything other than the “abuse” (53) of which he is accused by a female member of the university disciplinary committee. In *Disgrace*, women’s bodies signify as sites of displacement; for the black men who rape her, Lucy’s white female body symbolizes the land from which they have been dispossessed. For David, Melanie’s

biracial female body offers the opportunity to symbolically reclaim not only his youth, but also his authoritarian position at a university where the white male professor is marginalized by increasing demands of gender and racial diversification. In the case of both women, one runs the risk of reading their bodies on a purely symbolic level, as metaphors that inform the men who enact varying degrees of violence upon them. Without the overt trauma of the second event—overt in the sense that David is locked in a bathroom and set on fire while Lucy is raped offstage and overt also in the problematic sense that Lucy is white and her attackers are black—the more implicit trauma of the “seduction” of Melanie by David might be overlooked.

In the Freudian understanding, according to Ariella Azoulay, “trauma . . . is given its meaning only when it is experienced a second time, only in retroactive fashion when it is articulated and told to an addressee” (34–35), or, I would contend, only when it is re-enacted and thereby performed before an audience. Azoulay argues that in *Disgrace*, Lucy’s rape (the second rape) becomes the narrative articulation of Melanie’s rape (the first rape). It is the second violation that reveals the trauma of the first, a trauma often unrecognized by many of Coetzee’s critics who, according to Lucy Graham, dismiss the incident between Lurie and Melanie as an affair. Such an interpretation is understandable given that the narrative of the “relationship” is written through Lurie as a focalizer, but according to Graham, “although Lurie protests to the contrary, the act he commits is rape” (7). Whether Lurie protests is questionable; it is perhaps more accurate to say that no character in the novel, as well as few of Coetzee’s critics, questions the narrative voice in its biased assertions. For example, the narrative interpretation of Melanie’s smile as “sly rather than shy” (11) should be suspect given David’s desire to view Melanie as complicit in their sexual encounters. Only by recognizing parallels between the two young women, the first non-white, the second white, and the parallels between the white David Lurie and the black rapists in the latter part of the novel is the reader able to recognize David’s earlier encounters with Melanie as instances of violation. Similarly, the performative aspects of *Disgrace*, the later text, can be revealed by a brief analysis of the overt performance

of female enactment in the Costello lectures in general, especially in the earlier *Lives of Animals*.

Disgrace has been treated harshly by some critics both for its treatment of the post-apartheid status of the “new” South Africa and for Coetzee’s creation of David Lurie, a character with whom readers feel unable to empathize. For example, in a 2003 article in *Scrutiny*², Colin Bower claims, “I simply cannot see how . . . David Lurie can be taken as anything less than repellent,” and, within a twenty-page critical examination of Coetzee’s work, ironically finds Lurie (as well as the rest of Coetzee’s opus) “quite unworthy of any sort of critical attention” (14). According to Salman Rushdie, the novel’s damning weakness is the inability of its characters to understand one another: “Lurie does not understand Lucy . . . and she finds his deeds beyond her;” furthermore, “whites don’t understand blacks, and the blacks aren’t interested in understanding the whites” (A19). However contentious Rushdie’s claim may be—one could argue that the only character who does not understand anyone else is David Lurie since the novel is focalized through his point of view—a lack of understanding in “this place, at this time” is the necessary product of a postcolonial and post-apartheid narrative about shifting and renegotiated power in an historical moment fraught with various racially and sexually determined displacements. In addition, such critical dismissals can be read as evidence of a refusal by the critic to engage dialogically with the dilemma of identification posed by Coetzee.

In *Disgrace*, this dilemma is raised when the third-person narrative voice asks of David, “does he have it in him to be the woman?” (160) as he attempts, unsuccessfully, to imagine Lucy’s rape from her perspective. David, seeming to recognize—however obscurely—the animal rights argument posed by Elizabeth Costello in *The Lives of Animals*, does ultimately empathize with the bodily suffering his daughter endures by unconsciously placing the rape of women in an analogous relationship to the slaughter of livestock animals. After Lucy’s rape, David forms a bond with two Persian sheep that Petrus plans to slaughter, and he is disinclined to eat them because “suddenly and without reason, their lot has become important to him” (126). While David never actively par-

ticipates in a vegetarian ethic, his sensibility with regard to the lives of animals is greatly altered after Lucy is raped, and this change in perception results from a respect for the being of animals regardless of whether or not David can access the animal's interiority. If Elizabeth Costello in *The Lives of Animals* is Coetzee's performative parody of an academic, vegetarian woman, who asserts the highly problematic claim that as a writer of fiction, she does have it in her to *be* an animal ("if I can think my way into the existence of a being who has never existed, then I can think my way into the existence of a bat or a chimpanzee or an oyster" 35), then *Disgrace* is Coetzee's critique of the vanity of such an assertion. At best, as David discovers—whether he is consciously aware of his discovery or not—one can mimic or parody the subjectivity of the other, but to claim that one can actually be or "think [one's] way into the existence" of another is arrogant indeed. And Coetzee, through the character of Susan Moebius, makes this point in another Costello lecture entitled "What is Realism?" When Elizabeth's son John tells Susan that in her fiction, "my mother has been a man . . . she has also been a dog," Susan counters, "it's just mimicry. Women are good at mimicry, better than men. At parody, even" (73). If we subvert this claim and take Susan at her word, then Coetzee's embodiment of Elizabeth Costello can be read as the parody that must inform David's attempts to "be" Lucy in *Disgrace*.

Much recent criticism of *Disgrace*, with its attention to the role of secular confession in a world "in the absence of grace" (Graham 4) where "animals and art provide the substance of Lurie's new existence" (Attridge 108), can be read in defense of its bleak and seemingly negative portrayal of South Africa. Jane Poyner reads the novel "as an allegory of the Truth [and Reconciliation] Commission within the framework of (secular) confession" (67), while Mike Marais, James Meffan, and Kim L. Worthington tease out a discourse of Levinas's concept of alterity as it pertains to Coetzee's treatment of the other. Marais defends Coetzee's respect for the alterity of the other by claiming, "in reflecting on its failure to represent the other, the text reflects on the excession of the other. The point here is that the text's failure to instantiate the other is also a failure to *eliminate* the other" (60–61). Meffan and Worthington argue

that Lurie's act of self-reflective doubt, inherent when the narrator asks, "does he have it in him to be the woman?" may be ethically productive, a "question whose terms recognize another's perhaps insurmountable alterity" (144). The essential point extrapolated by Coetzee's critics from the perspective of Levinasian philosophy deals with the notion that one can never fully comprehend the other and must respect the alterity—the insurmountable difference—of the other despite the impossibility of imagined identification with the other. Such respect begins with self-questioning inherently located in the act of "Saying": "the Spirit is not the Said, it is the Saying which goes from the Same to the Other, without suppressing the difference. It paves a way for itself where there is nothing in common" (Levinas 63). But Levinas's notion of alterity is applicable only to other humans and fails to encompass the various non-human others that populate Coetzee's narratives.

Various critics read the role of animals in *Disgrace* as the means by which David Lurie begins to learn to love the "absolute other" (Attridge 114) by taking responsibility for the bodies of dead dogs despite the fact, as Lucy Graham claims, "that Lurie's work in the service of dead dogs is not redemptive in itself" (11). Attridge claims that *Disgrace* is not so much about postcolonial South Africa as it is about the cultural colonization of South Africa by the West. According to Attridge, the novel is a portrayal of "a new global age of performance indicators and outcomes measurement, of bench marking and quality assurance, of a widespread prurience that's also an unfeeling puritanism" (105). Louise Bethlehem points to the theatrical way that the text deals with these conflicting notions of prurience and puritanism when she says, "if the rape of Lucy takes place *offstage* . . . then so too does the *enactment* of her sexual pleasure" (22, my emphasis). Such a claim, while it describes the absence of Lucy's narrative perspective, her confession of either trauma or joy, also alludes to the ways in which the text is staged by Coetzee and performed by the characters that populate it.

Furthermore, David, in his attempts to imagine Lucy's rape from her perspective, constructs a fictionalized narrative of her experience—as she claims, "you behave as if everything I do is part of the story of your life" (198)—that runs up against his work on Byron, "something for

the stage. . . . Words and music. Characters talking and singing” (63). In fact, *Disgrace* is filled with references to various theaters, performances, and enactments, stagings of narratives that are never completed and that ultimately parody the truth of what they attempt to portray. When Lurie asks Melanie about her studies, she tells him that she is majoring in “stagecraft and design. I’m going for a diploma in theatre” (14). And when he watches her rehearsing the play *Sunset at the Globe Salon*, “a comedy of the new South Africa set in a hairdressing salon in Hillbrow, Johannesburg” (23), he becomes the unknown voyeur of her enactment of a character within the play within Coetzee’s staging of David’s narrative. David is drawn to the character, the “apparition on the stage” (25) that Melanie becomes as he watches her perform. The play, in David’s opinion, is ridiculous: “all the coarse old prejudices [are] brought into the light of day and washed away in gales of laughter” (23), and when he goes to see the performance at the end of the novel, “he finds the play, with its crude humor and nakedly political intent, as hard to endure as before” (191). Humor and humility, however, are what he ultimately depends on, as he uses Lucy’s banjo—an instrument created and first played by black Africans (see Conway 135)—to hybridize and shape his own historical narrative of the middle-aged Teresa, an Italian aristocrat who “looks more like a peasant” (181), more, in fact, like Bev Shaw than Melanie.

The transition from writing about Byron for whom he can find words to writing about Teresa, “young, greedy, willful, petulant” (181) for whom he cannot, takes place after his altercation with Melanie, a woman he imagines as similarly young, willful, and demanding. But the focus of his theatrical endeavour shifts again to Teresa in middle age after he meets Bev Shaw, the “remarkably unattractive” (82), middle-aged woman who euthanizes South Africa’s unwanted animals. Initially glib about his feelings for animals and his consumption of them (“do I like animals? I eat them so I suppose I must like them” [81]), David ultimately becomes completely “gripped by what happens in the theatre” (143) of the Animal Welfare League, the staging and dramatic enactment of a kind of ritualized and honorable death for animals—mainly dogs—at the hands of Bev Shaw. Of Teresa and, I would argue, of Bev

the narrator asks, “can he find it in his heart to love this plain, ordinary woman?” (182), a question that provides a kind of answer to the earlier question after Lucy’s rape. While David may not ever be able to “be” the woman, he may possibly come to love a woman who is ordinary, not young, and who may be able to guide him in a productive direction. He realizes the limits of imagined identification with Lucy and comes to accept that the best he can do or the closest he can approximate is a kind of performance, a mimetic parody of an unrepresentable alterity: “this is how it must be from here on: Teresa giving voice to her lover, and [David], the man in the ransacked house, giving voice to Teresa” (183)—while Coetzee gives voice to him. The voice of the man (Byron) is mediated through the voice of the woman (Teresa) as it is mediated through the voice of man (David) in *Disgrace*. While David wants to let Teresa tell her story of Byron, the story she can tell in his opera is still only the story that he writes for her, the narrative he imagines being performed by another woman, an actor, who will be neither Teresa nor his idea of her. That David is never able to complete his opera illustrates both a failure of the sympathetic imagination and, conversely, a testament to an unarticulated understanding that the alterity of the other, in this case Teresa, is never representable, never successfully performed.

In a moment that harkens back to the seeming ridiculousness David critiques in *Sunset at the Globe Salon*, he realizes the impossibility of attempting to voice Teresa in the context of the South African here and now. When he realizes his own apparent absurdity as he “sits among the dogs singing to himself” (212) while three boys from D Village watch him over the fence, he questions whether it would be permissible to allow an animal into the play to voice its own story. After all, a narrative of trauma inflicted upon animal bodies, “who come nowhere” (73) on the list of South Africa’s priorities after the fall of apartheid, is more relevant, certainly, than the story of Teresa’s lost love: “would he dare . . . bring a dog into the piece, allow it to loose its own lament to the heavens between the strophes of lovelorn Teresa’s? Why not? Surely, in a work that will never be performed, all things are permitted?” (215). Such questions are characteristic of the text after Lucy’s rape as the narrative perspective shifts from a voice of relative certainty to a dialogic

voice that challenges the validity and veracity of David's choices, beliefs, and conceptions of the self. This questioning, according to Meffan and Worthington, is perhaps ethically productive because it points to David's realization of the limits of his own perception, but "what will gall the reader, and probably incite new criticism of Coetzee's quietism," they claim, "is his refusal in *Disgrace* to do more than suggest the need to ask new questions of the self" (146). For the most part, however, the questions that the narrative asks are not questions that David asks of himself, but are instead questions the third-person narrator asks about David's position in the narrative. From the narrator's question, "does he have it in him to be the woman?" follow others. After asking, "can he find it in his heart to love this plain, ordinary woman [Teresa in middle age]?" (182), the narrator later asks, "how can he ever explain," in the context of the current historical moment, "what Teresa and her lover have done to deserve being brought back to this world?" (212). But one of the few questions that David asks of himself is about animals and about his revulsion to eating meat after Lucy's rape, and it is this question that seemingly references Coetzee's performance of Costello in *The Lives of Animals* and that leads to ethical respect for the other despite Lurie's inability to "be" the other.

III.

The colonizing impulse to treat people like animals is apparent throughout Coetzee's opus from his first work of fiction *Dusklands* (1974) in which Jacobus claims "death is as obscure to [the bushman] as to an animal" (80). Coetzee deconstructs such othering in *Boyhood* (1997) when the autobiographical character of John becomes averse to the aesthetic of meat and in *Life & Times of Michael K* when Michael's hunger for the ethical begins with the slaughter of a goat and ends with a purely vegetarian—albeit minimal—mode of consumption. In *Disgrace*, when Petrus tethers two sheep to a bare patch of ground days before he plans to slaughter them, David becomes agitated and advocates for their removal to a place where they might graze. When he ponders the bond that has formed between himself and the sheep, the narrative lets the reader into David's thoughts: "do I have to change, *he thinks?* Do I have

to become like Bev Shaw?” (126, my emphasis). Earlier in the novel, we learn that Lucy is a longtime vegetarian who “refuses to touch meat” (121), but David’s aversion to meat begins to take shape, for reasons he cannot fully understand, only after Lucy is raped.

When she asks him if he has changed his mind about the way he feels about animals, he claims, “no, I have not changed my ideas. . . . Nevertheless, in this case I am disturbed. I *can’t say why*” (127, my emphasis). It is David’s inability to say what changes his feelings for animals that is significant in terms of performance and identification. Being unable to articulate is also being unable to speak for, being unable to voice the suffering and trauma of the other; the connection is not imagined, is not Costello’s arrogant claim that she “can think [her] way into the existence of a bat or a chimpanzee or an oyster” (35). The connection is visceral, felt, quite literally, in the gut. It is a physical reaction to suffering, not an intellectualized exercise in mimesis; it is the bodily realization that one cannot “be” the other, but that empathy is possible regardless. When David does eat the mutton at Petrus’s party, he tells himself that he will “ask forgiveness afterwards” (131). Despite the fact that David cannot say what brings about this particular disturbance, the connections between the bodies of women and animals are apparent within the text; David, therefore, may not be able to “be” the woman—his daughter, Teresa, or Melanie—but he seems to be able, at least on a physical level, to empathize with the trauma inflicted on women through rape by recognizing, through his body in the form of its revulsion to meat, the trauma inflicted on animals through slaughter. In a rhetorical context, women are treated “like meat” when they are raped, a metaphor that underscores David’s subsequent relationships with animals who literally become meat when they are killed.

Of this connection, Carol J. Adams asks in *The Sexual Politics of Meat*, “what connects being a receptacle and being a piece of meat, being entered and being eaten?” and answers, “if you are a piece of meat, you are subject to a knife, to implemental violence” (54). Lucy articulates the connection between woman, animal, and meat when she confronts David about his similarity to the men who raped her:

You are a man, you ought to know. When you have sex with someone strange—when you trap her, hold her down, get her under you, put all your weight on her—isn't it a bit like killing? Pushing the knife in; exiting afterwards, leaving the body behind covered in blood—doesn't it feel like murder, like getting away with murder? (158)

David, despite his inability to make the connection between his rape of Melanie and this rape of Lucy, can identify with the rapists and also employs the language of consumption when he imagines how the men must have felt as they raped Lucy and “drank up her fear” (160). In terms of rape, the body of woman becomes so closely elided with the rhetoric of meat that the animal, according to Adams, becomes an “absent referent” because “animals in name and body are made absent *as animals* for meat to exist” (40). In *Disgrace*, David's question to himself about whether he must change and become like Bev does two extremely productive things. First, within the context of the novel, it illustrates a shift (or at the very least the potential for a shift) in David's thinking about Bev in particular and women in general. If he is inclined to be more “like Bev”—and by being disturbed by the slaughter of sheep, he has become more like her (whatever this may mean) than he may be prepared to admit—then he may be more inclined to be guided by a woman's compassion than “enriched” (56) by a physical relationship with her. Second, he restores the absent referent of the animal to the text and, through the animal, can form an empathetic identification with the woman—or at least with Lucy, who has been treated like an animal by a group of people—black South African men—who have, in turn, historically been treated like animals within the context of South African colonial history. David can give up the quest to perform Teresa and continue, instead, to work with Bev Shaw in the service of animals.

The body of the animal, then, in particular the body of the dog that David “sacrifices” at the end of the narrative is a body, not a symbolic representation of Lucy or of any of the other characters in the novel. While David's “giving up” of the animal can be read as his “giving up” of his daughter, it is through the dog himself that David learns to give

without expecting anything in return. David can love the dog because he has accepted responsibility for the dog as a being inherently entitled to love. This reciprocity, this “little enough, less than little: nothing” (220), in its potential for ethical productivity, is, in many ways, utterly promising. Lucy agrees to marry Petrus and give him her land in return for his protection, and David is appalled at Lucy’s decision to place herself in a position he views as humiliating, as a person forced to live “like a dog” (205). But for Lucy, this is a place of beginning, “a good place to start from again” (205). Coetzee’s relation to Franz Kafka has been intensely scrutinized (see Attwell, Dovey, Merivale, and Wright), and here he rewrites Franz Kafka’s existential ending in *The Trial* when Joseph K proclaims his fate to be “like a dog” (231) and renders literal the condition of both humans and animals in the new South Africa. For change to occur, it would seem, everyone must begin again from the same place, with the liberation of the land from its contested historical status. To begin “like a dog” is simply to start over, and the literary and historically negative connotation of the simile is itself essentially negated.

Lucy, therefore, may be able to imagine living “like a dog” even though David is unable to “be the woman,” to imaginatively perform the characters of Teresa or Lucy or even Bev. In fact, the one woman whose subjectivity David can imagine is another woman, like David’s Teresa, written into being by a man, Gustav Flaubert’s Madame Bovary. Not incidentally, when Flaubert was brought to court on charges of obscenity and asked to identify the “real” Madame Bovary, he made the now famous claim, “Madame Bovary, c’est moi.” Such a statement, as both the author’s claim of imagined identification with the woman and simultaneous refusal of some expected confession, is certainly not lost on Coetzee with regard to David Lurie.

Early in the novel after an encounter with the prostitute Soraya, David imagines himself as “Emma Bovary, coming home sated, glazed-eyed, from an afternoon of reckless fucking” (5), and later in the novel, after he first sleeps with Bev, “his thoughts go to Emma Bovary strutting before the mirror after her first big afternoon. I have a lover! I have a lover! sings Emma to herself. Well, let poor Bev Shaw go home and do some singing too” (150). Emma Bovary, the fictional woman imag-

ined by a man, becomes the fictional woman enacted by David Lurie in his relationship with Soraya and the fictional conceit he uses to imagine Bev Shaw—herself a fictional woman imagined by another man, Coetzee—and her delight in their sexual encounter. If David can be any woman, she is only the woman interpreted through the gaze of another man—Byron, Flaubert, or Coetzee.

When Joanna Scott asked Coetzee what it meant for him to write from the perspective of his female narrator Magda in *In the Heart of the Country* (1982), he answered,

A complicated question. One way of responding is to ask, is one, as a writer, at every level sexed? Is there not a level where one is, if not presexual, then anterior to sex? First anterior to sex, then becoming sexed? At that level, or in that transition between levels, does one actually “take on” the voice of another sex? Doesn’t one “become” another sex? (91)

As an answer, this one seems particularly evasive and provocative, illustrative of Coetzee’s ability to question, if not state a firm belief in, the notion that the writer must at the very least attempt to embody and perform other subjectivities. Scott’s question mirrors the narrator’s question of David Lurie in *Disgrace*: “does he have it in him to be the woman?” (160), and the answer to this question, when one looks at the performative nature of *Disgrace*, is a resounding—but not at all negatively connotated—no. While one can never *be* the other, on an ethical level, one must continue to attempt to imagine the subjectivity of that which one is not, and, more importantly, one must continue to respect the alterity of that which cannot be imagined.

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