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***DISGRACELAND: HISTORY AND FICTION IN FRONTIER COUNTRY***

By

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**Abstract**

This paper considers the question of why Coetzee chose to set the major part of his most recent novel, the Booker Prize-winning *Disgrace* [ital.], in the Eastern Cape, specifically in Salem. Examining the historical record of settlement in Salem in tandem with Coetzee's ideas on the pastoral genre in South African literature, the paper offers a reading of *Disgrace* [ital.] which responds simultaneously to the exigencies of history and the text's pastoral mythopoeism.

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## I

J.M. Coetzee's most recent novel has already generated a voluminous and various critical response, and – given the fertile indirections of its narrative style – it is likely to continue to do so for some time. While most readers have noted the realism that characterizes its mode of representation, no-one (to my knowledge) has yet addressed the specific issue of why Coetzee chose “Salem” as the primary setting for the latter part of the novel.<sup>1</sup> The question arises both because Salem is not an invented place but a real one, a village about 25 kms from the city of Grahamstown in the Eastern Cape province of South Africa; and because *Disgrace* is a novel whose every element seems freighted with symbolic meaning.

The answer to this question – or part of it – is that for historical reasons, the Lower Albany region of the Eastern Cape presents itself as the most logical setting for a story concerned at its core with entitlement to the land in post-apartheid South Africa. It was in this part of the country that nine Frontier Wars were fought between the British and the Xhosa people during the nineteenth century.<sup>2</sup> Although the specific origins and courses of the conflicts varied, the fundamental *casus belli* was the question of land, and the history of the region known to this day as “the Border” (or just “Border”) is a history of strife that is everywhere inscribed in the landscape. In Grahamstown, for instance, opposing hills on either side of the city seem situated endlessly to rehearse a founding moment in the district's history (and, according to Noël Mostert, the country's history as a whole [479]). In the east, Makanna's Kop, now the site of a sprawling shack settlement, where the forces of the legendary recidivist leader Makanna, or Nxele as he preferred to be known, gathered to attack Grahamstown in April 1819. In the west, Gunfire Hill, just beyond the beautifully maintained campus of Rhodes University, surmounted by the 1820 Monument and the remains of Fort Selwyn, from whose lower slopes British cannon bombarded Nxele's men with shrapnel shell and ensured their rout (Mostert 476). It is a moment and a history whose “shadows continue to move with unappeased restlessness within the haunted house that is modern South Africa” (Mostert xxviii, quoted in Coetzee, “Noël Mostert” 338). As if to insist on the inescapable presentness of this past, the Eastern Cape Tourism Board has recently erected road signs helpfully informing travellers that they are entering or exiting “Frontier Country”. Above the words on the signage appears the likeness of an old-fashioned field cannon next to a small pyramid of cannon balls. There is a rash of such signs in the vicinity of Grahamstown, especially on the N2 bypass from Port Elizabeth. Another sign has been erected in the very middle of Salem village, where the road from Grahamstown takes a left turn towards Kenton-on-Sea: this one displays the cannon symbol atop a single word “ENDS” (turning the

corner, one is welcomed to the “Sunshine Coast”). The placing of the sign is distinctly odd, but not without a certain (entirely unconscious) symbolic resonance.

Salem was the name given to the small valley where the majority of the Sephton party of the British settlers halted their trek from Port Elizabeth in mid-1820. The name (meaning Peace) was proposed by Rev. William Shaw, who quoted Psalm 76: “In Salem also is His tabernacle and His dwelling place” (Grahamstown Historical Association [a] 2). No doubt, like the naming of Salem in Massachusetts or Oregon before it, this gesture both embodied the hope that the remoteness of their new habitation had brought these hardy Methodists closer to their God, and sought to secure for them His blessing and protection in the face of the many real dangers threatening their survival.

Unfortunately the settlement proved no more successful than any of the others established by the English settlers: crops failed repeatedly, livestock were lost regularly to disease and Xhosa raiding parties, and the residents for decades remained very poor. But in an important sense the village lived up to its name: during the first fifteen years of their residence, the settlers were never themselves attacked by the “Caffres”. This seemed set to change at one point during the Sixth Frontier War of 1834-35, when early one morning a large force of some 500 Xhosas made off with the settlers’ cattle and then assembled on an eastern hillside, apparently preparing to attack. While most of the frightened settlers gathered themselves in a laager in and about the recently built church, one of their number named Richard Gush courageously rode out to meet the Xhosas and discover their intentions. Gush (1789-1858), a man of Quaker leanings and an avowed pacifist (“possibly the only man in the Eastern Cape who had never carried a gun,” Maxwell 1), was no stranger to Xhosa depredations. According to the anonymous “Life of Richard Gush, an African Immigrant,”

Some years before the war of 1834, some Caffres stole his team of bullocks when he was travelling, and he was so poor that he had not money to replace them. He would not however, lodge any information before the authorities, lest any armed force should be sent after the Caffres, and human blood should be spilled. (“The Life of Richard Gush” in Butler, *Richard Gush* 91)

If Gush’s response here anticipates Lucy Lurie’s reaction to her rape in *Disgrace*, the resolution of Salem’s crisis in 1835 reinforces the parallel. Seeing that he was unarmed, the Xhosas allowed Gush and his translator (an Afrikaner named Barend Woest) to approach. Gush asked why they

had stolen their cattle and were now threatening the lives of the people of Salem. The Xhosa captain replied that his people were hungry and had acted out of need.

To this Richard Gush answered, 'You cannot be hungry now, for you have nearly all the cattle in the bush behind you.' The number of these was considerable. The men then said they had no bread. Richard Gush pointed to his house, at the door of which his wife and children were standing, and said, 'If you will send one of your men, my wife will give him some bread and tobacco, and I will stand security for him until he returns.' The men replied, 'If you will go yourself and fetch it, we will go away.'<sup>3</sup> Richard Gush then rode back, and soon returned, bringing two loaves of bread, weighing about 15lbs., a roll of tobacco of 10lbs. and twelve pocket knives. He told the captain to take some of the knives to his chief, and tell him that they were sent by one who could neither steal cattle nor kill his fellow men, but who, with his fellow-settlers, had always been the best friends of the Caffres, and should not cease to pray to God that he would make them better men. The parties then shook hands, and the Caffres went away, and were no more seen in the neighbourhood of Salem, which may be justly regarded as given of the Lord into the hand of one who dared to trust in him. ("The Life of Richard Gush" in Butler, *Richard Gush* 92)

The gift of bread, already symbolic – 15lbs. would not have gone very far among 500 men, and bread was in any case at that time not a food familiar to the Xhosa – was too much for Guy Butler the playwright to resist: in *Richard Gush of Salem*, he has the Xhosa captain breaking the bread and sharing it with Gush, Woest and his own induna (Butler 69).<sup>4</sup> But 1820-settler mythmaking aside, the point is that for Butler, the story of Richard Gush understandably "went right to the heart of contemporary South Africa, and indeed, of our world: the response of the individual conscience to racial and other violence" (Butler, *Richard Gush* viii).

The same might be said of the reaction of Lucy Lurie to her violation in *Disgrace*. She declines to report the incident, thereby refusing to sanction the prosecution of her rapists; she insists throughout that it remain a "purely private affair" (*Disgrace* 112). It seems that we are being invited to read her response as a radical intervention (akin to that of Richard Gush) in the cycle of retributive violence which had (or *has*) for so long defined human relations on the 'frontier' – an exemplary demonstration of the principle of non-violence which for Coetzee is embodied in Christ's Crucifixion:

I understand the Crucifixion as a refusal and an introversion of retributive violence, a refusal so deliberate, so conscious, and so powerful that it overwhelms any interpretation, Freudian, Marxian, or whatever, that we can give to it. (*Doubling the Point* 337)

In updating the frontier in his novel, of course, Coetzee is exploiting a central dark irony: the rape of Lucy occurs in Salem, the place of peace where the grace of God (for a while, anyway) protected the settlers from their enemies. What is more, the occurrence violates the venerable Xhosa principle, sanctioned by the fundamental value known as *ubuntu*, that women and children ought never to be harmed in warfare (see Coetzee, “Noël Mostert” 334).<sup>5</sup> The implication is that Lucy’s attackers are degraded men, men who have fallen far from the state of natural nobility in which they were found by travellers like John Barrow (see Coetzee, “Idleness” 33). Whether one argues that, in the intervening years, white South Africans because of their disgraceful conduct have forfeited the right to such chivalrous exemption, or that their conduct has helped so irremediably to tear the fabric of Xhosa society as to abrogate this foundational precept, is immaterial: the point is that in the world of *Disgrace*, all alike, black and white, are “sunk into a state of disgrace from which it will not be easy to lift [themselves]” (*Disgrace* 172). (I am of course aware that Lucy’s attackers are criminals and not soldiers, but there is no denying that the novel encourages the reader at least to countenance a historical-political interpretation of their violence: see, for instance, Lucy’s description of them as “debt collectors, tax collectors” (158), calling in apartheid’s dues.)

Although there are a great many ways in which *Disgrace* may be read and interpreted, there can be no doubt that the novel gains in resonance when placed in the context of one man’s exemplary refusal to participate in the spiral of frontier violence.

## II

Coetzee’s well-known essay “Farm Novel and *Plaasroman*” closes with an enigmatic rhetorical gesture. He follows a rigorously anti-pastoral reading of *The Beadle* and other novels by speculating as to “whether it is in the nature of the ghost of the pastoral ever to be finally laid,” and notes that his essay exemplifies a mode of reading “finely attuned to modes of silence . . . [and] alert to the spaces in the text (Where is God? Where is Africa?)” –

a mode of reading which, subverting the dominant, is in peril, like all triumphant subversion, of becoming the dominant in turn. Is it a version of utopianism (or

pastoralism) to look forward (or backward) to the day when the truth will be (or was) what is said, not what is not said, when we will hear (or heard) music as sound upon silence, not silence between sounds? (*White Writing* 81)

The passage is an unusually whimsical example of what Teresa Dovey has called Coetzee's "self-deconstructive mode" of writing (Dovey, "Introduction" 10). But more than that, it reveals something of the writer's conflicted attitude towards rural settlement in South Africa. Coetzee's desire for a pastoral innocence to be restored to the activity of reading is simultaneously a wistful plea for the subjective truth of the feelings towards the land articulated in the *plaasroman* to be recognized. Will it ever be (or was it ever) possible, Coetzee seems to be asking, for a white South African to express a love for the land uncontaminated by the guilt of colonial conquest and dispossession? The question in turn encodes an impossible yearning for the individual to be allowed the integrity of a response to his own experience not entirely determined by the ethical and political demands that are the legacy of South Africa's troubled history.<sup>6</sup> And in Coetzee's case, this response includes a fierce attachment to the South African landscape and the simple beauty of farm life, an attachment memorably evoked in the autobiographical *Boyhood*.<sup>7</sup>

But in his fiction, too, both before and after *Boyhood*, Coetzee has sought to imagine an alternative way of relating to the land, a way that does not entail the exclusion or oppression of others. In *In the Heart of the Country*, Magda's efforts to transcend the imprisoning dialectic of master and slave fail conspicuously, and yet at the end of her darkly comic anti-pastoral narrative she admits that she remains "corrupted to the bone with the beauty of this forsaken world," possessed of an unshakeable "nostalgia for country ways" (*In the Heart of the Country* 138). In *Life & Times of Michael K*, farms are not very different from the camps, parcels of land divided up and fenced off so as to privilege some and exclude others. K's idyllic existence "in a pocket outside time" (60) can only be imagined in "forgotten corners and angles and corridors between the fences, land that belonged to no-one" (47), and during his sojourn on the abandoned Visagie farm he is intuitively aware that the "worst mistake" he could make would be to assume ownership of the property in order "to found a new house, a rival line" (104). Later on, observation of K convinces the Medical Officer that "there are areas that lie between the camps and belong to no camp, not even to the catchment areas of the camps – certain mountaintops, for example" (162), and he imagines himself begging K to show him the way. But whatever symbolic meaning is attached to the camps and K's alternative way of being, Coetzee himself has pointed out

how terribly transitory that garden life of K's is: he can't hope to keep the garden because, finally, the whole surface of South Africa has been surveyed and mapped and disposed of. So, despite K's desires, the opposition that the garden provides to the camps is at most at a conceptual level. (Morphet 456)

The alternative to both camp and farm, then, is what the novel must be content to call "*the idea of gardening*" (109, emphasis added): and as Rita Barnard has pointed out, this is "a new pastoral phantasy: a vision of rural life without patriarchal or colonial domination" (Barnard 389).

The question of whether this vision could ever be more than phantasy is re-opened by the plot of *Disgrace*. The auspices are initially promising: a woman, Lucy Lurie, is leading a modest but independent existence on a smallholding a mere five hectares in extent (59) – that is, on a piece of land a little over a tenth of the size of the paltry 100-acre plots to which 1820 settlers were entitled in terms of the regulations governing the emigration scheme (Makin 57). Lucy is often seen through the eyes of her father, the novel's focalizer, as a latter-day frontier farmer, "a solid countrywoman, a *boervrou*" (60). He finds it "[c]urious that he and her mother, cityfolk, intellectuals, should have produced this throwback, this sturdy young settler. But perhaps it was not they who produced her: perhaps history had the larger share" (61). Lurie seems determined to situate his daughter in the context of an ongoing frontier history: "A frontier farmer of the new breed. In the old days, cattle and maize. Today, dogs and daffodils. The more things change the more they remain the same. History repeating itself, though in a more modest vein. Perhaps history has learned a lesson" (62). Well, is history just repeating itself, or has it learned a lesson; and if so, what lesson has been learned?

These questions invite consideration within the context of what Coetzee sees as the primary concern of the Afrikaans *plaasroman*: the "conflict between peasant and capitalist modes of production" that ultimately drove the majority of Boers off the land and into the towns (Coetzee, "Farm Novel" 78). The "programme espoused by the *plaasroman*" thus flies in the face of the historical triumph of agricultural capitalism by imagining "a renewal of the peasant order based on the myth of the return to the earth" ("Farm Novel" 79). In *Disgrace*, the modesty of Lucy's agricultural aspirations is evident: in so far as her market gardening amounts to farming, she is a subsistence farmer, a peasant. At one stage she explicitly repudiates the capitalist (colonial, patriarchal) associations of the word "farm" in South Africa by remonstrating with her father: "Stop calling it *the farm*, David. This is not a farm, it's just a piece of land where I grow things – we both know that" (200). At the outset of the novel, moreover, Lucy has sold a portion of her

land to her black assistant, intent on translating his status in this way from “gardener” and “dog-man” (64) to “neighbour” (116). As Lurie reflects,

Petrus is a neighbour who at present happens to sell his labour, because that is what suits him. He sells his labour under contract, unwritten contract, and that contract makes no provision for dismissal on grounds of suspicion. It is a new world they live in, he and Lucy and Petrus. Petrus knows it, and he knows it, and Petrus knows that he knows it. (117)

He goes on to characterize Petrus as a “peasant, a *paysan*, a man of the country” (117). Now “African peasant” was John Barrow’s term for the *white* frontier farmer in South Africa, a term that Coetzee has approved, arguing that “many of the differences between the frontier farmer and the European peasant are more apparent than real” (“Farm Novel” 73). In this perspective, *Disgrace* makes the utopian gesture of imagining “a return to a peasant social order” similar to that envisaged in the German *Bauernroman* of the 1930s (“Farm Novel” 76), staging – in the “new world” of post-apartheid South Africa – the restoration of a pastoral mythology long negated by the forces of colonial capital.<sup>8</sup> This certainly seems to be the dominant effect of Lurie’s last view of Lucy in the novel:

She is wearing a pale summer dress, boots, and a wide straw hat. As she bends over, clipping or pruning or tying, he can see the milky, blue-veined skin and broad, vulnerable tendons of the backs of her knees: the least beautiful part of a woman’s body, the least expressive, and therefore perhaps the most endearing.

Lucy straightens up, stretches, bends down again. Field-labour; peasant tasks, immemorial. His daughter is becoming a peasant. . . .

The wind drops. There is a moment of utter stillness which he would wish prolonged for ever: the gentle sun, the stillness of mid-afternoon, bees busy in a field of flowers; and at the center of the picture a young woman, *das ewig Weibliche*, lightly pregnant, in a straw sunhat. A scene ready-made for a Sargent or a Bonnard. City boys like him; but even city boys can recognize beauty when they see it, can have their breath taken away. (217, 218)

Rita Barnard notes that this pastoral idyll “is only slightly ironized by the reminder that it owes much to the ‘ready-made’ images of Sargent and Bonnard” (Barnard 390); it is of course at the same time utterly and savagely ironized by the fact that it has essentially been enabled by Lucy’s gang-rape and her subsequent decision to surrender her land to her peasant neighbour, Petrus. We are obliged to ponder anew Lucy’s earlier, unanswerable question to her father: “What if . . . what if *that* is the price one has to pay for staying on?” (158)

Further irony of varying shades is provided by a return to the history of settlement at Salem. July 1820 marked the arrival in the Salem valley of Hezekiah Sephton’s party of settlers, Wesleyan dissenters and city dwellers all (Makin 31). Apart from a lone Boer obliged to make way for them, the area was uninhabited.<sup>9</sup>

From the outset, the village was laid out along the lines of peasant settlement already largely obsolete in England (see Coetzee, “Farm Novel” 77),<sup>10</sup> with each family allocated a small croft or allotment alongside the Assegai Bosch River, within walking distance of a civic centre where communal facilities were gradually established (a meeting place for the governing committee, a mill, a bakery, a holding prison, a shop and post office). The first few years of settlement were desperate, as wheat crops failed and the villagers came to realize that the lime-rich *suurveld* soil was essentially inimical to agriculture. By the end of 1823, only 32 of the original 86 families remained, but the lot of those who stayed improved gradually with the accumulation of stock and, from July 1824, trade with the Xhosas (Makin 50). In November 1823, the colony’s Governor Lord Charles Somerset gave official sanction to the transfer to the group of 5,913 morgen of land (Makin 57). This was followed in 1836 by a further 2,333 morgen, and in 1847, by 5,365 morgen, granted “to the present and future proprietors of locations in the Salem Party, being the grazing ground or common land of the said party” (Albany Quitrents vol.7 no.67; “Petition” 1). These latter grants, totalling 7,698 morgen, together came to be known as the “commonage” and remained the communal property of the residents of Salem until the middle of the twentieth century.

The fall from peasant husbandry into agricultural capitalism began in 1939, when the erfholders of Salem, with the approval of the Village Management Board, petitioned the Supreme Court for permission to subdivide the commonage and acquire freehold title to the resultant units. The petitioners advanced five reasons for their inability “beneficially to enjoy their rights in the Commonage” (“Petition” 2), among which appears the following: “Erfholders are unable to keep a good class of stock owing to the fact that they become mixed with other and inferior stock and it

is extremely difficult to avoid disease by contamination either with Erfholders' stock or with Strangers' stock" ("Petition" 2). Astonishingly, in all the recorded history of settlement at Salem, the mention of "Strangers" appears to be the first reference to Xhosas as rural co-habitants or *neighbours* rather than as marauding enemies. But of course the reference is indirect, anonymous and hostile: "neighbour" is hardly the word the white farmers would themselves have used, and in *Disgrace* the lexically fastidious Lurie fixes upon it after some hesitation (116). The black inhabitants of Salem valley seemed to have shared the virtual invisibility of colonial domestic servants.

On February 29, 1940, the Court duly decided in favour of the 29 petitioners, with Judge Gane commenting on the anachronism of communal proprietorship: "I must say that the position of the commonage-holders in this case appears to be very similar to the position of a native tribe holding communal property" ("Judgement" 6). By 1949 the surveyors' work was done and the subdivision of the commonage was effected; in terms of the idiom Coetzee employs in *Life & Times of Michael K*, another portion of the country had been subdivided and fenced off into "camps". But what of the "Strangers," part-time labourers and tenant farmers like Petrus in *Disgrace*, whose inferior and disease-ridden cattle stood accused of contaminating the landowners' stock? The majority lived in a village on a piece of the commonage just to the east of Salem, cultivating small patches of ground on either side of where the road to Kenton-on-Sea runs today. With the new owner enforcing his freehold right, they were expelled – and obliged either to become wholly dependent wage labourers on the consolidated farms, or to seek work in Grahamstown and elsewhere. As K reflects of the inmates of Jakkalsdrif camp, "entire families [were] turned off farms they had lived on for generations" (*Life & Times of Michael K* 79): the subdivision of the Salem commonage was an early apartheid-era reprise of the consequences of the 1913 Natives Land Act and a rehearsal for subsequent removals under the Group Areas Act. A new farmhouse was built on the site of the razed village, and the community's graveyard half a kilometre away was simply abandoned to the weather and the bush, with little trace of it remaining today.

This, at least, is the historical narrative advanced by the six "community representatives" who in 2001 filed a claim, on behalf of an estimated forty families, under the Restitution of Land Rights Act of 1994. Their claim was accompanied by two documents, the first of which is entitled "The History of Salem Land":

The Salem Land was resided by black people as a community. They were farming with cattle and goats and had mealie fields. There was no fencing surrounding the land. At a certain time white people came in one by one.<sup>11</sup> They gave us some seeds to plan[t], this resulted in having our own small gardens to plant instead of ploughing fields. The people of Salem were ruling themselves, they had a mayor, his name was Dayile.

A subsection of the document entitled “The Land Size” reads as follows: “The land starts at Jimsey to kwa-Tyindi, from there to kwa-Don, from there to Qhora, from there to kwa-Smoro, from there to Duku, from there to Neken and from there to Brein.” A final section, “Land Surveying,” concludes: “Surveying of the land resulted to the dismissal of the black community. From then on, the white people owned the Salem lands.”

This document, clearly created from oral testimony, is accompanied by a “Motivation” drawn up by the Legal Resources Centre in Grahamstown, which reads in part: “The land that [black residents] used was later sold to white farmers without their consent and they were forced to offer those farmers [their] labour for survival . . . Those who offered resistance were intimidated and their lives were threatened.” It concludes: “We believe that we were illegally dispossessed of land and all our rights to it and as such we are entitled to a restitution of our rights to this land.”

Although the portion of land concerned is small, white farmers have reacted intemperately. Alleging the claim to be “frivolous and vexatious,” they have applied to the Land Claims Commissioner for its dismissal before it comes before the Land Claims Court. A decision on the matter is still pending.

What, the reader might well ask, has all this to do with Coetzee’s novel, *Disgrace*? My response would be that historical information of this sort has a bearing on the plausibility of and motivation for fictional representations, as well as on the nature of their relation to and engagement with the discourses of history. And it is consideration of these and other questions that in turn helps to establish the *significance*, however tentative or provisional, that as a community of readers we agree to attach to a fictional text. Examination of the historical record with which *Disgrace* seeks to compete (see Coetzee, “The Novel Today” 3) forcibly reminds us of some awkward facts: first, that Richard Gush of Salem was an eccentric individual whose celebrated gesture did nothing to alter the course of history, and that a mere sixteen years later there began what Coetzee (quoting Mostert) has described as “the most terrible of [the frontier] wars, ‘a war of race, perhaps the first of its kind,’” whose conduct attested to “the active, personal hatred by now felt by the Xhosa for

whites” (Coetzee, “Noël Mostert” 338). It was a war, moreover, in which Salem was repeatedly raided and twice gutted and sacked. In the long view offered by this history, the attack in *Disgrace* on the Luries, the “personal hatred” (156) that Lucy senses to be animating her rapists, is neither more nor less than a resumption of the last Frontier War. Coetzee is clearly appalled by an incident described by Mostert, involving the then Governor of the Cape, Sir Harry Smith:

Arriving at the frontier, one of Smith’s first acts had been to force a Xhosa chief named Maqoma to prostrate himself. With his knee on Maqoma’s neck, Smith announced, ‘This is to teach you that I have come to teach Kaffirland that I am chief and master here, and this is the way I shall treat the enemies of the Queen of England.’ (“Noël Mostert” 339)

One cannot help but see Lucy’s acceptance in the wake of her rape of her necessary “Subjection. Subjugation” (159) by Africans as an exact reproduction in reverse of this symbolic spectacle of unequal power relations.

Finally (and I am of course aware of just how reductive it is thus to extend the argument), it would have to be said that nobody ‘in reality’ is even remotely likely to behave in the way that Lucy Lurie does. The story of Lucy very deliberately “rivals” rather than “supplements” that of the accepted historical record (Coetzee, “The Novel Today” 2-3). Rita Barnard’s description of the function of Lurie’s last glimpse of his daughter in the novel is apt:

*Disgrace’s* penultimate scene may invite us to imagine the farm in the Eastern Cape as a place where the difficulties of cultural translation may be overcome, wordlessly, by bodily experiences: pregnancy, field labour, the materiality of dwelling on the land . . . [thus lending the novel] a muted and vulnerable utopian dimension. (Barnard 390)

To the extent that the tableau of Lucy as “*das ewig Weibliche*” and her story as a whole exist outside of history – not in the past, nor in the present nor the conceivable future – they offer an ideal or mythical solution to a problem that in the real world seems incapable of solution; that is, they offer a *pastoral* solution.

Approaching Coetzee’s novel via the local history of a small portion of what Lurie somewhat inaccurately calls “old Kaffraria” (*Disgrace* 122) must incline the reader toward a pessimistic reading of the sort that Salman Rushdie offered in his review:

Nobody in *Disgrace* understands anyone else . . . . To the novel's whites, the black inhabitants are essentially a threat – a threat justified by history. Because whites have historically oppressed blacks, it's being suggested, we must now accept that blacks will oppress whites. An eye for an eye, and so the whole world goes blind . . . the novel's revelatory vision . . . [is] of a society of conflicting incomprehensions, driven by history's absolutes. (Rushdie, "A Novel that Leaves Us Blinded")

In this vision, the only logical alternative to utter self-immolation is to remove oneself physically from the arena where "history" continues to press its impossible demands. Coetzee, of course, now lives in Australia, and no reader of *Disgrace* apprised of its context will need to question why. For those of us who have chosen to remain – more accurately, perhaps, those who have not exactly chosen but nevertheless remain – the "vulnerable and muted utopian dimension" (Barnard 390) of pastoral idealism in texts like *Disgrace* will continue to provide a semblance of hope, or at least a semblance of the hope of hope, for rehabilitation from the disgrace of our past.<sup>12</sup>

## Notes

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1. This assertion needs qualification. Grant Farred has written instructively about *Disgrace*'s "border" setting, "a locale where the residues of the past are firmly grounded" (17), a "liminal space" beyond the reach of the Constitution where "certain transgressions are endured, if not endorsed" (18); in short, a place of lawlessness where the real antagonisms within the polity are laid bare for violent resolution. In "Coetzee's Country Ways," Rita Barnard (see section II of this essay) considers the novel's rural setting in relation to the author's views on the pastoral motif in South African literature.
2. It is clear from his review of *Frontiers* that Coetzee accepts Mostert's view of the Frontier Wars as constituting the most bitter and protracted struggle in all of South Africa's bloodstained history (see "Noël Mostert" 338).

3. This, one gathers from the sources, is a defining moment in the unfolding drama: will the white man accept the public humiliation of running an errand for a “caffre”?
4. In Butler’s play, when Gush returns to his homestead and asks his wife for bread for the Xhosas, a character by the name of George Dennison interjects: “It is not meet to take the bread from the children and give it unto the dogs” (68). This is of course mere coincidence, but it is worth just noting how often the equation of people and dogs recurs in *Disgrace*, from Petrus’s wry description of himself as the “dog-man” to Lucy’s acknowledgement of the extent of her reduction to “ground level. With nothing . . . like a dog” (205).
5. “In their wars with the colony [the Xhosa] ruthlessly slayed the white farmers and their grown sons at the feet of their wives and sisters, but no woman or child was deliberately killed in any of the nine wars that were fought with increasing bitterness and ferocity, despite the fact that the same chivalrous reticence was not always reciprocated by the other side. Missionaries, too, were spared, though sometimes only just. In their magnanimity towards defeated foes and in their self-control towards women and children even at the height of their stabbing fury, they were distinctly different, for example, from the Zulu Chief Shaka’s warriors, who were not inclined to make such exceptions.” (Mostert 197)
6. Impossible, because inevitably constituted by that history and compromised by failure to meet its ethical demands. In his “Jerusalem Prize Acceptance Speech,” Coetzee put it bluntly: “[white South Africans’] talk . . . about how they love South Africa has consistently been directed towards *the land*, that is, toward what is least likely to respond to love: mountains and deserts, birds and animals and flowers.” What this masks is a “failure of love” – a failure to love those whom they have conquered – a failure of “fraternity [which] ineluctably comes in a package with liberty and equality” (“Jerusalem Prize” 97).
7. In *Boyhood*, Coetzee memorably recalls the young John’s love for his uncle’s farm, a love so intense that he expresses its meaning to himself in the “secret and sacred” phrase “*I belong to the farm*” (96). But at the same time, he senses that a coloured farmworker like Freek “belongs here more securely than the Coetzees do – if not to Voëlfontein, then to the Karoo. The Karoo is Freek’s country, his home; the Coetzees, drinking tea and gossiping on the farmhouse stoep, are like swallows, seasonal, here today, gone tomorrow . . . (87).

8. The use of several German terms associated with rural life supports this association, for example: “She is here because she loves the land and the old, *ländliche* life” (113); “Ettinger is another peasant, a man of the earth, tenacious, *eingewurzelt*” (117).
9. This is not actually true, as such assertions seldom have been in the history of Western colonialism: Bushmen have left evidence of their (admittedly nomadic) presence, in the form of some fine rock paintings on the farm known as “The Castle” in the Salem area. The Xhosa were at that time north of the Kei river. The wattle-and-daub shelter left behind by Barend D. Bouwer, the Afrikaner farmer forced to move on, became the British settlers’ first meeting place and civic centre. According to popular legend, Bouwer did not leave willingly, and: “When on top of the hill above Jarret Short’s house, which was then on the road out of Salem, he stopped his wagon, *clapped* a few *blomskote* with his long whip and reportedly laid a curse on the village. He vowed that there would be no happiness or prosperity in the future because of the injury done to him. Some have agreed that it has been fulfilled, others laugh at the idea and give examples of just the opposite” (Amos 31).
10. “Salem, with its individual ‘crofts’ and its common rights, is [laid out] uncannily like an English medieval village, except that there is no evidence of the seat of a feudal lord” (Grahamstown Historical Association [b] 23). In fact the Lower Albany settlement of Sidbury affords an even better example of such a ‘peasant’ village.
11. It is hard to say when this “certain time” might have been: one suspects that this is a fictitious myth of “original” settlement.
12. In a longer version of this paper due out in *English in Africa* 30.2 (2003), this conclusion becomes the point of departure for a meditation on the relevance for an understanding of *Disgrace* of Coetzee’s story *The Humanities in Africa*.

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