

Rex Oedipus: The Ethics of Sympathy in Recent Work by J. M. Coetzee

Kate McInturff
University of Ottawa

“[T]he prisoner of war does not belong to our tribe. We can do what we want with him. We can sacrifice him to our gods. We can cut his throat, tear out his heart, throw him on the fire. There are no laws when it comes to prisoners of war.”

—Coetzee, *Elizabeth Costello* 104

“He said, at Guantanamo Bay we’ve learned that the prisoners have to earn every single thing they have,” Karpinski said.

“He said they are like dogs, and if you allow them to believe at any point they are more than a dog then you’ve lost control of them.”

—“Abu Ghraib General”

“How humiliating,” he says finally. “Such high hopes, and to end like this.”

“Yes, I agree, it is humiliating. But perhaps that is a good point to start from again. Perhaps that is what I must learn to accept. To start at ground level. With nothing. Not with nothing but. With nothing. No cards, no weapons, no property, no rights, no dignity.”

“Like a dog.”

“Yes, like a dog.”

—Coetzee, *Disgrace* 205

Introduction

This article poses the question: what are the limits of kinship? In particular, can and ought one to insist on the kinship of human beings to one another, of real to fictional beings, and of human to animal beings? Will such an insistence lead to more ethical relations between beings—to a world in which we can say that prisoners of war and dogs alike belong to our tribe and thus cannot and should not be subjected to torture?

The figuring of relations between citizens as one of kinship has a long history in western European thought. Romanticism produced a vision of a state given birth to by its own territory—citizens figured as the children of the earth, over which the state then claims dominion. The rise of nationalism in nineteenth-century Europe transformed the eighteenth-century’s chain of being into the families of man—each nation figured as one family within a larger kinship structure (McClintock 42-44). Like the chain of being, the families of man and their national fatherlands were figured hierarchically. The rise of scientized notions of race and social Darwinism at the turn of the nineteenth century provided an effective basis for the justification of the subjugation of colonized peoples outside of

Europe; it provided an effective basis for the justification of the subjugation of those peoples within Europe who were deemed outside the national family and, finally, it provided an effective basis for the subjection of women within and without that national family (McClintock 46-51).

A contemporary critique of sovereignty, by philosopher Judith Butler, examines the extent to which patriarchal state and family structures are still discursively linked. Butler, however, does not suggest the outright rejection of the state and family analogy. Rather, she asserts that because state legitimacy is tied to and depends upon this relationship, it is precisely this relationship that can be the site of a renegotiation of the state's and family's respective structures of patriarchal authority and power. Butler asserts the need to extend our definitions of kinship as a basis for negotiating a more ethical relationship of the citizen to the state and of the state to other states (Butler "On the Limits of Sovereignty").

J.M. Coetzee's fictional character Elizabeth Costello's treatment of the kinship of beings across species provides an interesting extension of Butler's argument. Costello allegorises the failure to recognize the humanity of other humans to the failure to recognize the kinship of human beings to non-human beings. Costello's radical extension of empathy in kinship as an ethical mode is particularly challenging in the context of historical racism, which represents particular groups of human beings as more akin to animals than to humans. Costello's argument is that *all* human beings are akin to animal beings. Against the arguments that human beings have capacities, which animals do not (in particular the capacity to reason), Costello posits that the more important human capacity is that of sympathy. Specifically, she grounds her assertion of the kinship of living beings with one another on the ability of human beings to recognize a kinship with imaginative or fictional beings. This, in turn, supports an argument for the ethical role of the reading and writing of fiction.

In the novel *Disgrace*, Coetzee interrogates the consequences of embracing or denying kinship between family members, between communities of humans, between humans and animals, and, implicitly, between reader, writer, and fictional being. The novel describes the "failure of love," between South African citizens, of which Coetzee has spoken elsewhere ("Jerusalem Prize Acceptance Speech" 97). It highlights the sexual and racial violence that attends that failure and suggests that such a failure is intrinsic to patriarchal power. The novel goes on to raise further questions about Costello's ethical proposition. Through the character of David Lurie, it considers the possibility that in spite of the practical difficulties inherent in, for example, becoming vegetarian, it may be easier to sympathise with animals and fictional beings, than with other human beings in all of their complexity.

Dog People

David Lurie is a dog man. His response to the dogs featured in *Disgrace* provides an opportunity for him to display his humanity in a classic Hollywood formulation: good guys pat the dog; bad guys kick the dog. Coetzee's characterization exceeds this formulation in a number of ways; there are, nonetheless, important cultural scripts concerning the relationships of humans to dogs against which the action of the novel can be read.

Not all dogs are pets. Dogs have long been used by police, security and military forces. There is an equally long historical record of the use of dogs by those forces to torture and kill. When the use of dogs in the torture of Iraqi prisoners at the hands of US military forces was revealed, reporters placed these events in an historical tradition that included the Nazis, the US police forces in the segregated southern states, and the South African Police forces (Jackson). The use of dogs in the assault and torture of non-white South Africans was endemic under the Apartheid regime and persists into the present (Beresford). This use of dogs by state authorities is, I would argue, premised on the human-ness of that authority—on the human-ness of that authority against the inhuman or less-than-human status of the tortured. This raises several questions: first, is it enough to condemn the torturers as inhuman, leaving the categories of human/inhuman intact? Second, what is gained or lost in the assertion of kinship, as opposed to humanity, across species lines, and who gains and loses? Finally, what is the impact of this model of inter-species kinship on the structures of inter-state and intra-state relations figured in terms of kinship?

Read together, Coetzee's *Elizabeth Costello* and *Disgrace* provide an important interrogation of the nature of the human and the violence concomitant to racially and sexually exclusive definitions of that category. Both works insert into this discussion the status of animals. For the dog men of *Disgrace*, for the dog men of the US forces in Iraq, and for the dog men of the South African Police, the dogs serve an instrumental purpose: they are tools with which to demonstrate the status of those who utilize them and the status of those against whom they are utilized. They are precisely useful as a boundary marker of the human.

When humans are pictured being kind and attentive to their dogs, that kindness and attentiveness has, in theory, a different status than kindness and attentiveness offered to another human. Our kindness is most evident precisely when our difference from the dog is most evident. In the terms of enlightenment philosophy, this is a difference between those with the capacity to reason and those without that capacity. In the terms of traditional Christian doctrine, this is a difference between those possessing a soul and those without a soul. In terms of physiology, this is a difference in strength and size. In the terms of anthropology this is the difference between tool-using beings and non-tool-using beings. Our very ability to

use the dog, to accomplish a task (whether it is policing or public relations) demonstrates our difference from the dog.

When dogs are used by humans to torture and kill other humans, the dogs' function not only as instruments of the torturer's will, but also as markers of that torturer's difference from the tortured. If the use of a dog confers on the user the status of intellectual, spiritual, and physical superiority to the dog, the corollary assumption is of the inferiority of the torturer's victim. A failure to control the dog, to instrumentalize the dog, would suggest that the torturer is him/herself a potential victim of the dog and thus of the same status as the tortured. This, in turn, suggests what every human rights organization has argued of torture, that there is no basis on which torture can be justified—that there is no sufficient difference between torturer and tortured. What Coetzee's work seems to be asking us to consider is: does the assertion of the difference of the dog from the man necessarily leave an outlet for the assertion of a difference between humans, and thus a basis for the justification of the torture of one being by another?

Elizabeth Costello's first response to these questions is a direct affirmative. She argues that the assertion of difference between human and animal, predicated on the human capacity for reason, is structurally similar to the assertion of differences between humans, predicated on racism: “‘To me, a philosopher who says that the distinction between human and non-human depends on whether you have a white or a black skin, and a philosopher who says that the distinction between human and non-human depends on whether or not you know the difference between a subject and a predicate, are more alike than they are unlike’” (*Elizabeth Costello* 111). In a similar vein, Costello allegorizes the slaughter of animals to the holocaust. Costello implies, as many have argued before her, that the assertion of the racial difference of Jews, by the Nazis (following an historical European anti-Semitism) was an assertion of the human-ness of one race (Aryan) against the inhuman-ness of another race (Semitic). Costello's emphasis, however, is on the ethics of the treatment of animals.

Costello is clearly arguing against distinctions between groups (of humans and of living beings in general). The important difference of Costello's argument from those mentioned above, is that she asserts that *all* humans are like animals—as opposed to arguing that *some* humans are like animals, where others (rational, god-like) are not like animals. Nonetheless, to do so is to ignore the violence being exercised into the present moment, not only on the basis of the *difference* between human communities, but also on the basis of the *similarity* of some human communities to animals.

Where Costello insists on the assertion of sameness, Coetzee's work as a whole, does not. *Elizabeth Costello* contains a number of internal critiques of Costello's argument—both explicitly voiced by other characters and implicit in the narrative. Costello's analogy of the slaughter of animals to the holocaust brings a written response from a member of her audience, Abraham Stern, who asserts that “If Jews were treated like

cattle, it does not follow that cattle are treated like Jews” (94). Costello’s logic does not follow because, in Stern’s argument, “Man is made in the likeness of God” (94). Stern’s critique does not address Costello’s assertion that one of the primary elements of enlightenment philosophy’s argument for man’s likeness to God—reason—is only “the being of one tendency in human thought” (67). It does, however, open the door for a different critique. Costello does not precisely deny that humans and animals have distinct capacities to reason. She argues, rather, that it is another capacity of humans that should form the basis for a kinship with animals, that of “the sympathetic imagination” (80). Costello asserts that “‘there is no limit to the extent to which we can think ourselves into the being of another. There are no bounds to the sympathetic imagination.’ [. . .] ‘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, any being with whom I share the substrate of life’” (80). Even here, however, Costello does not assert that this capacity of the imagination is something that humans and animals have in common, but rather that it is a human capacity that subsequently allows the human to imagine “inhabiting another body” (96).

Costello’s emphasis on the ethical imperative to sympathise with the embodied experiences of other beings produces a further dilemma for her. While Costello asserts that “[t]here are no bounds to the sympathetic imagination” in theory, she ultimately argues that there ought to be bounds to the sympathetic imagination in practice (80). Where she admires the poet Ted Hughes for his capacity to record his embodied engagement with an animal (95-98), she recoils from her own engagement with Paul West’s representation of Nazi executioners (157). This reaction points to a paradox in Costello’s argument: how can one sympathise with those who have no sympathy for others? How can one sympathise with the torturer? Costello concludes that censorship is necessary: “she is no longer sure that people are always improved by what they read. Furthermore, she is not sure that writers who venture into the darker territories of the soul always return unscathed. She has begun to wonder whether writing what one desires, any more than reading what one desires, is in itself a good thing” (160). The very capacity that provides the basis for an assertion of kinship, and thus a more equitable treatment of all beings, must be curtailed.

The argument for the exercise of human imagination in the name of sympathy for and tolerance of other beings, human and animal, is one which I would advocate equally. However, I would argue that not all acts of sympathy and tolerance are equal. Costello sidesteps the question of the difference in power between animals and humans. She further sidesteps the question of the difference in power between human communities—that is, the power of human communities to define another group of humans and a group of animals as alike, but without dignity and undeserving of sympathy. As Elleke Boehmer argues, the assertion of sexual difference historically distinguishes women from men on the basis that women are less rational and more like animals than men. Boehmer points out that a

woman, in the philosophical and political tradition which Costello seeks to interrogate, is “always-already a creature of dumb animality”; thus to assert the kinship of humans and animals, for women, “is a matter of no change—a continuation of subjection which it would be preposterous to propose as redemptive” (350). While Costello would like to see dignity and sympathy extended to all, she fails to address the question of how one would achieve the radical shift in power relations, which would make that possible.

Where the character Costello asserts that all acts of imaginative sympathy are inherently equal, Coetzee’s novel *Disgrace* raises the question of the difference between sympathising with the human and the animal, of sympathising with the torturer and the tortured, and of sympathising with the rapist and the raped. In so doing, he places the question of power relations at the centre of his novel. *Disgrace* considers not only the possibilities of extending sympathy, but also the structural difficulties that work against it.

In brief, *Disgrace* tells the story of a white, South African professor of English Literature, David Lurie.¹ David has an affair with a student, Melanie Isaacs, which ends in his dismissal from the University. He then goes to stay with his daughter Lucy at her rural farm. While there, three black men break into the farmhouse, beat him, set him on fire and lock him in a bathroom. They then rape Lucy. Lucy refuses to report the rape to the police. In the aftermath of the incident David spends increasing amounts of time caring for stray dogs at a local shelter and composing an operetta based on the life of Byron’s Italian mistress. The latter half of the novel comprises his attempts to understand what has happened on the farm, to understand his daughter’s withdrawn reaction, and to understand his own complicity in patterns of sexual and racial violence.

Dog Man

David Lurie is a dog: a Casanova. Over the course of the novel, *Disgrace*, he becomes a dog-man. In both the pursuit of women and the care for animals, the character of David Lurie finds himself confronted with the limits of reason and the limits of his own ‘sympathetic imagination.’ The novel questions the limits of David’s capacity for sympathy—of his ability to both “be the men” and “be the woman” in the scene of sexual violence (*Disgrace* 160). It interrogates David’s resistance to considering either position in terms of what it reveals about the relationship of patriarchal kinship structures to sexual violence. It also asks the reader to consider the tension between what Coetzee has called “the authority of the

¹ To say that the categories of race, such as those defined under the Apartheid system, are hateful fabrications, is not to say that racism doesn’t exist, or that South African society has ceased to be affected by those categorizations; as Sneja Gunew succinctly points out: “while ‘race’ has no basis in fact, racism does” (33). They are powerful categorizations and therefore important to understanding how relations of power are being played out in the novel. For the purposes of this work I will use the designations of ‘black,’ ‘white,’ and ‘coloured’ to speak about the socially constructed racial identities of the characters.

suffering body” and the limits of sympathy (“Interview: Autobiography and Confession” 248).

From the opening pages of the novel, David is described as someone who has strict control of his ‘animal nature’: “he has, to his mind, solved the problem of sex rather well” (*Disgrace* 1). His solution to “the problem of sex” is to reduce it to an economic exchange between himself and the sex-worker Soroya. David’s claims to rationality, however, begin to fail almost immediately—he attempts to engage Soroya outside of their contractual appointments. Rejected by Soroya, he begins an affair with a young student, Melanie Isaacs. David fails to recognize the extent to which his rational engagement with others in the novel is not sufficient for him to comprehend the experiences, desires, fears, and intentions of others. With this failure, the novel appears to be making a distinction between the capacity and willingness to *understand* and the capacity and willingness to *sympathise*.

David understands that there is a difference of status between Melanie and himself. He understands that this difference of status is, in part, a difference of power. Indeed, David feels compelled to remind Melanie of his administrative power over her, within the system of the University: “Melanie, I have responsibilities. At least go through the motions. Don’t make the situation more complicated than it need be” (35). David’s abuse, however, is not limited to his role in assigning Melanie a grade in his class. In their second sexual encounter David assaults an unwilling Melanie: “Not rape, not quite that, but undesired nevertheless, undesired to the core” (25). This moment of understanding, however, does not extend to sympathy. A member of the University Disciplinary Committee, Farodia Rassool, points out David’s failure to sympathise with Melanie and with Melanie’s position of power relative to his position of power: “all of a sudden it is not abuse of a young woman he is confessing to, just an impulse he could not resist, with no mention of the pain he has caused, no mention of the long history of exploitation of which this is part” (53). Farodia Rassool’s final comment can be read in multiple ways. The “long history of exploitation” could be a reference to the exploitation of women by men, a reference to the exploitation specifically of (female) students by (male) professors, or it could be a reference to the exploitation of, in the terms of apartheid categorizations, ‘black’ or ‘coloured’ (female) South Africans by white (male) South Africans (Graham; Cornwell).² Where David suggests that his own failure of love is a failure to follow “similar impulses” of Eros—to manage the problem of sex too well (*Disgrace* 52), Farodia’s comments suggest that his failure of love and of

² Although there has been much critical speculation about what Melanie’s status might be under the racial categorizations of Apartheid, there are no specific descriptions of the color of Melanie’s skin in the novel. The absence of explicit racial markers shifts the reader’s attention to the other forms of distinction used by David, amongst which are the distinctions of scholarly knowledge, of age, and of professional status.

sympathy is part of a larger failure—the failure of love and of sympathy that underwrote Apartheid.

In a speech delivered in 1987, Coetzee states: “At the heart of the unfreedom of the hereditary masters of South Africa is a failure of love. To be blunt: their love is not enough today and has not been enough since they arrived on the continent; furthermore, their talk, their excessive talk, about how they love is, toward what is least likely to respond to love: mountains and deserts, birds and animals and flowers” (“Jerusalem Prize” 97). When David follows ‘the impulse of Eros’ and seduces Melanie, he perceives this as him being true to his nature—which he analogizes to the nature of an animal. In an attempt to explain his actions to his daughter, David argues that his desire for Melanie was part of his nature, which he compares to a dog following a bitch in heat (*Disgrace* 90). In his explanation of his actions to his daughter, David attempts to sympathise with an animal. However, in so doing David sees only his own ‘nature’—or rather he identifies a being whose nature is like his own. Thus, David understands what he already knows—his own desires. This first attempt at sympathy with another being can be read as a failure in two ways. First, it is a failure of sympathy in Elizabeth Costello’s terms. David does not understand the dog in this analogy, as a being that is not similar to him, something that is other than him. Second, it is a failure to sympathise with the object of his desire—a failure to sympathise with Melanie as a being who is not like him, who is other than him and who has other desires than his. David’s engagement with Melanie is an engagement with his own desire. This leads David to perceive Melanie in an externalized way: as an object. He perceives her as defined primarily by beauty and the ability of her beauty to inspire desire in himself. David tells Melanie: “a woman’s beauty does not belong to her alone. It is part of the bounty she brings into the world. She has a duty to share it” (16). In this conclusion, David fails both to sympathise with Melanie—to imagine what her desires might be—and to consider the consequences of his own line of reasoning, in which men are dogs and women do not belong to themselves.

The character of David is, himself, notoriously unsympathetic to the novel’s readers. The portrayal of David as stubborn, self-indulgent, and sexist (or misogynist) is itself a provocation to the reader to consider the difficulties inherent in sympathising with another being and to avoid the failures represented by David’s own attempts at sympathy. Critical analysis of the novel often involves attempts to understand David’s motivations and some critics consider his transformation admirable. No critic, to my knowledge, claims to have character traits in common with David, to be like him. This represents a success measured against David’s own failures. Nonetheless, the novel seems to ask us to consider not only David in his otherness, but also to consider what it is we might have in common with him. Do we, in David’s words, have it in us to “be the men” (160)?

Dog Women

Following his failure to sympathise with Melanie's desires and interests, David turns to his relationship with another woman—his daughter Lucy. That David's deepest engagement with the feelings of another should first be with a member of his family seems unsurprising in the context of a patriarchal society. Such a society justifies the authority of the patriarch on the basis that the patriarch is not only better able to exercise that authority (wisely, rationally), but also has the good intention to do so (emotionally, instinctually). When Lucy is raped, however, David's first response is to try to *understand* the rape, rather than to *sympathise* with Lucy or the rapists: "Too many people, too few things. What there is must go into circulation, so that everyone can have a chance to be happy for a day. That is the theory; hold to the theory and the comforts of theory. Not human evil, just a vast circulatory system, to whose workings pity and terror are irrelevant. That is how one must see life in this country: in its schematic aspect. Otherwise one could go mad" (98). Reducing rape, murder, and torture to the terms of political economy, however, provides neither consolation, nor a defence against further violence.

David's attempt to understand the motives of the men who attack him and rape Lucy in rational-economic terms returns him to the explanation he provides for his seduction of Melanie—a woman does not belong to herself (16). David's assertion echoes the discourse of Levi-Strauss's anthropology, in which women are objects of exchange between men; it echoes the discourse of European colonialism in which non-European women and men are objects of exchange between Europeans; it echoes the economic reasoning of Malthus, satirized by Swift and commented on by Elizabeth Costello, in which colonized Irish populations become objects of exchange for English colonists. As Costello points out of Swift's parable, the logical conclusion to be drawn from this form of reasoning is that the books can be balanced by the consumption of the group which is "too menny" (*Disgrace* 146).³ The books can be balanced by the consumption of Irish children by English colonists in Swift's example, the consumption of animals by humans in Costello's example, and the consumption of women by men in David's example.

The application of this line of reasoning to the rape suggests a simple role-reversal between colonizer and colonized. The black men, having been reduced to objects (to the value of their labour) by Apartheid, now reduce the white man and woman to objects. As an object, David is of little use; he is therefore disposed of, burnt. As an object, Lucy is put to the same use as Melanie: she is treated as an object of sexual use. The dogs on Lucy's farm also have an historical use—the policing and torture of blacks—but they are not put to use for the policing and torture of others

³ David quotes the Thomas Hardy novel, *Jude the Obscure*, in reference to his work euthanizing stray dogs. In the Hardy novel, three children are killed "because we are too menny".

by the three attackers; instead, the dogs are killed. Nor can Lucy's rape and the setting of David on fire be explained in terms of use-value alone.

The alternative or ancillary explanation of the attack on the farm is one which David initially attempts to censor. Just as Elizabeth Costello turns from portrayals of human evil, David asserts that to confront the events on the farm in terms of "human evil" would be to "go mad" (98). For both novels this is a moment of crisis; at the moment in which David appears most able to sympathise with other beings and the embodied experience of those beings, he curtails that capacity of the sympathetic imagination on the grounds that it would force a confrontation with evil.

The novel goes further in suggesting the limits of sympathy. Following the assault, David's attempts to console Lucy are repeatedly rejected by both Lucy and her friend Bev Shaw. Lucy and Bev assert that David cannot understand Lucy's experience (99; 112; 134). David, however, ultimately considers that he may not be able to sympathise with Lucy's experience, but he can sympathise with the experience of the rapists: "*You don't understand, you weren't there*, says Bev Shaw. Well, she is mistaken. Lucy's intuition is right after all: he does understand; 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?" (160) These two corollary assertions—that he has it in him to be the man and that he should attempt to be the woman—each raise questions about the ethics of sympathy.

By contending that he can imagine what it is to be one of the rapists, David is asserting that he can, imaginatively, occupy the position of a black South African man. Yet, the black South African man with whom David has the most contact in the novel, Lucy's neighbour Petrus, is one with whom he is unwilling to sympathise. David does not make any sustained attempts to sympathise with Petrus prior to the attack; following the attack, he curtails absolutely any possible imaginative sympathy with Petrus: "The worst, the darkest reading would be that Petrus engaged three strange men to teach Lucy a lesson, paying them off with the loot. But he cannot believe that, it would be too simple. The real truth, he suspects, is something far more—he casts around for the word—anthropological, something it would take months to get to the bottom of, months of patient, unhurried conversation with dozens of people and the offices of an interpreter" (118). In this, David perhaps follows Elizabeth Costello's assertion that one should respect the otherness of the other. This is an imperative that one can see at work elsewhere in Coetzee's work—most notably in the mute figure of Friday in the novel *Foe*.

While much has been said of the problems that attend speaking on behalf of an other, not least historical assertion on the part of the Apartheid regime that they speak for all South Africans, to refuse sympathy is equally problematic. In refusing to put in the "months of patient, unhurried conversation," David insists on a division between himself and Petrus on 'anthropological' grounds. This may constitute an ethical recognition of a profound cultural division between his own

experience and perception of the world and Petrus's experience and perception of the world. However, there is a failure of love or desire here in as far as David's love or desire to sympathise with Petrus is not sufficient to motivate him to attempt a long "unhurried" engagement with Petrus.

There is a further possibility for sympathy here—one which perhaps explains David's resistance to either 'be the men' or to 'be the woman.' Elizabeth Costello argues that while our engagements with others are imaginative, they are not necessarily an engagement of intellects but rather one of bodies: "it is a matter—I emphasize—not of inhabiting another mind but of inhabiting another body" (*Elizabeth Costello* 96). This assertion allows Costello to pose the possibility of sympathy without ignoring radical difference in being. This is a solution of which Coetzee speaks directly in a 1990 interview with David Atwell. Coetzee argues:

If I look back over my own fiction, I see a simple (simple-minded?) standard erected. That standard is the body. Whatever else, the body is not 'that which is not', and the proof that it *is* is the pain it feels. The body with its pain becomes a counter to the endless trials of doubt. (One can get away with such crudeness in fiction; one can't in philosophy, I'm sure.)

Not grace, then, but at least the body. Let me put it baldly: in South Africa it is not possible to deny the authority of suffering and therefore of the body. It is not possible, not for logical reasons, not for ethical reasons (I would not assert the ethical superiority of pain over pleasure), but for political reasons, for reasons of power. And let me again be unambiguous: it is not that one *grants* the authority of the suffering body: the suffering body *takes* this authority: that is its power. To use other words: its power is undeniable. ("Interview: Autobiography and Confession" 248)

The assertion of the authority of the suffering body does, as Coetzee argues above, make central the question of differences in power. Further, it allows for a recognition of the other as an other—a recognition that is not a totalizing representation of other beings, but rather one which recognizes both commonality—a common embodiment—and difference—in power and in suffering. That said, in focusing on other beings as bodies, this formulation risks reducing the other being to the status of object—of a physical machine capable of providing labor or sexual pleasure. The crucial and, I would argue, *ethical* difference between different modes of recognizing the authority of the body, is in recognizing the body not in its utilitarian functions (in its ability to provide labor or sexual pleasure) but precisely in its non-utilitarian functions (as the source of "pity and terror") (*Disgrace* 98). The difference in these forms of recognition lies in the difference between body as object and body as being.

Coetzee's assertion of the importance of imagining the body of the other in its non-utilitarian being allows for an ethics of sympathy that does not deny difference or objectify difference as it recognizes it. David insists on caring not only for the living and unwanted dogs in Bev Shaw's practice, but also the dead bodies of the dogs who have been euthanized.

In this insistence on honouring the dogs' bodies, he claims a more ethical relationship with another being. The dead dogs are neither of use to him, nor demanding of him, yet he extends his sympathy to them—answering his own question: “Is it proper to mourn the death of beings who do not practise mourning among themselves?” (127) Derek Attridge argues that this extension of the sympathetic imagination and the non-utilitarian actions that it motivates redeem David from his disgrace: “In this dedication we find the operation of something I’ve called *grace*, and perhaps—whatever ungainliness and awkwardness we associate with Lurie—even a touch of its derivatives, *gracefulness* and *graciousness*. Where Coetzee differs from many others who have taken similar positions is his unblinking acceptance of the non-instrumental nature of this stance” (117).

This model of ethics, however, raises further concerns. *Disgrace* places the question of egotism centrally in the novel. Through David, it asks us to consider how one can escape one's (natural?) egotism, in which the beings of others simply reflect one back to oneself. Is the respectful burial and mourning of the dogs an attempt to be “with nothing,” in Lucy's terms (*Disgrace* 205) or is it an attempt at self-dramatization on David's part (in which case the dogs are being instrumentalized after all)? Further, the novel asks us to consider whether or not the claims of kinship allow for a (natural or unnatural) distribution of sympathy that is not equal—should David care more for the dignity of Lucy's body than for that of the dead dogs? Is this distribution ethical, or must our understanding of kinship be renegotiated in order to ensure that the authority of suffering bodies is not, in fact, ignored?

Dog Lessons

Confronted with Melanie's use of institutional power to challenge the legitimacy of his use of authority, David leaves town. Confronted by his inability to communicate with Petrus, David gives up. Confronted by Lucy's refusal of sympathy for him and her insistence on his complicity in the abuse of power over her, David leaves the farm. Confronted even with the pain concomitant to caring for an animal, David gives the dog over to death. David first attributes his blindness to consumption by the flame of desire. Over the course of the novel he is literally blinded by the men who set him on fire. There is also, arguably, a more wilful turning away involved in the novel which raises questions about the nature of the obscene and the ethical consequences of rendering events or individuals invisible—of failing to recognize the power of the suffering body. In particular, I would argue that what David attempts to render obscene are the violent consequences of patriarchy as a model of kinship in the family and in the state.

Disgrace has been read by a number of critics as, in part, an allegorical critique of the work of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (Attridge 2000; Diala 2001; Farred 2002; Marais 2000; Rose

2002). David's temporary blinding, the depiction of a shifting relationship between father and daughter, and the novel's concern with burial and mourning also suggest parallels to the Oedipus story. The Oedipus story has been at the center of a series of debates about the relationship of the family to the state and of the state to the family. This comparison opens up further questions about the relationship of the state to the individual and of the models of kinship that structure them. In considering relations of power in terms of the relationships of individuals to one another, there is a danger in losing sight of the structures by which that power is established and supported. For this reason, I argue that questions raised by the novel must be considered not only in themselves, but also with respect to the relationship of the individual to the family, to the community, and to the state.

Kinship can be both the basis for an assertion of sympathy and the basis for an assertion of power over the other. The assertion of kinship creates both external exclusions, defining as other those who are not kin, and internal exclusions, defining those who do not (and ought not) occupy a particular role within the kinship structure. Positing kinship as the basis for an ethics of care or even simply of recognition (of the authority of the suffering body) is therefore problematic if the model of kinship is the western patriarchal model that, as Ann Laura Stoler, Anne McClintock and others have argued, is inherently hierarchical. Stoler and McClintock have demonstrated that the naturalising of relations of power within the European family—of men over women and of adults over children—was inextricably linked to the naturalising of class relations within the state and of relations between races in European colonies during the nineteenth century. Judith Butler has argued that the state's authority over its citizens and the father's authority over his kin cannot be separated from one another. She poses the questions: "whether there can be kinship—and by kinship I do not mean the 'family' in any specific form—without the support and mediation of the state, and whether there can be the state without the family as its support and mediation. And further, when kinship comes to pose a threat to state authority and the state sets itself in a violent struggle against kinship, can these very terms sustain their independence from one another?" (*Antigone's Claim* 5)

In answering 'no' to these questions, Butler's argument also suggests that Lucy's assertion that her rape is "a purely private matter" is untenable (*Disgrace* 112). It is precisely "in this place, at this time" that sexual relations between black and white citizens of South Africa are a public matter (112). Under Apartheid, sexual relations between black and white citizens were a legislated matter. They were also, paradoxically an obscene matter—a public prohibition of sexual relations between black and white and a rendering invisible (off-stage/ob-scene) of those sexual relations.

What Melanie makes public with respect to David, and what the rapists make public with respect to Lucy, lays the foundation for a radical critique of David's patriarchal authority and, ultimately, of the state's

authority. In a 1990 essay on censorship in South Africa, Coetzee characterizes the concern of the censorship agency of the South African government with privacy and, in particular, with sexual privacy: “‘At the basis for the protection accorded [by the law] to sexual relationships lies the respect for privacy and dignity,’ writes van Rooyen in his own person. ‘At the basis of control of the arts’ lie (*inter alia*) ‘respect for the privacy of the sexual act [and] for the privacy of the nude human body’” (“Censorship in South Africa” 320). There is an imperative for the Apartheid state not only to respect the privacy of sexual relations, but actually to ensure that such relations remain private. Sexual relations between individuals of different racial designations, under the Apartheid system, threaten the very boundaries that that system attempts to demarcate. Specifically, the existence of ‘racially-mixed’ children undermines the notion of absolute otherness that justifies the radical inequities in power within the Apartheid state. Sexual union very literally asserts kinship, where kinship is denied by the state. There is, perhaps, a further fear here. Klaus Peterson has argued of censorship, particularly of attempts to censor sexual material that it derives from a fear or anxiety about the sexual act itself—an anxiety about the loss of bodily integrity involved in the sexual act. Thus, what the state seeks to render off-stage, is a chaos of undifferentiated bodily boundaries as well as of undifferentiated racial boundaries. This un-differentiation is a profound threat to the foundation of apartheid authority and self-justification—of ‘apart-ness’ as a whole. It is profoundly disturbing to a social, political, legal, economic, cultural, sexual system of apart-ness to dissolve that boundary of the ‘parts’ that are not of each other.

The question remains: does the making public of these relations allow for greater equity or even sympathy between citizens and kin? In his essay on censorship, Coetzee goes on to point out that a particular structure of sexual and racial relations are written into the designation of the private and the obscene: “It seems to be no accident, however, that the PAB [Publications Appeal Board], in its judgment on *Magersfontein*, identifies the outrage of the reader as a man’s outrage (‘The broad public. . . personified in the average man’) and elsewhere identifies what is outraged by such obscenity as a man’s feeling for a woman’s honor: ‘The average man puts a high premium on the sexual privacy of woman’; the PAB objects to ‘the dishonor of the female body’” (“Censorship in South Africa” 320). This points to the fact that the rape of white women by black men has, far from being rendered obscene, been publicized in an attempt to foster white antipathy towards the black population (Graham). Further, the depictions of the rape of white women by black men function not to establish the sameness of those involved but rather to establish the difference of those involved: to render the black men inhuman, and utterly other in being—‘like dogs.’ This then is simply another instance of a failure of love and sympathy.

The rape of black women by white men follows a different logic. It would prove to be a threat to the basis of white patriarchal authority if the

raped women were recognized as beings--as human kin. Given the analogy of state to family, the abuse by white men (figured as benevolent patriarchs) of black women (figured as children) should metaphorically break the incest prohibition. Therefore the subjugation of the rape must be predicated on white patriarch's refusal of kinship with the black woman. The rape is made possible by a total failure of love and sympathy. The raped woman is not recognized as a being, as human kin. Thus, the incest prohibition is not broken.

As I have argued above, the prohibition against rape is, in part, a prohibition against the production of illegitimate heirs—a prohibition against rendering ambiguous the question of who belongs to the family and who does not—of who carries the patrimony and who does not. This is a question that is closely tied to property ownership, rights of inheritance, and enfranchisement. The Apartheid state effectively rendered all claims to authority by black men and women illegitimate—in as far as it radically proscribed their movements, powers, and property rights. As such, the rape of black women does not constitute a violation of the patrimony of black men, because no such patrimony is recognized by the state. Thus, both the kinship of black women and the kinship of black men within the state family and within the domestic family are denied in the act of sexual violence.

What both Coetzee's work and Butler's work makes clear, however, is that it is not sufficient to condemn the act of sexual violence alone without a concomitant interrogation of the logic of patriarchal authority which facilitates such a radical refusal of sympathy in the first place. Coetzee provides an example of precisely this pitfall. When David Lurie decides that his actions with respect to Melanie have constituted a transgression, he does not turn to Melanie. David turns instead to Melanie's father. In so doing, David appears not to be capable of 'being the woman' in the scene of sexual violence—in that he is still most able to extend his sympathetic imagination to another man, another father: Mr. Isaacs. Thus, the making public of this particular sexual relation, of the relations of power involved, does not de-legitimize those relations of power in themselves—but rather David's actions in particular. The intimations of incest, which haunt David's relationship with Melanie, suggest again David's failure to behave appropriately as a father. These intimations do not suggest that the authority of the father in general is not legitimate—that it produces violence and suffering itself.

David is confronted with the logical conclusion of the assertion of patriarchal authority by Lucy's decision to ally herself with Petrus, as his wife or ward. Lucy's rape will be made public, ultimately, through the increasingly apparent fact of her pregnancy. In order to ensure that it remains a 'private matter,' indeed, a family matter, she seeks out a legitimate patrimony for her child. In this she is arguably as abject before Petrus's power as she was before the power of the rapists. Petrus's power is, as David points out, predicated in part on the threat that without his protection the rapists might return and rape Lucy again (*Disgrace* 202).

Further, Petrus is seen to demonstrate his power as a patriarch by extending his protection to the youngest of the three rapists, Pollux, specifically because he identifies Pollux as “my family, my people” (201).

Lucy sends her father to negotiate with the neighboring patriarch, Petrus. In this she follows the prescriptions of patriarchal authority to the letter. In these actions she forces David to confront the dehumanization of women wrought by this authority:

‘Yes, I agree, it is humiliating. But perhaps that is a good point to start from again. Perhaps that is what I must learn to accept. To start at ground level. With nothing. Not with nothing but. With nothing. No cards, no weapons, no property, no rights, no dignity.’

‘Like a dog.’

‘Yes, like a dog’” (205).

David, as well as several critics of the novel, read this in terms of the racial history of South Africa—as Lucy’s abject sacrifice of herself as a form of reparation for past racial violence (Boehmer; Graham; Splendore). There is, however, an additional emphasis here. In both the encounter with Mr. Isaacs and in a conversation with Bev Shaw, David is asked if he has learned a lesson (*Disgrace* 172; 210). The lesson, in both cases, would seem to have patriarchal authority as one of its central terms. This is not to say that the question of sexual violence and racial violence are separated, far from it. Rather, it considers that patriarchal authority cannot be separated from the structures of racial and sexual authority exercised by the Apartheid state. As Butler suggests, kinship structures and state structures are inextricably linked. The authority of the father in one is the authority of the agents of the state in the other.

The lesson that Lucy appears to have learned from the rape is that of her abjection within a patriarchal system. It does not require a very great extension of her sympathetic imagination for Lucy to consider the being of an animal. She is herself already treated as an object of public use by the men who rape her. Their power is demonstrated through their ability to utilize her—for pleasure, for revenge, for profit.

Disgrace has been strongly criticised by the ANC amongst others for its depiction of black men as rapists (South African Human Rights Commission). In this it risks reducing the black men equally to the level of animal—of dehumanized being. Certainly David’s characterizations of the black men underscore this. He refers to the soul-less-ness of the leader of the three men and refers to the youngest of the three as a “jackal boy” (*Disgrace* 202). However, the novel also contains both an extended critique of the abuse of power by a white character: David Lurie, and the representation of a complex black character: Petrus. In this, I would argue, it asks the reader to learn a different lesson: not that black men are like animals, but rather that patriarchal systems of authority make animals of us all. Critic Paola Splendore has argued that *Disgrace* is representative of an ongoing critique in Coetzee’s work of the use of the patriarchal family model to shore up the legitimacy of the state and the “race”:

I am convinced that Coetzee's impossible *Familienromane* contain and express, within their 'private' framework, the denial of a fantasy concerning origins and belonging built up in Afrikaner historiography and literature, the indictment of the injustice and lack of love of the colonial system and the representation of the failure of a whole colonial culture and ideology ascribable to the generation of fathers. The amputated families of Coetzee's novels mirror in their deformity another larger distortion, perpetrated by the colonial system and exacerbated by apartheid. (Splendore 149)

Splendore's comments draw attention specifically to the centrality of the relationship of kinship to the state in a state predicated on the notion of a racially pure white group of citizens. Where I differ from Splendore is in her conclusion that Lucy's new maternal role allows her to redress the failure of love that marked Apartheid—to make a new, inter-racial family (159). Here I follow Boehmer in asserting that Lucy's abjection cannot be redemptive. It is an acceptance of her role as object within that old patriarchal structure and therefore only reaffirms the divisions of power and of human-ness supported by that system.

In this sense, Lucy, the rapists, and Petrus, have learned the lessons of white, patriarchal authority very well. They have learned that the authority of the father is constituted by the subjection of other beings. This raises the question of how that authority (and thus the subjection of others) might be undone. For Butler and for Coetzee's characters, Elizabeth Costello and David Lurie, the question of death, mourning, and burial are central to understanding the ethical obligations imposed by kinship. An extension of imaginative sympathy may require non-utilitarian actions but, I would argue, they do require actions. Melanie's father, Mr. Isaacs, makes this point to David: "The question is not, are we sorry? The question is, what lesson have we learned? The question is, what are we going to do now that we are sorry?" (Coetzee, *Disgrace* 172).

The actions which both Coetzee and Butler consider are the actions associated with the mourning and burial of the dead. These are equally central concerns of Sophocles's final play in the Oedipus trilogy: *Antigone*.⁴ Judith Butler employs Freud's theories of the role of mourning and melancholia in the work of subject formation to consider how the emotion of grief might bridge the gap between ethical being and ethical action. In light of the events of September 11th, 2001, she writes:

⁴ Antigone's insistence on honouring her dead brother by observing the rites of burial, even at the expense of her own life, can be read as the assertion of the importance of private relations of kinship over the demands of the state. I would follow Butler, however, in reading Antigone's actions as performing the impossibility of the division between kinship and state-citizen relations. In all three plays the state is, after all, represented by members of Antigone's family. Furthermore, it is precisely the undoing of family relations which causes the turmoil within the state—from the plagues brought down by Oedipus's unwitting act of incest to the deaths of the potential heirs to the kingdom as a result of the conflicts between Creon and Antigone.

That we can be injured, that others can be injured, that we are subject to death at the whim of another, are all reasons for both fear and grief. What is less certain, however, is whether the experiences of vulnerability and loss have to lead straightaway to military violence and retribution. There are other passages. If we are interested in arresting cycles of violence to produce less violent outcomes, it is no doubt important to ask what, politically, might be made of grief besides a cry for war. (*Precarious Life* xii)

In the moment of vulnerability and grief (for our kin), Butler argues that we might be able to consider the common vulnerability of human beings and thus the kinship of human beings in their experiences of 'pity and terror.' This emotive and embodied understanding might then lead us to act in a manner which does not cause suffering for others. As Coetzee succinctly puts it: "if all of us imagined violence as violence against ourselves, perhaps we would have peace" (Coetzee, "Interview: South African Writers" 337).

Elizabeth Costello considers a particular instance of this proposition in imagining the ethical failures of average German citizens under the Nazi regime: "They did not say, 'How would it be if I were burning?' They did not say, 'I am burning, I am falling in ash'" (Coetzee, *Elizabeth Costello* 79). Coetzee's novel offers a further insight into the significance of mourning and burial as an ethical act, over and above other kinds of emotional and imaginative relationships. David's relationships with Lucy and with Melanie involve, in part at least, the consideration of how these relationships define him (as a father and as a 'servant of Eros'). His relationship with the condemned and dead dogs begins in a similar vein—he imagines himself in the role of "harijan" or untouchable outcast (*Disgrace* 146). To have a relationship with a dead being, however, takes the question of sympathetic imagination a step further. In Costello's terms, it isn't just a question of imagining how it would feel to be burning; it is a question of imagining how it would feel to be burnt. In extending one's imaginative sympathy to the dead, there is perhaps the potential here for a sublimation of being in oneself. In extending his sympathy to the dead dogs, David is taking Lucy's advice to be "with nothing" (205). He describes his actions precisely as "less than little: nothing" (220). This can be read as meaning both that his actions are of no significance to the dogs and that in performing them David is himself being with nothing.

The link between sympathy and action raises further question about the objects of our sympathy. In a published response to Elizabeth Costello's (fictional) argument about the lives of animals, noted animal rights advocate and philosopher Peter Singer imagines a Socratic dialogue with his daughter in that she expresses surprise that he would save her, rather than the family's pet dog, in the event of a fire. Singer responds that this imperative to act to save her is obvious, although he provides no reason for his choice. Likewise, during the attack on the farm in *Disgrace*, the intimation of David's own vulnerability is followed immediately with an intimation of his daughter's vulnerability and his attempts to protect her: "he can burn, he can die; and if he can die, then so can Lucy, above

all Lucy!" (96). Following his daughter's rejection of his attempts to sympathise and to act to limit her vulnerability, David turns to the dogs, whose bodies he consigns to the fire of the incinerator (220). There is, in fact, no reason for the choice of the daughter over the dog within Costello's or Butler's arguments. Thus, David's attempts to sympathize with his daughter and with the dogs are equally ethical in her terms. His actions in burying the dogs are equal to his attempts to protect his daughter. There is no particular claim to be made by those with whom we are intimate, or with whom we share common ancestors, experiences, or even species. However, to recognize the authority of the suffering body or of the animal in its otherness, one must recognize its otherness.

To say the state and the family are alike is not to say that the state and the family are the same thing. For the state to be like the family, there must be a family. For the dog to be treated like the daughter, there must be a daughter. If there is no family, there is no point from which to re-imagine our relations with our broader community. Moreover, if we treat our daughters like dogs, there is little to be gained in treating dogs like daughters. The renegotiation of our first encounters with vulnerability and with the bodies of others may yet form an important and compelling foundation for the future successes and failures of love of the state. In sum, "Dorothy was right [...] for whom, anyway, do we do the things that lead to Nobel Prizes if not for our mothers?" (Coetzee, "Nobel Banquet Speech").

Works Cited

- "Abu Ghraib General Says Told Prisoners 'Like Dogs.'" Tuesday, June 15, 2004. Reuters. Online. www.reuters.com.
- Attridge, Derek. "Age of Bronze, State of Grace: Music and Dogs in Coetzee's *Disgrace*." *Novel* 34.1 (2000): 98-121.
- . "J. M. Coetzee's *Disgrace*: An Introduction." *Interventions* 4.3 (2002): 315-320.
- Beresford, David. "Focus: Scandal In South Africa: The Dogs Of Racism Set Loose: A Smuggled Video Unmasking Police Brutality Recalls The Worst Horrors Of The Apartheid Years." *The Observer*. Guardian Newspapers Limited. November 12, 2000: 20.
- Boehmer, Elleke. "Not Saying Sorry, Not Speaking Pain: Gender Implications in *Disgrace*." *Interventions* 4.3 (2002): 342-351.
- Butler, Judith. *Antigone's Claim: Kinship Between Life And Death*. New York: Columbia UP, 2000.
- . *Precarious Life: The Powers of Mourning and Violence*. London: Verso, 2004.
- Coetzee, J.M. "Censorship in South Africa." *Doubling the Point: Essays and Interviews*. Ed. David Attwell. Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1992. 315-334.
- . *Disgrace*. New York: Penguin, 1999.
- . *Elizabeth Costello*. London: Secker and Warburg, 2003.

- . "Interview: Autobiography and Confession." *Doubling the Point: Essays and Interviews*. Ed. David Attwell. Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1992. 243-250.
- . "Jerusalem Prize Acceptance Speech." *Doubling the Point: Essays and Interviews*. Ed. David Attwell. Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1992. 96-99.
- . "Nobel Banquet Speech." December 10, 2003. The Nobel Foundation, 2003.
http://nobelprize.org/nobel_prizes/literature/laureates/2003/coetzee-speech-e.html
- Cornwell, Gareth. "Realism, Rape, and J. M. Coetzee's Disgrace." *Critique* 43.4 (2002): 307-322.
- Diala, Isidore. "Nadine Gordimer, J.M. Coetzee, and Andre Brink: Guilt, Expiation, and the Reconciliation Process in Post-Apartheid South Africa." *Journal of Modern Literature* 25.2 (2001-2002): 50-68.
- Farred, Grant. "The Mundanacity of Violence: Living in a State of Disgrace." *Interventions* 4.3 (2002): 352-362.
- Graham, Lucy V. "Reading the Unspeakable: Rape in J.M. Coetzee's *Disgrace*." *Journal of Southern African Studies* 29.2 (2003): 433-445.
- Gunew, Sneja. "Postcolonialism and Multiculturalism." *Yearbook of English Studies* 27 (1997): 22-39.
- Jackson, Derrick Z. "The Dogs of War." *Boston Globe*. June 18, 2004. Online edition. www.boston.com
- Marais, Michael. "'Little Enough, Less than Little: Nothing': Ethics, Engagement, and Change in the Fiction of J.M. Coetzee." *Modern Fiction Studies* 46.1 (2000): 159-183.
- McClintock, Anne. *Imperial Leather*. London: Routledge, 1995.
- Petersen, Klaus. "Introduction." *Interpreting Censorship in Canada*. Eds. Klaus Petersen and Allan C. Hutchinson. Toronto: U of Toronto P, 1999.
- Rose, Jacqueline. "Apathy and Accountability: South Africa's Truth and Reconciliation Commission." *Raritan* 21.4 (2002): 175-195.
- Singer, Peter. "Reflections." *The Lives of Animals*. Ed. Amy Gutmann. Princeton: Princeton UP, 2001. 85-92.
- South African Human Rights Commission. *Faultlines: Inquiry Into Racism in the Media*. Johannesburg, 2000.
- Splendore, Paola. "'No More Mothers and Fathers': The Family Sub-Text in J.M. Coetzee's Novels." *Journal of Commonwealth Literature* 38.3 (2003): 148-161.
- Stoler, Ann Laura. *Race and the Education of Desire*. Chapel Hill: Duke UP, 1995.