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Author(s): Lucy Valerie Graham
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Reading the Unspeakable: Rape in J. M. Coetzee’s Disgrace

LUCY VALERIE GRAHAM
(Lincoln College, University of Oxford)

Of Daphne Rooke’s Mittee, J. M. Coetzee writes: ‘to her credit, Rooke does not indulge in the ne plus ultra of colonial horror fantasies, the rape of a white woman’. Since he is evidently aware of the volatile nature of this subject, what compels Coetzee to portray the rape of a white woman by three black men in Disgrace? One may well ask whether ethical scriptings of interracial rape are possible in a context where representations of sexual violence, under the old regime, supported racial injustice. Unsurprisingly, Coetzee’s latest novel has been accused of racism, of feeding national hysteria, and of reflecting white anxieties in the post-apartheid context. I argue that the novel performs a subversion of ‘black peril’ narrative, and propose that the hidden stories of the characters Melanie and Lucy have relevance in the South African context and have unavoidable implications for the reader of Disgrace.

Introduction

In Disgrace, the protagonist’s daughter, Lucy, is gang-raped by three men on her smallholding in the Eastern Cape, but she chooses to say nothing about what happened to her. Reflecting on the triumph of the intruders, her father, David Lurie, speculates: ‘It will dawn on them that over the body of the woman silence is being drawn like a blanket’. This stifling of rape narrative is a feature of the entire novel. The central incidents in both narrative settings of Disgrace are acts of sexual violation, but notably, in each case, the experience of the violated body is absent, hidden from the reader. Although Lurie acknowledges that his sexual violation of a student, Melanie Isaacs, was ‘undesired’ by her, he maintains it was ‘[n]ot rape, not quite that’. During the disciplinary hearing that ensues, Melanie’s account never reaches the reader, and Lurie, who refuses to defend himself, is accused of being ‘fundamentally evasive’.

In the wake of the farm-attack, Lucy asks Lurie to tell only his story: ‘I tell what happened to me’. The irony is that she does not tell, she remains resolutely silent about her experience. Until she mentions having had tests, the inference that a rape has occurred is Lurie’s. He tells Bev Shaw that he is concerned for Lucy, about the risk of pregnancy, and of HIV, but in response he is told to ask Lucy herself. An account of rape is completely elided in Lucy’s report to the police. Lurie pleads with his daughter to leave the Eastern Cape, or to tell the police, but she insists: ‘You don’t know what happened’. Bev

3 Ibid., p. 25.
4 Ibid., p. 50.
5 Ibid., p. 99.
6 Ibid., p. 107.
7 Ibid., p. 134.
Shaw reiterates Lucy’s message: ‘But you weren’t there, David. She told me’. When Lurie confronts the word they have avoided, Lucy is not direct: ‘I think they do rape’.

The second part of *Rape and Representation*, edited by Lynn Higgins and Brenda Silver, focuses on ‘The Rhetoric of Elision’ in a collection of essays that examine how rape may be read in its absence. The editors correctly propose that reading sexual violence requires ‘listening not only to who speaks and in what circumstances, but who does not speak and why’.

Higgins and Silver concede that elision of the scene of violence in texts about rape both emphasises the violence and suggests the possibility of making it visible, but these critics propose that there are differences between male and female scriptings of rape, and that the omission of the rape scene in male-authored texts could expose ‘the ambivalence of the male author caught in representations of masculinity and subjectivity he may question but that he ultimately leaves in place’. As I intend to demonstrate, however, Coetzee presupposes and doubles back on such ‘ambivalence’, and not only is his reticence self-reflexive, it also leaves a certain responsibility with the reader.

**Rape and Race After Apartheid**

Media reports documenting high levels of sexual violence in South Africa increased noticeably in the national press during the late 1990s. The story that received maximum publicity, however, was the report of the *Mail and Guardian* journalist and rape-survivor, Charlene Smith, published in April 1999. Smith’s chilling account of her rape and her scathing critique of the treatment of rape survivors by the police and in South African hospitals grabbed the attention of the nation. Smith’s story also drew considerable international interest, such that she quickly became something of a spokesperson for South Africa on the subject of sexual violence and its consequences. In an article written for the *Washington Post*, Smith claimed that ‘rape is endemic’ in South African culture, and that ‘the role of tradition and religion’ in fostering a culture of rape needed to be understood. She stated that rape ‘has become a prime means of transmitting [HIV/AIDS], to young women as well as children’.

Smith, however, was harshly criticised by President Thabo Mbeki, who protested that her assumptions were deeply racist. In a live BBC webcast in 2000, Mbeki was asked what he was doing about the rising incidence of rape in South Africa. The President responded that although South Africa, like many countries, had ‘a rape problem’, there was ‘a lot of misreporting about these things’, and that certain rape statistics in South Africa were ‘fake’. The government’s denial of sexual violence as a serious social problem in South Africa has been extremely disturbing, but it is useful to place Mbeki’s objections in relation to a history where rape narratives have been deployed for racist ends.

Despite inferences made during an interview with Charlene Smith in the United States in February 2001, she is not ‘one of the first women to speak out about rape in South Africa’. More significantly, she is not the first white woman raped by a black man to have
received extensive media coverage. As Charles van Onselen has demonstrated, sensation-
alised media accounts of white women raped by black men were symptoms of the ‘black peril’ hysteria of the early twentieth century and contributed to oppressive legislative measures against black people in South Africa.17 According to van Onselen, ‘black peril’ scares during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries reflected white anxieties in times of social and economic crisis.18 One could argue that rerunning ‘black peril’-type representations in the media and in election campaigns potentially plays on white paranoia, and obscures the fact that most rapes in South Africa are intraracial.

Although ‘black peril’ refers to the period of social hysteria prevalent in South Africa from 1890 to 1914, deployment of analogous fears has been a recurring strategy in South African politics and in the media. It is not surprising to find these anxieties replayed in the transition period of the 1990s. Laden with adjectives of hysterical outrage, a poster for the New National Party before the 1999 elections states that women are raped daily, that the party is ‘deeply shocked’ at the ANC’s ‘unfeeling’ attitude, and that the New Nationalist Party plans to institute capital punishment for rapists (see Figure 1).19

In their submission during the Human Rights Commission (SAHRC) hearings on racism in the media (1999), the African National Congress (ANC) protested that the white media in South Africa have continued to propagate negative depictions of black Africans. This attitude, the ANC claimed, is most noticeable in reports about crime and rape. Quoting examples from South African newspapers The Sunday Times and The Mail and Guardian, Public Enterprises Minister Jeff Radebe, who presented the ANC’s report, claimed:

What is remarkable about the pieces of unashamedly racist journalism we have cited is that they do not go further to portray Mr Mbeki as a criminal and an HIV-positive rapist of white women.20

Referring to J. M. Coetzee’s Disgrace, Radebe proposed that in the novel Coetzee illustrates the ways in which white South Africans still believe in a certain stereotype of the African: ‘In this novel J. M. Coetzee represents as brutally as he can the white people’s perception of the post-apartheid black man’.21 The ANC’s argument is built on the idea that Coetzee’s novel reflects society, that the views of the white characters in Disgrace may be equated with those of white South Africans in general. Yet the corollary of this reading would mean that the black rapists in Disgrace are representative of most black people in South Africa, which is exactly what the ANC would like to refute. Although Radebe stops short of accusing Coetzee himself of racism, the ANC’s allusion to Disgrace is not unremarkable or incidental. In short, it seems to reveal extreme discomfort with the interracial gang rape that occurs in the novel.

Reading Past ‘the Peril’: Self-reflexivity and Subversion

Internationally, it would appear that ‘black peril’ representations have been highly mar-
ketable. In 1950, Doris Lessing’s New York publisher, Alfred Knopf, told Lessing they would consider The Grass is Singing for publication if she would change it to accommodate an explicit rape of the white female protagonist by Moses, a black man: ‘in accordance’,

21 Ibid. p. 124.
Vrouelewens word daagliks bedreig...

...127 vroue word elke dag verkrag. Dikwels is vigs en moord die tragiese gevolge van hierdie verwoestende geweldsmisdaad.

Die Nuwe NP is diep gesok deur die ANC se ongevoelige houding oor die onrustbarende situasie. Hierdie noodtoestand kan omgekeerd word mits die Nuwe NP se Bloudruk teen Misdadigheid, wat die doodstraf vir verkragters insluit, gevolg word. Belê jou stem in die Nuwe NP.

Geen genade vir misdadigers.

as the publishers put it, ‘with the mores of the country’. Lessing refused the attempted revision, claiming: ‘the whole point of The Grass is Singing was the unspoken devious codes of behavior of the whites’. When the novel came out in paperback, the writer was
shocked to find on its front cover ‘a lurid picture of a blond cowering terrified while a big buck nigger ... stood over her, threatening her with a panga’.22 In the minds of publishers at least, such ‘porno-tropics’ evidently made for lucrative publications.

While the commercial success of Coetzee’s latest novel may be attributed to similar international appetites, it is possible to argue that in Disgrace Coetzee self-consciously performs a subversion of ‘black peril’ narrative – by simultaneously scripting what Sol T. Plaatje referred to as ‘the white peril’, the hidden sexual exploitation of black women by white men that has existed for centuries.23 While ‘black peril’ imagery was a common feature of racist political discourse throughout the twentieth century, the subversive status of ‘white peril’ literature is confirmed by attitudes of apartheid censors. In 1977, Coetzee’s In the Heart of the Country was placed under scrutiny, partly for representing an apparent rape of a white woman by a black farm-worker as well as the white farmer’s coercion of a black female servant.24 Records of the former Board of Censors also reveal that, in 1962, Daphne Rooke’s The Greyling was banned in South Africa, as the novel portrays the ways in which white men abused certain women who were considered inferior in terms of race and class.25

In Disgrace, David Lurie translates Melanie’s name as ‘the dark one’,26 while Lucy’s name has associations with light. Playing on tropes of darkness and light, the names of the two women expose ‘black peril’ stereotypes and the residual threat of the ‘white peril’ that prevailed under colonialism and apartheid. Lurie has a history of desiring ‘exotic’ women, and assumes that he has the right to purchase or possess their bodies without being responsible for them or respecting the lives they live. As Plaatje observed, many white men in colonial South Africa exploited ‘coloured concubines’ without offering the women long-term security, or caring whether or not they became pregnant.27

Rather than confirming ‘black peril’ stereotypes, Lucy’s name reveals that these have been based on ‘up-holding’ the ‘purity’ of white women. The sexual violation of Lucy further highlights a history tainted by racial injustice, by possession and dispossession, where, as Dorothy Driver has pointed out, white women have been ‘signs’ of that which was not exchanged between men in different racial groups.28 In David Lurie’s opinion, ‘a history of wrong’ was speaking through Lucy’s rapists.29 At the same time, Coetzee demonstrates very clearly that Lurie is blind to the history of his own actions and, during the disciplinary hearing in Disgrace, Farodia Rassool comments on Lurie’s refusal to acknowledge ‘the long history of exploitation of which [his treatment of Melanie] is a part’.30

If Disgrace is ‘half campus novel, half anti-pastoral’,31 then the two rapes that take place in the novel reveal the power dynamics in each setting, and in the respective literary modes. Lurie’s misuse of Melanie exposes power operating at the level of gender and at an

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25 National Archives, Cape Town, Publications Control Board, BCS 26963.
26 Coetzee, Disgrace, p. 18.
29 Coetzee, Disgrace, p. 156.
30 Ibid., p. 53.
institutional level. Rassool’s comment at the disciplinary hearing could refer to a history where white men have sexually exploited black women, and it could also point to abuses of power in the university that are as old as the academic profession. Immersed in a falsifying Romantic tradition, David speculates that ‘beauty does not belong to itself’, and thus justifies his underlying assumption, as Melanie’s educator, that she is somehow his property. This is revealed when he watches her in a play, claiming her achievements as his own: ‘When they laugh at Melanie’s lines he cannot resist a flush of pride. Mine! He would like to say to them ... as if she were his daughter’.

By exposing these structures of power, Coetzee rewrites versions of the college novel, a genre that often masks the inequalities, gender harassment and incidents of rape reported in campus life. The events that take place between David and Melanie in Disgrace also invite consideration of David Mamet’s play Oleanna, which dramatises the vicissitudes of sexual harassment in the university environment. In Oleanna, however, the student who turns on her professor and accuses him of sexual harassment develops a shrill voice, strong opinions, whereas Melanie’s words in Disgrace are few. Although the female student in Oleanna is set up as possibly provoking the violence inflicted on her, in Disgrace there is a subtle critique of Mamet’s play, articulated, significantly, via Melanie’s script in a theatrical production: ‘My gats, why must everything always be my fault?’

Sadly, Melanie’s position in Disgrace is not an uncommon one in contemporary South Africa. A South African newspaper recently reported that a deputy principal had impregnated twenty girls at his school, and that an educator had raped a fourteen-year old schoolgirl twice in three months and had infected her with HIV. The girl said that after the second rape her teacher told her he was HIV positive. Lurie’s relationship with Melanie in Disgrace is depicted as a betrayal of ethical responsibility, as he violates and will not take responsibility for her as an embodied human being. Although Lurie protests to the contrary, the act that he commits is rape, it is ‘undesired’ by the girl and involves an abuse of her self. In an analysis of embodiment within a discourse of ethics, Barry Smart emphasises that the physical consequences of sexual relationships, such as pregnancies, abortions, and sexually transmitted diseases including AIDS, demand consideration of the body that ‘prioritises moral issues and encompasses relations of self and other’. In Coetzee’s novel, one may contrast Lurie’s concern for Lucy’s body after she is raped (he wants her to have HIV and pregnancy tests) to his lack of concern for Melanie Isaacs, whom he forces himself upon after his sexual relationship with Soraya, a prostitute, comes to an end.

Coetzee’s choice of the rural Eastern Cape as a setting for the rape of Lurie’s daughter by three black men emphasises complex historical relationships between issues of race, gender and land. In ‘The Mote and the Beam’ (1921), Sol Plaatje noted that the British Colonial Secretary, Lord Harcourt, justified the Natives Land Act as a means of stopping the ‘black peril’ cases. The farm space is a violently contested boundary in post-apartheid South Africa and, as J. M. Coetzee demonstrates in White Writing, the South African pastoral, which presents a vision of the ‘husband-farmer’ as custodian of the feminine earth, has been discursively implicated in the colonial appropriation of territory. In Disgrace,

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32 Coetzee, Disgrace, p. 16.
33 Ibid., p. 191.
34 Ibid., p. 24.
however, the anti-pastoral mode breaks with colonial mappings of the female body and land, depicting instead feudal systems of claiming and reclaiming where there is contempt for women as owners of property and land.

A worthwhile comparison here would be with Eleanor of Aquitaine, who apparently feared being ‘rapt’ by a ‘vassal’ who might, through the act, gain title to her land and assets.\(^3\) After Lucy is raped by unnamed intruders, she is made a proposal of marriage by Petrus, the farm worker who claims kinship with one of her rapists, and offers to look after her in return for her land. In the *Heart of the Country*, Coetzee’s earlier anti-pastoral novel, also alludes to rape, and reveals gender oppression operating within the farm setting and in the pastoral genre, where we find women ‘imprisoned in the farmhouse, confined to the breast function’.\(^4\) *Disgrace* seems to suggest that female bodies may not fare better in the new order, as after Lucy is raped she becomes pregnant, gives up her land and retreats into the house.

In ‘The Harms of Pornography’, Coetzee claims that colonial culture and processes of apartheid are deeply implicated in the escalation of sexual violence in the contemporary context:

[Colonialism] fractured the social and customary basis of legality, yet allowed some of the worst features of patriarchalism to survive, including the treatment of unattached (unowned) women as fair game, huntable creatures.\(^4\)

*Disgrace* points to a context where women are regarded as property, and are liable for protection only insofar as they belong to men. As a lesbian, Lucy would be regarded as ‘unowned’ and therefore ‘huntable’, and there is even a suggestion that her sexuality may have provoked her attackers.\(^5\) Lucy insists that in South Africa, ‘in this place, at this time’, the violation she has suffered cannot be a public matter,\(^6\) and her refusal to report the crime may represent a rather extreme refusal to play a part in a history of oppression. This does not, however, explain the complete absence of her story in the narrative structure of *Disgrace*. Similarly, the reader never hears Melanie’s story, and the accounts of the two women are significant lacunae in each narrative setting.

In canonical literary narratives of the West, rape is often depicted as ‘unspeakable’, as severed from articulation, and literary references to hidden rape stories cannot but bring into relief the complex relationship between literary silences and the aftermath of actual violation. Although Shakespeare’s Lucrece names the one who has raped her, her account does not save her from perceiving herself as ‘disgraced’, or from giving herself death. Philomela, in Ovid’s *Metamorphosis*, is raped and has her tongue cut out to prevent her from naming the crime and the perpetrator. Yet she sews her account into a tapestry, thus making it possible for her sister to discover the rapist’s identity. In the workings of art, Philomela can thus convey that which is ‘unspeakable’ in the realm of life. It is no accident that the names of Melanie and Lucy in *Disgrace* echo those of the two mythological rape victims, highlighting Western artistic traditions in which rape has had a fraught relationship with articulation or representation.

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\(^6\) Coetzee, *Disgrace*, p. 105.
\(^7\) Ibid., p. 112.
The Double Bind: Rape, Colonial Culture and Pornography

In a study of ‘colonial and contemporary violence against women in Africa’, Amina Mama proposes that the Western cultures which imposed themselves on the African continent were steeped in gender violence.44 In my opinion, this is revealed decisively in Western attitudes to the representation of rape. Although sexual violation was common enough subject matter in classical art, the violence of the act of rape was both obscured and legitimised by representations that depicted sexual violation in an aesthetic manner.45 As Coetzee himself observes in ‘The Harms of Pornography’, the portrayal of violence is ‘deeply anti-classical’, since carnage and rape were typically kept behind the scenes in classical representations.46

With such elisions in mind, Lynne Higgins and Brenda Silver urge readers to challenge conventions that represent rape as titillation or seduction. These critics are wary of representations and readings that transform the violence of rape into an aesthetic encounter where the victim’s beauty seals her fate:

The conventions at issue are no less than the Western lyric tradition and the quest for beauty, truth and knowledge associated with the ‘Grecian Spirit’ in Western art and philosophy.47

In Rape and Representation, Higgins and Silver point out that reading rape requires conscious restoration of the body as a site of suffering and violation.48 Similarly, Laura Tanner, in a study of violence and torture in twentieth century fiction, urges the reader to counter the ‘seductive powers of representation’ by ‘seeing into violence’.49 Much is at stake in reading rape in literature. While there are obviously major differences between representations of fictional and actual violence, anyone who believes that literary representations and readings of these have no impact on responses to sexual violence should read Kathryn Gravdal’s study of rape in medieval France. Observing echoes of medieval French poetry in the discourse of rape trials, Gravdal emphasises the ways in which the use of this language in the courtroom trivialised actual violation.50

Although narrative perspective in Disgrace allows for critical distance from David Lurie, who is the ‘focaliser’ of the story, the majority of reviewers seem to read in sympathy with Lurie when he glosses his sexual encounter with Melanie as ‘not rape, not quite that’.51 Lucy Hughes-Hallett writes that Lurie ‘seduces a young female student’;52 and other reviewers represent his abuse of Melanie as an ‘affair’.53 Overlooking the violation entirely, Albert du Toit explains that the ‘affair’ between Lurie and Melanie ‘blossoms but soon sours’.54 Derek Attridge describes Lurie’s interaction with Melanie as ‘a brief liaison’, and even lauds Lurie’s refusal to cooperate with the university disciplinary committee who

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45 For a detailed discussion of rape in Western art, see Diane Wolfthal, Images of Rape: The Heroic Tradition and Its Alternatives (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000).
47 Higgins and Silver, Rape and Representation, pp. 4–5.
48 Ibid, p. 4.
51 Coetzee, Disgrace, p. 25.
call upon him to account for his behaviour. It is important to recognise, however, that *Disgrace* actually stages the encounter between rape in art and the reader/viewer, and thus the novel pre-empts the blindness of certain readings.

In Shakespeare’s ‘The Rape of Lucrece’, the distraught Lucrece stands before a painting of the war that ensued after the rape (typically represented as an ‘abduction’ or ‘elopement’) of Helen of Troy. The encounter, framed within the literary text, is between the artwork and the viewer, and between representation and life. *Disgrace* depicts this confrontation, also via rape narrative, in a remarkably similar way. After the farm attack, David finds a reproduction of Poussin’s *The Rape of the Sabine Women* in an art book in the Grahamstown library and asks: ‘What had all this attitudinising to do with what he expected rape to be: the man lying on top of the woman and pushing himself into her?’

Thinking of Byron, who ‘pushed himself into’ and possibly raped ‘legions of countesses and kitchenmaids’, Lurie speculates that from where Lucy stands, ‘Byron looks very old-fashioned indeed’. Here is a critique of the Romantic/humanist posturing that obscures, even justifies, forsaking ethical responsibility in the realm of life. And yet David, scholar of Romanticism, is guilty of ‘attitudinising’ when he excuses his violation of Melanie Isaacs as an act motivated by Eros, or inspired by ‘Aphrodite, goddess of the foaming waves’. Coetzee’s novel thus assesses the disjunction between allegiance to an ideology of aesthetics and allegiance to the ethical, revealing Western artistic traditions and perspectives that may condone unethical acts.

The masking of violence in the classical tradition is quite different from humanitarian attitudes that developed in the eighteenth century. Enlightenment humanitarianism, based on notions of sensibility and sympathy, typically sought to expose atrocities, but ran the risk of turning violence into a pornographic spectacle that threatened to implicate the viewer. Hence the double bind, and what Terry Eagleton, analysing Richardson’s *Clarissa*, regards as the ‘unrepresentability’ of rape. Coetzee seems to be aware of this dilemma, and there is evidence, in his early fiction, and in his critical work of the mid-1990s, that he has given serious consideration to strategies of representing sexual violence. In ‘The Harms of Pornography’, Coetzee engages with the feminist campaign against pornography, and particularly with views expressed by Catherine MacKinnon. Other chapters in this collection on censorship had found their way into publication between 1988 and 1993, but the essay on MacKinnon is a new contribution, suggesting that Coetzee was preoccupied with the issues raised in ‘The Harms of Pornography’ during the period when *Disgrace* was in the offing. As an alternative to MacKinnon’s argument, which insists on the ‘delegitimisation’ of representations of sexual violence, Coetzee offers the possibility of ‘a male writer-pornographer’ who presents the following question:

If I were to write an account of power and desire that, unlike yours, does not close the book on desire... if this hypothetical account were further to be offered, not in the discursive terms of ‘theory’, but in the form of a representation... if this representation were to share a thematics with pornography (including perhaps torture, abuse, acts of cruelty)... if this project were carried through and offered to the world, what would protect it from suffering the

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56 Coetzee, *Disgrace*, p. 160.
57 Ibid., p. 160.
58 Ibid., p. 52.
59 Ibid., p. 25.
same fate – ‘delegitimisation’ – as any work of pornography, except perhaps its seriousness (if that were recognised), as a philosophical project.\(^62\)

Coetzee points to the moral blindness of an industry that profits from exploiting women but argues that neither censorship nor the ‘delegitimisation’ of certain representations would stop serious writers from dramatising darker aspects of experience. For a particular type of artist, he explains, ‘seriousness is... an imperative uniting the aesthetic and the ethical’.\(^63\)

Coetzee’s earlier novels demonstrate an awareness of the ethical complexities of representing sexual violence. Mapping female bodies onto the landscape, colonialism propagated a myth of territories as ‘virgin land’, but Coetzee’s fiction exposes the violence literally inflicted on bodies in the colonial encounter. Dusklands, his first novel, depicts the violence in two versions of imperialism, where the desire to penetrate and possess the other’s territory overlaps with instances of sexual violation. Eugene Dawn, narrator in ‘The Vietnam Project’, describes political warfare and sexual violence as inseparable acts of penetration and domination: ‘We cut their flesh open, we reached into their dying bodies... we forced ourselves deeper than we had ever gone before into their women’.\(^64\) In ‘The Narrative of Jacobus Coetzee’, J. Coetzee dispassionately watches one of his men raping a ‘Hottentot’ child, and his act of intercourse with a captured ‘Bushman’ girl serves both to consolidate his power and to eliminate her: ‘You have become power itself now and she is nothing, a rag you wipe yourself on and throw away’.\(^65\)

Dawn describes a memento, a photograph of an American soldier copulating with a Vietnamese woman who is ‘tiny and slim, possibly even a child’.\(^66\) Congruence with an actual instance of captured reality adds horror to this fictive snapshot, as the gang rape and murder of Vietnamese women at My Lai in 1968 by Captain Ernst Medina’s unit was photographed by one of the participants.\(^67\) Rending the fictive, the chilling parallel draws attention to actual bodily violation underpinning the colonial contest. Furthermore, the photograph in Dusklands creates a mise en abyme such that Eugene Dawn’s perusal of the snapshot, reducing representation to spectacle, echoes the reader’s encounter with the text. Situated as voyeur, the viewer/reader is implicated in pornographic violence which, in this case, is not just fictive.

In Disgrace, Lucy is adamant that what happened is ‘[hers] alone’,\(^68\) insisting that David Lurie – and, by default, the reader – was not there. But if female silence in Coetzee’s previous novels could be linked to ‘the power to withhold’,\(^69\) Lucy’s refusal to speak about her experience certainly does not empower her and means that her story belongs to her rapists: ‘not her story to spread but theirs: they are its owners’.\(^70\) The predicaments of Lucy and Melanie point to a context where victims are compelled to be silent, and thus collude with perpetrators. When Lurie tells Melanie to return to her work, she stares at him in shock: ‘You have cut me off from everyone, she seems to want to say. You have made me bear your secret’.\(^71\) Similarly, Lucy’s silence means that her rapists are ‘getting away with’ their crime.\(^72\)

Whereas the rape of Lucy remains off stage, Melanie’s violation is ‘luridly’ represented

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\(^63\) Ibid. pp. 73–74.


\(^65\) Ibid. p. 61.

\(^66\) Ibid. p. 13.


\(^68\) Coetzee, Disgrace, p. 133.


\(^70\) Coetzee, Disgrace, p. 155.

\(^71\) Ibid., p. 34.

\(^72\) Ibid., p. 158.
via Lurie, the intruder who ‘thrusts’ himself into her apartment and into her body. The narrative point of view and aspects of description echo the father–daughter rape in Toni Morrison’s *The Bluest Eye*, where the incident is distanced by way of a third person narrative voice, ‘focalised’ through the father-rapist and the victim’s experience is blanked out. In *The Bluest Eye* the victim faints, and in *Disgrace* Melanie ‘averts’ herself, as if she had ‘decided to... die within herself for the duration’.73 In Morrison’s novel, Cholly nibbles his daughter’s foot before he rapes her unresponsive body.74 Similarly, Lurie kisses Melanie’s feet before indulging in an act he describes as ‘not quite’ rape, but for her part is ‘undesired to the core’.75 At times the narrative viewpoint seems to be located outside of Lurie, but in the paragraph beginning ‘not rape, not quite that’ the reader’s perspective is destabilised, such that the distance between narrative voice and ‘focaliser’ collapses. Melanie protests when Lurie grabs her, she struggles against him as he picks her up and carries her to the bedroom, and there is an acknowledgement that for her, their intercourse is ‘undesired to the core’.76

In *Disgrace*, David Lurie is composing an opera about Byron’s relationship with the young Teresa Guiccioli, but after the rape of his daughter Lurie begins to alter the focus of his artistic work. Discarding a Romantic tradition that has legitimised his mistreatment of Melanie, Lurie moves away from an emphasis on Byron, and scripts the voices of Byron’s abandoned daughter, and of Teresa, ‘now middle-aged’, asking whether he ‘can find it in his heart to love this plain ordinary woman’.77 In his quest for the resonance of hidden voices and stories, Lurie discovers a certain amount of empathy and care, for the ‘plain ordinary’ Bev Shaw, and for the dog he carries to its death in the final pages of *Disgrace*. Derek Attridge dismisses in a recent article on *Disgrace*, Lurie’s sex with Bev Shaw as ‘inconsequential’.78 The choice of such a word is highly ironic—thanks to the condom that Bev passes to Lurie, their encounter will indeed have no unfortunate “consequences” such as pregnancy or the spread of sexually transmitted diseases. Yet the incident is important. Although marked by pathos, it contrasts with Lurie’s previous exploitative and irresponsible sexual behaviour.

**Conclusions**

There will certainly be readers who protest against what they regard as the representation of black men as rapists in *Disgrace*, just as there will be those who read David Lurie as exemplifying the white experience in post-apartheid South Africa. But it is important to acknowledge that the novel dissolves clear boundaries of identity between Lurie and the men who rape Lucy. Like these men, Lurie is also a rapist and (albeit in a different way) a dog-killer. As critics such as Michael Marais have noted, the scene in which Melanie is raped in *Disgrace* has resonance with Lurie’s imagining of his daughter’s rape.79 Although Lucy’s story is hidden from Lurie and from the reader, Lurie agonises over possibilities, and eventually stages an appalling scenario in his mind where he ‘becomes’ the men who violate his daughter:

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73 Ibid., p. 25.
75 Coetzee, *Disgrace*, p. 25.
76 Ibid.
77 Ibid., p. 182.
78 Attridge claims that Lurie’s sex with Bev Shaw is ‘inconsequential’. See Derek Attridge, ‘Age of Bronze’, p. 110.
... the men, for their part, drank up her fear, revelled in it, did all they could to hurt her, to menace her, to heighten her terror. Call your dogs! They said to her. Go on call your dogs! No dogs? Then let us show you dogs!

He can, if he concentrates, if he loses himself, be there, be the men, inhabit them, fill them with the ghost of himself. The question is, does he have it in him to be the woman?80

In this imaginary ‘reading’, the elided scene of violence is represented, but Lurie’s question suggests that ethical responsiveness depends on experiencing the narrative differently – not from the viewpoint of perpetrator or voyeur, but from the position of weakness and suffering. Since the stories of Melanie and Lucy are elided in Disgrace, the responsibility for such an imagining is left with the reader. For although the stories of Melanie and Lucy in Disgrace can only remain ‘[theirs] alone’, to consign rape to a space outside articulation may contribute to a wider phenomenon of silencing.

LUCY VALERIE GRAHAM
Lincoln College, University of Oxford, Oxford OX1 3DR, UK. E-mail: lucy.graham@lincoln.ox.ac.uk

80 Coetzee, Disgrace, p. 160.