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J. M. COETZEE'S 'POSTMODERN' CORPUS: BODIES/TEXTS, HISTORY, AND  
POLITICS IN THE APARTHEID NOVELS, 1974-1990

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BY

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## **Dedication**

For my family in love and gratitude;

For knowledge seekers;

For those who know the meaning of love and suffering.

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## Preface: The Violated Body in a Global Context

The body implies mortality, vulnerability, agency: the skin and the flesh expose us to the gaze of others, but also to touch, and to violence, and bodies put us at risk of becoming the agency and instrument of all these as well.

Judith Butler, *Precarious Life*

In times of political conflict, like the apartheid years in South African history, it is the material body as flesh and blood that suffers and makes history. Imprisonment, torture, rape, abuse, injury, starvation, control, and killing are variations on what touches the body under oppressive regimes. Under apartheid, black bodies were—among other things—segregated, disenfranchised, shot, imprisoned, and sometimes killed in detention. During the years of the National party in government, 1948-1994, the main premise behind apartheid was “the division of all South Africans by race” (Worden 105). Through a series of legislative acts, Africans were forcibly removed from their residence locations to townships and segregated in public amenities.<sup>1</sup> The Sharpeville shootings in 1960 killed and injured many protesters against the pass laws, with many demonstrators shot in the back as they fled the firing police. What began as a campaign called for by the Pan African Congress ended as a massacre.<sup>2</sup> The township revolts in the 1970s, like those of

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<sup>1</sup> Two particular acts that enforced residential and social segregation were the Group Areas Act (1950) and the Reservation of Separate Amenities Act (1953). The former officially separated races through distinct residential areas. The latter enforced separation in, among others, transportation, restaurants, public services. Other acts like the Prohibition of Mixed Marriages Act (1949) prohibited marriage across racial lines. The Population Registration Act (1950) divided people according to race: white, colored, African, and Indian. See Worden, especially the chapter on “The Heyday of Apartheid,” pp. 115-133.

<sup>2</sup> Another resistance movement against apartheid was the African National Congress (ANC). The ANC carried out guerilla acts of warfare and sabotage in the 1960s and 1970s in response to attacks against blacks. Its famous leader, Nelson Mandela, was imprisoned for many years by the apartheid government and released in 1990. Many of the movement’s leaders were exiled for promoting civil disobedience and political struggle.

black school children against teaching in Afrikaans, what is known as the Soweto uprising of 1976 and its aftermath of school boycotts and burnings and police retaliation, resulted in the death of hundreds of students and wounding thousands (Worden 131). The same turmoil between the police and black township youth resurfaced in 1985, and the spreading boycotts and clashes resulted in the State of Emergency that continued until 1990 and gave the police more powers for arrests and detention without trial (Worden 143). The students' protests, stones, and barricades were silenced by the armed forces and the police by 1987 (Worden 145). Many black leaders were exiled, imprisoned, or assassinated. The death of a detained Black Consciousness leader, Steven Biko, in 1977 under torture was a spark that revived internal resistance (Eades 20) and international condemnation of apartheid. Forced removals/relocations to "homelands"<sup>3</sup> or townships and political detentions touched countless thousands throughout the apartheid years. Millions of malnourished bodies lived in extreme poverty and lack of basic services. By 1994, "the Africans made up 75 percent of the South African population, but owned about 15 percent of land in South Africa and controlled about 2 percent of the nation's wealth" (Eades 51). Simply put, Africans suffered under the apartheid regime. For long years, protests, demonstrations, and underground activities did little to effect a real political change. Complex internal and external factors and sociopolitical dimensions contributed to the weakening of apartheid in the early 1990s and its demise in 1994 with the country's multiparty democratic elections.

The South African apartheid history, however, is not something to be considered in itself and away from other historical contexts for bodily violations and loss of human

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<sup>3</sup> The Bantu Homelands Citizenship Act of 1970 required Africans to get citizenships in their new homelands, thus losing their citizenship rights in South Africa.

rights. Moreover, the body can be used to exercise some agency just as it often demonstrates naked vulnerability. Growing up in a small town in Jordan, I used to partake in my elders' daily evening pastime of watching the news. The typical sights on TV screens were those of violated Palestinian bodies crushed under a heavy Israeli war machine. The Intifada years of 1987-93, concurrent with the last years of apartheid, were a time of intense political turmoil in which bodies were maimed and killed in the course of a political struggle for land and equal rights. While I am not ignorant of acts of violence perpetrated by desperate Palestinians against a militarily superior Israel or against innocent Israeli civilians, or violence perpetrated by Palestinians against each other, I was constantly touched by the body's vulnerability to injury and death whenever we have bad times and people resort to violence—which is how this dissertation came into being. The old-new Middle Eastern situation, like the South African one I study in this dissertation, is part of a global context of material suffering whereby bodies are displaced and assassinated. And while the apartheid years are over, Palestinians still experience loss of land and rights. They have contributed martyrs, what the West knows as “terrorists” or “suicide-bombers,” for their cause, both men and women. Moreover, many Palestinians found in Hamas, a terrorist organization by Western standards, a legitimate avenue for political agency. Although political assassinations of Hamas leaders by the Israelis have continued over the past years, and despite international pressures and Israel's recent bloody military intervention in 2008, Hamas still holds its place in Gaza as a more militant alternative to mainstream Palestinian politics—and people continue to suffer under the blockade imposed on Gaza by Israel. The same applies to HezbAllah in southern Lebanon. The recent military engagement with Israel in 2006 led to heavy

civilian deaths, infrastructure damage, and death of party members on the part of the Lebanese, but HezbAllah still exercises some agency in Lebanon for its option of armed-resistance against the Israelis regardless of the cost. Just as African bodies were violated in the process of a struggle for political rights which were ultimately gained, Palestinian and Lebanese bodies have also been violated in years of political strife against Israel's policies in the region like demolishing of homes, appropriation of lands, and massive airstrikes. On the other hand, violence against the Israelis is often viewed in the Arab world as a justified violence which a military tyrant should sustain.

And as a graduate student in English at a university in Jordan with hopes of attending an American university for a Ph.D., I was stunned to see live coverage of hijacked airplanes slamming into the World Trade Center. This violent act, which took thousands of innocent lives and which I condemn and declare Islam to be innocent of, initiated the American "War on Terror." The Bush Administration began a relentless endeavor purportedly against religious fundamentalism in Afghanistan and, surprisingly for me, then, in Iraq. The rhetoric that they used reinforced the dichotomous logic of us vs. them, the axis of good vs. the axis of evil, the free, civilized West vs. its hateful Other. Bin Laden and his "gang" became the "barbarian enemy" that could stealthily strike anytime. There were no apparent connections between Al Qaeda and the Saddam Hussein regime in Iraq then. Moreover, the US had already crushed Saddam's army in Kuwait during the Gulf War in the early 1990s, and Iraq was under heavy economic sanctions following the Gulf War right until the invasion of 2003. In both wars involving Iraq, however, the body was a site for violence. The military superiority of the American troops and their domination of the air battle exposed Iraqi troops in Kuwait to much fire

and inflicted much destruction on the fleeing forces trying to get to Iraq from Kuwait. Before the actual fighting in Kuwait, weeks of aerial bombardment of Iraq in 1991 burned bodies and shelters, amputated limbs, and killed children and women alike. With a shortage of medical equipment and the high number of war casualties, the situation was even worse in 2003 in Iraqi hospitals trying to accommodate war's broken bodies. American missiles fell on civilian areas and killed innocents, and this was attributed to technology failures or Saddam's use of civilian areas as a cover for his forces.

About three thousand people lost their lives in the 9/11 attacks, and hundreds of thousands of civilians in Iraq and Afghanistan lost their lives as well. The aftermath of the 9/11 attacks and the invasion of Iraq in 2003 witnessed an abusive treatment of war prisoners in Abu Ghraib and Guantanamo Bay. On the other hand, the war and its aftermath of insurgency in Iraq cost the U.S. thousands of troops and more injured troops who returned with amputated limbs, scars, and psychological trauma. The attacks of 9/11 forced America to change its immigration policies and execute more surveillance on "foreign" bodies. My stay here on a visa and the related restrictions made me acutely conscious of the control that bodies are subjected to in the political field. The post 9/11 U.S. used racial profiling and other counterterrorist strategies at its international airports. The special registration I underwent upon entry to the U.S. (from the Middle East) and the security checks made me miss my Oklahoma flight. In violent times, the body becomes particularly visible, which is exactly what we find in Coetzee's apartheid fictions and what I intend to problematize in this dissertation.

As I argue in the five chapters to follow, the colonial violence we see in Coetzee's *Dusklands* and the state-sponsored violence of torture, killing, and incarceration we find

in *Waiting for the Barbarians*, *Life and Times of Michael K*, and *Age of Iron* are particularly notable because they reveal the body's entrapment in the political of the sort we find in contemporary global politics. The black youth shot by the police in *Age of Iron* for resisting apartheid policies and the prisoners tortured or killed in *Waiting for the Barbarians* and *Dusklands* offer variations on the theme of the violation of the body in times of political pressure. The reign of terror let loose by the Empire on the suspicion of a supposed barbarian invasion in *Waiting for the Barbarians* is instantiated by the terrorism it inflicts on the other body. The wretchedness, deprivation, and strict bodily control of crowded camp life in *Life and Times of Michael K* mirror those of the concentration camps in which hundreds of thousands of Jews perished under the Nazis or were starved and tortured in the early 1940s. Similarly, the dehumanized prisoners held in the barracks in *Waiting for the Barbarians* and brutally and publically flogged by a hierarchy of state officials evoke images of the life at the Auschwitz camp.<sup>4</sup> The classification and categorization of prisoners at Auschwitz via the insignia they wore (McDonough 79) is also mirrored in the classification labels attributed by camp officials to K in *Life and Times of Michael K*. The forced physical exercise the weakened K and

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<sup>4</sup> There are parallels between Coetzee's works, both apartheid and post-apartheid, and life in the Nazi death camps. The corpses of the bodies killed in gas chambers and thrown into burning ovens for cremation in Nazi death camps find implicit parallels in Coetzee's *Disgrace* (1999) where stiff corpses of dogs are thrown for incineration. The idea is explicitly stated in Coetzee's *Elizabeth Costello* (2003) when Costello in a lecture defends animal rights and makes a problematic, even obscene and morally dubious, analogy between killing the Jews in the Holocaust and the mass slaughter of animals in abattoirs and labs. She reasons that in both cases people living close to mass killing places assume willful ignorance. Costello argues: "The crime of the Third Reich, says the voice of accusation, was to treat people like animals" (65). She indignantly describes how the victims "went like sheep to the slaughter" (64). The "obscenity" of her analogy makes a man in the audience, a Jewish poet, walk out in protest at her apparently anti-Semitic remark and miss the dinner held by the hosting college to honor her. Of course, it is problematic to assume that animals and humans belong to the same order of being. Jacques Derrida, commenting on the word "apartheid" and its legacy of racism, once said that "by itself the word occupies the terrain like a concentration camp. System of partition, barbed wire, crowds of mapped out solitudes" (292). Derrida's comparison allows us to see the state camps in *Life and Times of Michael K* in the light of the experiences of prisoners in Nazi concentration camps and in the South African apartheid state.

the old magistrate perform for “sadistic” guards is reminiscent of Auschwitz, where those “chosen for ‘recreation’ would be forced to do extreme physical exercises for hours” and many inmates made by the death squads do such exercises “were exhausted and emaciated individuals hardly capable of standing up” (McDonough 83). The anonymous Empire in *Waiting for the Barbarians* and the civil war South Africa in *Life and Times of Michael K* are not much different from Nazi Germany in the hold of its authoritative discourses on the body. The suggestive bodily violence of mutilation and rape that Friday in *Foe* and Magda in *In the Heart of the Country* are subjected to, respectively and within a colonial context in each novel, also reveals the body’s investment in political power, in oppressive and patriarchal discourses. The materiality of bodily suffering that gets represented in Coetzee’s apartheid novels will be complicated in the following chapters within a postmodern theoretical frame because Coetzee, we will see, represents the violated body in pain but shows the construction of this body in discourse. Hence, this dissertation looks at the relationship among pain, the body, and language.

A look at political strife around the world reveals the interplay between the material body and the body politic. As I am preparing this manuscript for deposition, Egyptians are heroically protesting against an oppressive regime that has dominated their lives for more than thirty years. Their demonstrations are being countered by the clubs, bullets, and tear gas of the regime’s forces. Coetzee’s novels can be read against global conflicts and as a critique of the foundations of imperial and political violence, and hence their continued relevance and the importance of such a dissertation. For example, Noam Chomsky says that the war against terrorism has often been described in American political rhetoric as “a struggle against a plague, a cancer which is spread by barbarians,

by ‘depraved opponents of civilization itself’” (217-218). Chomsky’s statement is reminiscent of the political allegorization of cancer in Coetzee’s *Age of Iron* and the treatment of the “barbarians” as the Empire’s enemy in *Waiting for the Barbarians*. Moreover, the anonymous Empire in *Waiting for the Barbarians* invites comparison and contrast with recent global, and inclusive, conceptions of “Empire” of the sort Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri discuss in a groundbreaking book like *Empire*. Coetzee questions the roots of evil and injustice and his novels relate allegorically to global politics. History and politics converge over the body, and Coetzee interrogates what it means to be human under political oppression. For this reason, his novels have an enduring relevance within a postmodern project that questions humanism and points to its failures as a master code. Although I focus in the next chapters on Coetzee’s apartheid novels and discuss them as postmodern texts that highlight the interplay between material and discursive bodies, this dissertation begins with the premise that the abundant materiality of the body in Coetzee’s apartheid novels politicizes them and gives them value with reference to apartheid politics and globally beyond South Africa. It concludes by asserting and complicating the claim that this recurring materiality allegorizes the apartheid novels at different levels. In between the introduction and the conclusion, the middle chapters discuss thematically related novels by focusing each time on different facets of my central claim about the troubled relationship between the body and language.

Shadi Neimneh

Norman, Oklahoma (January 2011)

## Chapter One: Introduction

Inevitably, the characteristic of African literature during the struggle against colonialism and, later, neocolonialism and corruption in postcolonial societies, has been engagement—political engagement. .... “Engagement” does not preclude the beauty of language, the complexity of human emotions; on the contrary, such literature must be able to use all these in order to be truly engaged with life, where the overwhelming factor in that life is political struggle.

Nadine Gordimer, “Turning the Page”

For us, the direction and scale of the ambition of writing remained hidden for much of the early and middle parts of his career. What we failed to see was that Coetzee was in search of ways of speaking to history from his own ground and in his own voice.

Tony Morphet, “Reading Coetzee in South Africa”

Discursive formations are not hermitically sealed, they overlap and intersperse in ways that may be fruitfully and reflexively utilized. It is, after all, at the point of intersection with other discourses that any discourse becomes determined.

Bill Ashcroft et al, *The Empire Writes Back*

One of the major tenets of postmodern thought is a critique of and a problematization of representation. Rather than simply rejecting the real, postmodernists experiment with how to represent and even re-represent the real. They make us “think differently about representation” (Nealon 231). In their critique of essentialism, postmodernists reject an easy realism whereby there is a correspondence between fiction and reality and insist on the constructedness of meaning and the mediation of

experience.<sup>5</sup> Postmodern politics, it turns out, is also rooted in the politics of representation, in how historical materiality is related. And if we are to redeem the political relevance of a problematic body of literary works produced during an era of intense political pressure like the apartheid years in South Africa and accused of political irrelevance, of dehistoricizing the real, it becomes necessary to examine how such a body of writings transforms the way we understand the reality of material suffering and oppression. Before we look at the problematic apartheid novels in question of the white South African writer J. M. Coetzee and attempt to highlight their political value for us as global readers, it is essential to explore the way they were received within that apartheid context and how they were seen to diverge from traditional forms of committed writing. It is also imperative to elaborate the nature of postmodern politics of such works by showing how they represent the body as a primal site of material suffering and oppression in this case, in terms of both its materiality and constructedness. So, I endeavor in this introduction to give some background on South African politics of apartheid writing and establish relationships among postmodern representation, the body, and history.

#### I. Apartheid Writing and South African Politics: History and the “Real”

White South African writers during and after the apartheid years had to find an appropriate political and ethical response to apartheid and tackle a collective historical guilt rooted in apartheid’s legacy. It is not surprising that many writers resorted to neo-Marxism and non-fictional forms of writing to counter apartheid, thus making history and

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<sup>5</sup> It is no wonder that postmodernist writers often opt for techniques that blur the boundaries between realistic and non-realistic representation, between the fantastic and the real, as in magic realism and surrealism. The common charge is that postmodernism is “the most highly antimimetic of all the modes” (Lehan 262).

politics dominate their literary productions. The political tensions associated with apartheid made writers aware of a distinction between the aesthetic features of fiction and protest purposes. Few writers succeeded in striking a balance between their artistic vocations and their social commitments. Accordingly, it was customary to accuse of quietism works that did not show the economic and political factors of history or capture social realities and class struggle. For neo-Marxist critics, literature was evaluated by its public value of intervention, by a realism essential for the truth about political realities, and by its ability to protest against material factors of oppression. The pressing problem in writing about apartheid, then, was that of political engagement, of capturing the realities of such a history. However, engagement is not straightforward in Coetzee's apartheid writings. Even so, the aesthetic dimensions of such writings do not necessarily undermine their political potential.

Critics of Coetzee's early fiction sometimes had problems with its Western tradition and experimental nature. They were not happy with what seemed metaphorical and universalized representations of South African politics. Hence, Coetzee has been criticized in South Africa for a lack of political commitment and social responsibility in his novels, as manifested in his use of unnamed empires and withdrawn characters as protagonists. Universalism, it seems, was not in line with radical politics in a country like South Africa. An old-new issue in the critical reception of the novels of Coetzee, and especially those of the apartheid era, is thus contextualizing such novels within a South African context and finding their relevance in relation to an anti-apartheid struggle. Hence, and looking at the history of the local reception of such works, one finds strong condemnation of Coetzee's oeuvre, whereas internationally Coetzee has been acclaimed

and rewarded in North America and Britain for writing critiques of apartheid. Because Coetzee did not use the (realist) conventions of politically committed writing, and thus seemed to advocate art above politics,<sup>6</sup> his early works were criticized by a neo-Marxist tradition within South Africa for their self-reflexivity and for not developing “weapons” in a political struggle against apartheid. Coetzee was accused of elitism and lack of seriousness. Basically, neo-Marxists dismissed his works on grounds of their global “postmodernism” and in line with others who saw in postmodernism no theory of agency. Postmodernism was thought to be self-absorbed, ironic, formally exaggerated, lacking in radical solutions in its inclusive logic, and neither confrontational nor documentary. Postmodern writing was equated with political paralysis, and Coetzee’s postmodern affiliations made neo-Marxist critics dismiss his apartheid works as politically irrelevant with no historical value. As Ihab Hassan argues in *The Postmodern Turn*, critics were distressed by the broad, international scope of postmodernism, by its “loose, baggy character” (xvi). A committed writing fighting political injustice was expected to go against rather than exploit poststructuralist, postmodernist leanings and to have a clear political agenda pertaining to a specific historical reality.

Neo-Marxist critics of the early Coetzee did not find overt representations of material and historical conditions of life under apartheid. They were disheartened by the spatial and temporal displacements and self-reflexive dimensions of the works, a fact confirmed for them by the passing of Coetzee’s works by the state censors. His

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<sup>6</sup> See for example Clive Barnett, “Constructions of Apartheid,” esp. p. 289 and p. 291. In “The Great South African Novel,” Coetzee paradoxically shows how South African writers have internationally been recognized for the peculiarity of their relationship with colonial themes and historical times. Coetzee writes: “Internationally, those South African writers who make the grade are given a wide and, it seems to me, remarkably respectful hearing. The reason is that they are seen to have privileged access to a theme of compelling importance which we may loosely call ‘the South African situation’” (74).

engagement of the realities of South African social and political life has been found lacking for not providing political solutions or protesting against apartheid policies. Compared with the work of white South African writers like Nadine Gordimer, Alan Paton, and Andre Brink, his work was not overtly political and engaged in South African realities. The fictions for Coetzee's detractors were "postmodern" in the sense of being ahistorical and elitist. Coetzee was attacked within South Africa by neo-Marxist critics who evaluate works according to how they fit into a political struggle.

For example, Coetzee was attacked by Paul Rich for complicity and expressing in his fictions "the cultural and political dilemmas of a privileged class of white artists and intellectuals" (73). Rich finds Coetzee appealing to a trend to consider postmodernism (in its neglect of conventional realism and blatant interest in psychological realism) a vehicle for a privileged class of intellectuals in ivory towers and with cosmopolitan interests. On another occasion, Rich views Coetzee's *Waiting for the Barbarians* (1980) as lacking "any understanding of the historical forces that produce actual imperial systems at particular phases of history" ("Apartheid" 385) and indicating that postmodernism in a postcolonial condition like that of South Africa "is a moral dead end" ("Apartheid" 389). Peter Knox-Shaw saw in Coetzee's novel *Dusklands* (1974) an absence of critical import, "a virtual effacement of economic motive" (28). He concludes his article on the novel by regretting that a writer of Coetzee's talent "should play down the political and economic aspects of history in favor of a psychopathology of Western life" (37). Michael Chapman saw in another Coetzee novel, *Foe* (1986), a failed attempt to "speak to Africa" and a "kind of masturbatory release . . . for the Europeanising dreams of an intellectual coterie" (335). Michael Vaughan, in an early study on Coetzee and Matshoba, points out the

failure of Coetzee's early fiction to capture the nature of social and class relations in South Africa. He complains that Coetzee does not engage "material factors of oppression and struggle" in the South Africa of the time (126). Coetzee's three early novels for Vaughan<sup>7</sup> establish no connection with "forms of class struggle" or offer no concerns/cures for "objective social conflicts within industrial society" (136). Hence, Vaughan sees Coetzee's project as one absorbed in its own problematization of language. Brian Bunting in a review of *Life and Times of Michael K* criticizes K as a "bore" and argues that the novel has little to offer to "those interested in understanding or transforming South African society" (qtd. in McDonald; *Literature Police* 319). Peter Kohler sees Coetzee's fiction as an intellectual fiction concerned with consciousness and rooted "in an idealist epistemology" and that Coetzee "is bound to repeat himself" (qtd. in Dovey; "Coetzee and His Critics" 16). According to Tom Paulin, Coetzee's *In the Heart of the Country* fails to enact a strong political message of protest because the South Africa it depicts is a "static society which has sought to preserve itself by becoming a lonely castaway, a fixed and introverted state which is utterly inflexible and incapable of bending to that developing process which is history" (qtd. in Wohlpart 219). In the succinct words of Peter McDonald,

According to the dominant view, only those novels that in a realist mode put their literariness in the service of ethics, politics, and history deserved to be valued and taken seriously in the pressing circumstances of South Africa in the 1980s. This

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<sup>7</sup> The apartheid novels Vaughan means are: *Dusklands*, *In the Heart of the Country* (1977), and *Waiting for the Barbarians*. The other apartheid novels referred to in my title and to be considered in this dissertation are: *The Life and Times of Michael K* (1983), *Foe*, and *Age of Iron* (1990).

concerned Coetzee not just because it devalued his own work but because it assumed that literary discourse has no public value or authority per se. (293-4)

To sum up, Coetzee's writings were attacked for ignoring certain trends of political fiction and pursuing, instead, allegorized, European, and effacing forms. They were viewed as more aesthetic and less political. Such neo-Marxist critics deemed Coetzee's postmodernism conservative and evasive of real apartheid suffering in matters of labor and land. But can we, as global readers, search for the political within the "aesthetic"? Or rather, can we respond to accusations against postmodern literature as politically irrelevant? If so, how can the body function as a site for the restoration of the political? How does Coetzee engage history in a postmodern way that rejects foundational thought and history as master discourses? This dissertation attempts to answer these questions. Since the apartheid years stand for a history of manipulating bodies by unfairly and cruelly treating them, it becomes legitimate to restore the political in Coetzee's apartheid fictions by looking at their depiction of oppressed, suffering bodies.

Gordimer was publicly involved in the debate outlined above about the role of the writer in society and the political expectations of anti-apartheid literature in South Africa. Her apartheid writings were more appealing to neo-Marxist critics because of their direct and active treatment of anti-apartheid themes and identifiable South African characters and settings. Her famous 1984 review of Coetzee's *Life and Times of Michael K*, entitled "The Idea of Gardening," discusses Coetzee's resort to allegory's ambivalence in the face of the realities of life in South Africa in that allegory distances the writer and yet remains vaguely applicable to the South African situation. But Gordimer, a protest writer then writing within a tradition of social realism, does not find this resort to allegory adequate

since Coetzee's characters are "passive," showing no interest in history and political action. She speaks of a "revulsion against all political and revolutionary solutions" she detects in the novel and links this to Coetzee's "own revulsion." She does not find in the novel Lukács's "organicism" in that the relation between the novel and social realism is distorted like that of the private versus the public. For Gordimer, Coetzee's choice of a protagonist is not successful as Michael K escapes history, does not represent a specific social type actively resisting evil, and is not even identified as a colored or black protagonist.<sup>8</sup> The novel then lacks a strong sense of history because it is not written in the mode of critical realism necessary for an interventionist writer in apartheid South Africa. Gordimer articulates the writer's position of feeling compelled to write about common events of life in apartheid South Africa and "their daily, grubby, tragic consequences." She is unhappy with the allegorical approach Coetzee takes up that projects the horrors of apartheid "into another time and plane" and allows him to "hold himself clear" of social responsibility. She is equally unhappy with the protagonist's ignorance of history's course rather than attempting to alter it. The novel denies, she argues, "the energy of the will to resist evil." The central point of the novel becomes for her the "idea" of gardening and not militant politics.<sup>9</sup> These critics thought that Coetzee was not reacting to death and burning in black townships, political arrests, imprisonment, and torture.

Coetzee himself in a review of Gordimer's novel *The Pickup* in *Inner Workings: Literary Essays* asserts Gordimer's sustained political commitment to anti-apartheid

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<sup>8</sup> Within the apartheid context, these labels were used to racially classify people within an institutionalized system of racism. Blacks were the overriding majority in the population of South Africa.

<sup>9</sup> For Coetzee, though, K's gardening is a solid engagement with the world/the earth, and K's escape is from "the fantasy world of power" at a fatalistic time "when it is too late for politics" ("Too Late" 6). I defend Coetzee's political engagement in this novel in Chapter Three.

politics and claims that one “principle that has animated Gordimer’s writings from the 1960s to the democratisation of South Africa in the 1990s” can be a “quest for justice. Her good people are people unable to live in or profit by a state of injustice” (251). Gordimer easily aligned herself with the fate of her country and its turbulent history and dedicated her apartheid writing to document its history. The social and political justice dealt with in her novels is part of an attempt on her part, as Coetzee reminds, of coming to terms with the “historical role” a writer “born into a late colonial community” like her must face (255). Gordimer asserts that South African writers cannot evade their historical situation and that literary gestures have to be “essential” ones. She, an example of social commitment to be contrasted with Coetzee, speaks of the “essential gesture of the writer as a social being” (“The Essential Gesture” 286).

Gordimer joined a tradition of speaking out against apartheid during that era and assumed the status of a dissident writer. She also thought that a writer should be free to write about the South African situation by writing “*the truth as he sees it*” (emphasis original; “A Writer’s Freedom” 105). Gordimer was asserting a form of social realism whereby the conditions of apartheid are truthfully represented in fiction and parallels are easily drawn between the private within fiction and the public in history. This realism was bound to be hostile to postmodernist tendencies that dislocate and distract from apartheid conditions and show an occupation with textuality. The realistic mode Gordimer followed was fit for apartheid writings that seek to depict the atrocities of that system. Hence, Gordimer directly opposed apartheid policies and state censorship and had many of her works banned in South Africa. She sees the freedom of expression she advocated and practiced as the writer’s “unique contribution to social change” (107). For

her, commitment is not separated from freedom to write responsibly about society. Compared with Coetzee's, Gordimer's apartheid writings had an easier relation to social and historical realities and clearer connections, which she deemed necessary for the fidelity with which the writer depicts his/her times. Her novels, short stories, and even essays of the apartheid years were clearly political in their opposition to apartheid. She saw writing as a liberating political act that legitimates itself through the authority of history. While black writers in South Africa had more revolutionary responsibilities, the white writer, according to her, also shares in a concern for the oppressed within the limits of the artistic vocation: "Whether a writer is black or white, in South Africa the essential gesture by which he enters the brotherhood of man—which is the only definition of society that has any permanent validity—is a revolutionary gesture" ("The Essential Gesture" 269). Gordimer made clear alignments between her fiction and political commitment and created characters who accept their responsibilities for political change.

Gordimer is, therefore, more easily associated with critical realism than Coetzee who said in an interview that the novel today (back in 1978) was "after a bigger game" than the critical realist mode practiced by Gordimer and others ("Speaking" 23). In another interview with Tony Morphet, Coetzee vents a postmodern lack of interest in "the kind of realism that takes pride in copying the 'real' world" (454). Similarly, a postmodernist like Jim McGuigan asserts the postmodern interest in a problematized reality: "The postmodern declaration is ... to do with ideas and subjectivity, how we think and signify: it is not primarily a claim concerning 'material reality'. The declaration is supported by the assumption that there is no 'objectively' discernible material reality, in any case, certainly not one situated beyond thought and signification" (2). In other

words, Gordimer saw that the times warranted subordinating the novel to history while Coetzee stuck to rivaling history (mimetic representation) but without asserting the purity of discourses or arguing against history and the novel being fluid genres. If history and politics have no easy relationship with the realist mode in Coetzee's apartheid writings, then we are entitled to look for them in the very way Coetzee complicates mimetic representation. In *Doubling the Point*, in an essay entitled "Into the Dark Chamber," Coetzee rejects a form of documentary realism or the complete absence of realism by contending that the writer's challenge is "how to establish one's own authority, how to imagine torture and death on one's own terms" without ignoring them or reproducing mere "representations" of them and thus becoming complicit in the morally deplorable atrocities of the state (364). In fact, realism and representation are the site of a postmodern problematic, and Coetzee is reacting to the same problematic in his apartheid writings. As a postmodernist, Coetzee has been described by a critic as follows:

The Post-modernists will claim him for their own – his work is highly self-conscious, tersely fashioned in such a way as to draw attention to the fashioning process. He makes the decisive break from the kind of formal realism which draws the reader into acquiescence, inviting instead an uncomfortable relationship between reader and text, one in which uneasy questions must clamour without certainty of answers. (Ward 154)

Briefly put, the realist tradition that sought to copy or document the realities of apartheid, as in the case of Gordimer, is rethought and reinvented in Coetzee's postmodern vision.

In an early article entitled “The Novel Today” and given originally as a talk during the 1987 *Weekly Mail* Book Week in Cape Town, Coetzee defends his engagement with history—and thus with ethics and politics—and discusses the relationship between the novel and history in apartheid South Africa then as one of “supplementarity or rivalry. It cannot be both autonomous and supplementary” (3). Coetzee here problematizes his own engagement with ethics and politics and his public interventional role.<sup>10</sup> He even problematizes attempts to defend his political engagement as, for example, when he argues that a story “is not a message with a covering” (4), thus rejecting easy didacticism. But this is not to say his works have no political or oppositional content or that we are not entitled to look for clues to understand how he can still be an engaged writer. In a postmodern fashion, Coetzee speaks of the novel and history as discourses rather than concrete realities. He aligns himself with the discourse of the novel and politicized representation. He goes against “a powerful tendency, perhaps even dominant tendency, to subsume the novel under history” (2) and treat novels which do not seem to engage “real historical forces and real historical circumstances” as “lacking in seriousness” (2). Coetzee rejects the rejection of postmodernism as apolitical or playful. He rejects history as a priori, independent of our analysis or construction. He treats history as “a certain kind of story that people agree to tell each other” (4), which highlights the interplay between history and language/meaning. But Coetzee does not assert the novel’s absolute autonomy or purity nor does he reject (or accept uncomplicatedly) the ideological imperative of apartheid writing. A novel that rivals history, he argues, demythologizes it; it shows “the mythic status of

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<sup>10</sup> As an intellectual, Coetzee often declined personal interviews and once asserted that he detests “celebrity.” See his piece “Too Late.” However, this talk in particular on “The Novel Today” is an instance of public intellectualism. The writer’s lectures around the globe are another example of his public role.

history” (3). In other words, it shows the discursive, cosmic nature of history in the form of historicity—in conscious production of historical material. While Coetzee is against history claiming primacy over the novel, or appropriating it, he does assert the discursive, unfixed nature of history by claiming that “history is not reality; that history is a kind of discourse; that a novel is a kind of discourse too” (4).<sup>11</sup> This poststructuralist conception of history as a constructed reality, as a discourse, is one propagated by Michel Foucault in such works as *The Archaeology of Knowledge* in which history emerges as inseparable from the masses of accumulated documents and artifacts it analyses. History is a field of related statements as basic units of discourse forming a field of knowledge. Foucault argues: “history is one way in which a society recognizes and develops a mass of documentation with which it is inextricably linked” (*Archaeology* 7). Coetzee mainly does two things in this short piece entitled “The Novel Today.” He reclaims his own works as serious and redefines autonomy in terms of rejecting a subordinate position to the discourse of history rather than simply doing away with such a discourse.

In resisting direct political engagement of apartheid realities through mimetic representation, Coetzee is in line with Theodor Adorno who similarly argues in his famous essay “On Commitment” that overt commitment as opposed to autonomous art risks degenerating into propaganda and preaching while art works by transforming attitudes and consciousness, by working “at the level of fundamental attitudes” (6).

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<sup>11</sup> In another interview cited by Benita Parry in her review of Teresa Dovey’s book on Coetzee, Coetzee directly argues against absorbing his novels into “a political discourse” and asserts that his “allegiances lie with the discourse of the novels and not with the discourse of politics” (qtd. in Parry 18). This very assertion should, again, be understood as a rejection of the discourses of history and politics colonizing the discourse of the novel, a rejecting of overpoliticization at the expense of the art of the novel. Coetzee’s assertion is, actually, untraditionally political. Again, he argues for privileging the discourse of the novel as opposed to the discourses of history and politics. See Parry’s “The Hole in the Narrative.” If Coetzee is against his novels being absorbed into the discourses of history and politics, this does not mean that we cannot look for political and historical value in his work within the discourse of the novel.

Adorno argues: “Committed art, necessarily detached as art from reality, cancels the distance between the two” (4). Similarly, Coetzee is aware that direct realism, and thus traditional commitment, blurs the distance between art and the real while art by nature is necessarily and already distanced from the real. Committed art approximates reality without losing its merit as art. Proper commitment for Adorno lies not in “the deceptions” and “untruth” of politics (59) whereby suffering and politics can be “betrayed” (61). Like Adorno, Coetzee seems to believe that overt politics and direct historical realism necessarily betray a work of art and turn it into both bad art and bad politics. By claiming that history and the novel are discourses, Coetzee articulates a postmodern awareness of cultural construction and mediation of the real in diverse discourses, showing that our experience of the historical real has changed in the postmodern world and that we should not accept reality as a stable thing. Coetzee adheres here to postmodern reshaping of the real as existing within discourses that shape the way we conceive the world. He challenges history as a dominant discourse or a master narrative. He is aware that there are forms of postmodernism that do not lack seriousness and are not indifferent to moral and ethical ends. What Jen Ang calls the “‘anything goes’ mentality” often ascribed to postmodernism and associated with more “conservative” forms of postmodernism does not negate the existence of a “critical postmodernism”; while the conservative one yields to “the seductions of postmodern culture,” Ang contends, the critical one adopts a critical stance of “sceptical questioning of the certainties and absolutisms of those [modernist] ways of thinking” (qtd. in Berger 74).

For Coetzee, there is nothing called history or the particular real as such but histories, discourses, and stories. This postmodern note is in line with Linda Hutcheon’s

theorizing of fiction and history as discourses and “an acknowledgement of the meaning-making function of human constructs” (*Poetics* 89). As Hutcheon reminds us, history and fiction “have always been notoriously porous genres” (“Pastime” 56). Coetzee is not simply advocating an absolute autonomy of art or an easy ahistoricism. When he speaks of the novel as being impossibly both autonomous and supplementary to history, the autonomy he refers to is not a total abnegation of history but an engagement of history on the terms of the novel. This should not be taken to mean that he chooses an autonomous writing free from commitment or political thrust.<sup>12</sup> Autonomous writing can, after all, be committed in its own way, without being overtly so or without being subservient to the demands of history. Coetzee’s argument for a novel that acts in terms of its own principles rather than those of history implies that it has to find the means of engaging history without losing its grounds or focus as a novel. His point is that a novel should function according to its own totality as a novel and that its engagement with history should not be an overriding concern, or rather history should not overpower the novel’s own status as a novel, and as a discourse in that.<sup>13</sup> As far as these are discourses, they overlap and enrich each other. While the writer cannot avoid being implicated in history, he should not make history reduce the art of the novel to a secondary status. However,

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<sup>12</sup> Hania Nashef, for example, argues: “By choosing autonomous over committed writing, Coetzee opens his novels to endless interpretations, giving them an existence beyond the boundary of one state or a single reading” (3). Such critics polarize autonomy and commitment and ignore the extent to which autonomous writing can be committed in non-traditional ways.

<sup>13</sup> This point is given more weight in an interview with Joanna Scott in which Coetzee seems to advocate a brand of textual politics and to suspect the revolutionary potential of books. He argues against taking books too seriously or dismissing them as politically or historically irrelevant: “On the other hand, I have never been entirely persuaded that writers are the unacknowledged legislators of mankind. The fury of the authorities against writers has always, to me, had its ridiculous side” (102). Coetzee, then, doubts the role of writing as an actual tool of liberation of the kind expected in realist, documentary accounts of apartheid. Against the claims of neo-Marxist critics and in response to accusations of poststructuralism of political quietism, Coetzee asserts in an interview with Richard Begam: “Should philosophers be expected to change the world? Such an expectation seems to me extravagant. Marx himself didn’t change the world: he reinterpreted it, then other people changed it” (422).

this does not mean that Coetzee abnegates all responsibility as a South African writer. History is subsumed under the novel historiographically and discursively as Coetzee avoids traditional realistic representation and rejects the totalizing act of accepting “one” true way of representing history socially or materially. Coetzee’s is a historiographic interest in history as a construct rather than an uncontested narrative.

To note Coetzee’s rejection of history appropriating the novel is not the same as claiming that he is politically irrelevant. For Coetzee, the novel as a discourse does not engage history realistically. As Michael Green explains in this regard, “it is social history’s claim to a privileged grasp of reality, reflected in the emphasis it places on the mode of realistic representation, which is an issue for Coetzee” (125). And in the words of Michael Marais, “To contend that Coetzee’s novels of this period [the late apartheid period] did or did not engage with apartheid society is to assume that engagement is a given, merely a matter of authorial choice and intention” (245). As such, political engagement for Marais is “not a matter of choice but an ethical imperative” (245). When once asked by Stephen Watson in an interview whether he believes South African writers should have any responsibilities, Coetzee responded positively and asserted the vehemence of apartheid themes: “I guess so. Let’s say that in a way it’s easier and more difficult being a writer in South Africa than in Western European countries; because there are such gigantic subjects of such unassailable importance facing a writer in South Africa.” In the same interview, Coetzee interestingly asserted that “the South African situation” is discursively, and unavoidably, “only one manifestation of a wider historical situation to do with colonialism, late colonialism, neo-colonialism” (23). He generalizes and globalizes the colonial experience by way of denying “lines of division between a

European context and a South African context” (24).<sup>14</sup> What Coetzee highlights here is an essential global context for his apartheid works as that of colonialism and a history of colonial oppression. The national is intertwined with and expressed in terms of the global. Apartheid realities are discursively related/complicated within a colonial context and not simply ignored. In an interview, Coetzee comments on the task imposed on him by the history of his country and hints at his universal intellectual affiliations: “Perhaps that is my fate. On the other hand, I sometimes wonder whether it isn’t simply that vast and wholly ideological superstructure constituted by publishing, reviewing and criticism that is forcing on me the fate of being a ‘South African novelist’” (Morphet 460).<sup>15</sup> As far as Coetzee rejects being pinned down to a specific South African context, he is asserting his discursive relevance to this very context on the one hand and on the other hand redefining political commitment and history within the discourse of the novel.

In his Jerusalem Prize acceptance speech, in *Doubling the Point*, Coetzee described South African literature as an obsessional one trapped in relations of subjugation and power, as a “literature in bondage” (98), one that “you would expect people to write from a prison” (98) and that expresses life and human relations in terms

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<sup>14</sup> On a global note, Coetzee also applies this experience of colonialism to the publishing industry whereby African literary products are sent to metropolitan centers and sent back to South Africa at increased prices (24). Coetzee is aware of the postcolonial reception of African works in the West. As Suman Gupta argues, “Postcolonialism has raised the visibility and influence of authors and intellectuals in marginalized locations outside the West too—particularly in former colonies—and has brought their ideas and products into global circulation” (116).

<sup>15</sup> In an interview for *World Literature Today*, Coetzee, commenting on his own way of opposition to censorship as the main focus of his book *Giving Offense: Essays on Censorship*, describes himself as “a rather disaffiliated intellectual whose heritage is largely European, or European-in-Africa” who is still in opposition (107). The meaning of this opposition and how it is achieved become for him the main thrust of the book. In an exclusive interview with David Attwell, Coetzee argues he is “a late representative” of the European colonial movement and asserts his European intellectual affiliations. He also says he represents “the generation in South Africa for whom apartheid was created, the generation that was meant to benefit most from it.” He, therefore, realizes the colonial roots of apartheid.

of an unavoidable “stuntedness and deformity” (98). Coetzee, however, is aware of his inability yet desire to “quit a world of pathological attachments and abstract forces, of anger and violence” (98). His situation is an imposed one, difficult to escape. Coetzee is aware that his writing is part and parcel of South African literature and that it is implicated in its themes. Indeed, the same unnatural and violent human relationships are detected in his apartheid writings as will be elaborated in the chapters to follow. The literature Coetzee produced during the apartheid years was bound to be trapped in the political quagmire of the country regardless of the degree of its relevance, its way of expression, or the writer’s intentions. If the content is somehow political, then the reception of this literature should also look for the political. Language is never neutral, and it complicates politics and morality. The result is a fiction that carries a certain level of resistance, a politicized writing that advances values and ideas whether in a narrow, specific political sense or in a wider, global one. As characteristic of postmodern writing in its critique of purity, Coetzee’s writings transgress and blur the boundaries between the aesthetic and the historical, the national and the international. Hence, and in line with the paradoxes of postmodernism and its tendency to heterogeneity/pluralism, his writing escapes from and yet problematizes all forms of political and historical rootedness and emphasizes a sense of contamination, crossing of borders, and fluidity.

What Coetzee is resisting is an overpoliticization or an underpoliticization of his works, for the former belittles their artistic integrity and the latter does an injustice to them. In a short interview for the *Buffalo Arts Review*, Coetzee contends: “I have no interest in overtly political literature, as I understand the phrase ‘overtly political’” (6). On the other hand, Coetzee could not abnegate all responsibility or rootedness in South

Africa. He asserts in an interview that people can love one landscape in their lifetime and that he intimately knows and loves the South African landscape: “Once can appreciate and enjoy many geographies, but there is only one that one feels in one’s bones. And I certainly know from experience that I don’t respond to Europe or the United States in the same way as I do to South Africa. And I would probably feel a certain sense of artificial background construction if I were to write a fiction set in another environment” (qtd. in Easton 590-591). Coetzee is not ahistorical; he aligns himself with a novelistic discourse that is not subsumed under but does not nullify history. He is aware that reality is always mediated and that, therefore, we can speak of “History” as a discourse within fiction and not of a fixed reality that can be captured within a novel. As a postmodernist writer, Coetzee is not arguing for strict genre boundaries between fiction and history. In the intense political climate of South Africa, it was impossible for him to avoid history and politics, so he sought to engage them on his own terms. Julian Gitzen is right to claim that: “Repeatedly [Coetzee’s] novels focus upon the processes by which history is made and recorded, emphasizing how history is registered in human consciousness through the medium of language” (3). Having established Coetzee’s discursive understanding of history and South African politics and hinted at his postmodern affiliations in this regard, it is time now to discuss a primary postmodern site for implementing such an understanding, namely the body as a visceral body whose material suffering is complicated with relation to language and representation. And before I specifically discuss Coetzee’s postmodern conception of the body as politically invested, I need to further justify postmodernism as the necessary context for problematized representation,

establish the politics of postmodern representation, and establish the body as a rich postmodern theme and relate it to the problematic of postmodern representation.

## II. Postmodernism and the Politics of Representation

The formal features of postmodernism are similar in most cases to those of modernism, though more intensified.<sup>16</sup> They reduce reality to a textual level and employ parody, pastiche, and other stylistic strategies to foreground the textuality of the text and highlight the ontology of the world as a linguistic construct. Postmodernism has a tendency to read almost everything as a text and legitimate different readings, thus making meaning ambivalent and challenging authority. Within postmodernism's textualizing tendency, *écriture* becomes an inclusive term for writing. Postmodernism rejects straightforward representation and belief in authentic originals. Reality for postmodernists is consciously constructed. Postmodernism is, Arthur Berger writes, "very much involved with visual culture, images, the media" and the idea that the represented reality is "increasingly important. More important, some would say, than reality" (15). Jean Baudrillard articulates his famous proclamation that the real in postmodern culture is replaced by the hyperreal, by its image:

It is reality itself that is hyperrealist. Surrealism's secret already was that the most banal reality could become surreal, but only in certain privileged moments that are still nevertheless connected with art and the imaginary. Today it is

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<sup>16</sup> It is thematically, however, that we can draw borders between them. Modernism has been identified as attempting to impose order on chaos and lament the loss of meaning and order while postmodernism is often assumed to celebrate fragmentation without attempting to impose any meaning. Such claims, however, remain general and in need of some qualification as the relationship between both movements is much complicated. At least, I try to defend Coetzee's brand of postmodernism against charges of political irrelevance.

quotidian reality in its entirety—political, social, historical and economic—that from now on incorporates the simulating dimension of hyperrealism. We live everywhere already in an ‘aesthetic’ hallucination of reality. (qtd. in Berger 24)

Simulation becomes a form of (mis)representation that seeks to distance the real. This makes representation seem more real than the real it is meant to capture. Media images and metafiction complicate the referential value of representation. For Baudrillard, simulation is opposed to mimetic representation since the relation between signs and referents became very unstable in the play of signs and images. Postmodernists are aware of the reflexive nature of language and its power in constructing the world. Hence, they pay special attention to writing techniques and styles that foreground language and the unconventional/intertextual play of meanings as part of a larger concern with textuality.

Steven Connor in “Postmodernism and Literature” states:

Rather than retreating from worldliness into the Word, postmodernism could continue to embrace the world, though on the condition that this world was known and shown to be made up of words. Where modernist literary texts acknowledged their linguistic constitution in a blushing or grudging manner, postmodernist texts candidly embraced and celebrated their wordedness in the form of wordiness. (69-70)

Postmodernists, while not necessarily abolishing the real, argue for the mediation and construction of the real through language and various forms of representation.

In *Postmodernist Fiction*, Brian McHale discusses postmodernism on the basis of its interest in ontology, in the status of reality and the world (in a self-conscious

foregrounding of the construction of the world in the text), as opposed to modernism's epistemological interest in interpreting the world (in questions of understanding and knowledge). McHale's distinction between "modernist epistemological poetics and postmodernist ontological poetics" (xii) is the main idea of the book. The difference for McHale is that of the "dominant" in each, one deploying "strategies which engage and foreground" epistemological questions of knowledge, what can be known (9), and one whose dominant is ontological asking questions about the nature of the world, our place in it (10). In postmodernist texts, McHale argues "epistemology is *backgrounded*, as the price for foregrounding ontology" (emphasis original; 11).<sup>17</sup> Postmodernism is more concerned with the nature of existence and being as opposed to modernism's interest in the nature and limits of human knowledge. Postmodernists view reality as ontologically unstable. McHale is aware that a text can have more than one dominant based on who reads it and how we approach it. Hence, a text can raise both epistemological and ontological questions. What he sees in postmodern texts is a tendency to prioritize ontological questions. Postmodernist fiction problematizes the representation of the world and makes it a matter of (de)construction through words. Postmodernism here appears as an intensification of modernism, as inseparable from it since seeing the world and constructing it overlap, and the world is what makes the word possible.

This is a useful interpretive model because it claims that postmodernism complicates the relationship between being and representation. Postmodernists transform the way we experience reality by highlighting the images we access, by showing how the

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<sup>17</sup> It is noteworthy that for some postmodernist thinkers like Jean-Francois Lyotard postmodernism is, paradoxically, mainly concerned with the epistemological question of how knowledge is legitimized and how grand narratives are produced. Again, the relationship between modernism and postmodernism is conceptually beyond the limited scope of this dissertation.

real is disappearing or getting concealed by the hyperreal. We experience the real through its effects. Kevin Hart argues: “To live reality as an image is to live in what many postmodernists call hyper-reality. We live in a world of images that seem more real than the natural world about us” (58). The real is replaced by its copy in postmodern culture and the world is full of images, icons, signs, and texts. The image is made more important than the real it might refer to. As a result, many critics attacked postmodern culture for lacking in critical distance and being superficial.

Postmodernism was criticized for a lack of a historical sense in its interest in pastiche and formal experimentation. The mediation of experience, critics argue, effects a simulated reality and reduces external referents to simulations. The signifier, thus, takes precedence over the signified. Fredric Jameson relates postmodernism more to the present rather than the past or history. In line with a tendency of detractors of postmodern culture and art on grounds of simulacra rather than stable referents, he claims that it respects no authorities or traditions. He views it as tolerant of excess, lack of teleology, immediate gratification of desires, exhaustion of originality, erasure of historical past, imitation of styles, and what Stefan Morawski calls “the absence of confrontative and rebel attitudes” (12). However, it should be noted that the postmodernism Jameson attacks is basically a cultural and historical period. Jameson in his well-known “Postmodernism, or The Cultural logic of Late Capitalism” presents postmodernism as a dominant cultural logic of multinational/consumer capitalism as the title hints. He argues that the global capitalist economy and commercialism effect a postmodern culture of lost subject, history, and originality. He criticizes postmodernism, or rather the culture of postmodernity, for a lack of oppositional critique and a consumer culture of

interchangeable commodities. He argues that “the past as ‘referent’ finds itself gradually bracketed, and then effaced altogether, leaving us with nothing but texts” (66). Hence, the nostalgic postmodernism for him is incompatible with “genuine historicity” (67) and a radical, real history “remains forever out of reach” (71), disappearing behind images and simulacra. Postmodernism for him is preoccupied with the transformation of reality into superficial, fragmentary, and changing images. Besides Jameson’s accusation that postmodernism is historically shallow, there have been claims that a model of postmodern politics based on inclusive logic is weightless since such an inclusiveness of politics makes everything seem political. Postmodernism has had its supporters and detractors because of its ambivalence toward and celebration of pluralism.

However, even its critics acknowledge postmodernism’s political potential and more militant forms. Terry Eagleton points out the contradictions of postmodernism, including its radical and conservative nature and celebration of fluidity/difference despite a homogenizing impact.<sup>18</sup> Eagleton in *The Illusions of Postmodernism* acknowledges the “illusions” of postmodernism and yet its radical potential. He contends: “At its most militant, postmodernism has lent a voice to the humiliated and reviled, and in doing so has threatened to shake the imperious self-identity of the system to its core. And for this one might almost forgive it the whole of its egregious excesses” (24). “The politics of postmodernism,” Eagleton concludes, “have been at once enrichment and evasion” (24). Jameson, who is typically seen as one of the detractors of postmodernism for lack of historical seriousness, also acknowledges that his “conception of postmodernism is thus not meant to be monolithic” but rather a “dialectical” one (“Conversation” 11-12).

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<sup>18</sup> See for example Eagleton’s “The Contradictions of Postmodernism.”

Jameson even argues along with postmodern theory when he asserts that history, though not a narrative, “is inaccessible to us except in textual form” (qtd. in Best and Kellner 185). In addition, Hal Foster in his preface to the *The Anti-Aesthetic* is aware that postmodernism can be politically attacked for its relativism and openness/pluralism (xi). Hence, he makes a distinction between “a postmodernism of resistance and a postmodernism of reaction” (xii). It is the postmodernism of resistance that he presents as resistant to the status quo rather than celebratory of it as in the reactionary one, destructive of tradition (modernism), and seeking “to question rather than exploit cultural codes, to explore rather than conceal social and political affiliations” (xii). So, a postmodernism of resistance for Foster does not passively appropriate everything and tries, instead, to gain grounds for oppositional politics. There are degrees of postmodernness, and some of postmodernism’s forms are more politicized than others.

Other critics defended postmodernism for the very politics of its representation and its ambivalent nature. In the words of Hutcheon, “historiographic metafiction” “was perhaps the most obvious of the postmodern paradoxical forms that were both self-consciously fictive (‘metafiction’) and yet directly addressing historical issues, events and personages” (“Postmodernism” 122). For Hutcheon, these distinctive forms of postmodern fiction are conscious of their status as fiction and the writing process but not simply for that end. Rather, the end is to fictionalize history and distort borders between fiction and history since history can only be known via representation, narration, and discourses. Hutcheon highlights the unavoidably textual nature of history in fiction. The gap between the textual and the real is bridged in her defense of postmodern fiction and its treatment of history. Her work falls within broader postmodern notions of our inability

to know the real without mediation and interpretation, without trying to approach the truth from a specific perspective. Hutcheon shows that history is not a given but a mediated experience reaching us through texts by means of selection, organization, interpretation. History is real, she argues, but it shapes or relates to the present discursively. For Hutcheon, “the ideological and the aesthetic,” that is, the political and the self-reflexive, “are turning out to be inseparable” in postmodern fiction (“Discourse” 105). Historiographic metafiction, she argues, “foregrounds the problematic and complex relationship that has always existed between the formal concept of the text and the socio-political one of ideology” (“Discourse” 106). Hutcheon views postmodernism as simultaneously ironic and critical, complicit and subversive. She insists on the political aspects of postmodernism by showing how it complicates representation and history behind self-reflexive, metafictional, and discursive practices.

Postmodernism is not dehistoricized. It borrows from poststructuralism an interest in language and representation as the medium through which we experience the world. Hence, postmodernism rejects “History” as absolute, uncontested and transcribes it into narrative, making it lose some of its localized referential aspects and fusing the local with the international. According to Hutcheon,

what both postmodern historiographic theory and literature taught was that both history and fiction are equally ‘discourses’, that is, ways of speaking about (and thus seeing) the world that are constructed by human beings; both are systems of meaning by which we make sense of the past—and the present. The meaning of history is not therefore in the events but in the narrative (or, quite simply, the

story) that makes those past events into present historical ‘facts.’ (emphasis original; “Postmodernism” 122)

Hence, Hutcheon concludes that postmodern historiographic writing blurs distinctions between fiction and history and can be “paradoxically both serious and playful” (“Postmodernism” 122). In “The Politics of Postmodernism: Parody and History,” Hutcheon continues to argue that postmodernism is “a fundamentally contradictory enterprise” and that many of its works are “resolutely historical and inescapably political precisely because they are parodic” (180). Hutcheon maintains that using irony and play does not necessarily “exclude seriousness and purpose in postmodernist art” (“Politics” 186). In “Beginning to Theorize Postmodernism,” Hutcheon dwells on the contradictory nature of postmodernism and its ambivalent treatment of history and politics. She continues to sample “historiographic metafiction” as an example of this contradiction in that it is “intensely self-reflexive” but refers to “historical events and personages” (12). This form of fiction is characterized, as she argues, by “theoretical self-awareness of history and fiction as human constructs” (12). Hutcheon here defends postmodernism by arguing that it rethinks history in its textualized form, “as a human construct” since its “accessibility to us now is entirely conditioned by textuality” (21).

Hutcheon elsewhere points out that postmodernism is contradictory in that it is complicit in what it seeks to contest, that it is “politically ambivalent: its critique coexists with an equally real and equally powerful complicity with the cultural dominants within which it inescapably exists” (“Circling” 150). She defines postmodern historiographic metafiction as what disrupts the relation between the literary and the historical, as “novels that are intensely self-reflexive but that also both re-introduce historical context into

metafiction and problematize the entire question of historical knowledge” (“Pastime” 54-55). She shows that history and fiction are textual constructs whose interrelationship is problematic and that reference is made discursive, referring back to language. Historiographic metafiction, she maintains, “espouses a postmodern ideology of pluralism and recognition of difference” (“Pastime” 63). Unlike detractors of postmodernism who argue for a disappearing real, Hutcheon asserts that the real/the past exists but that our access to it is different: “Historiographic metafiction acknowledges the paradox of the *reality* of the past but its (only) *textualized* accessibility to us today” (emphasis original; “Pastime” 64).

In *The Politics of Postmodernism*, Hutcheon continues to emphasize the contradictory nature of postmodernism and to find the political potential of postmodernism against claims of “narcissistic and ironic appropriation” by showing how it works by turning its “inevitable ideological grounding into a site of de-naturalizing critique,” thus problematizing representation (3). Hutcheon asserts as her focus for the book the politics of postmodern representation, “the ideological values and interests that inform any representation” (7). Her model is a “paradoxical postmodernism of complicity and critique, of reflexivity and historicity” (11). In a pivotal paragraph in the book, she spells out the workings of postmodern representation:

What postmodern theory and practice together suggest is that everything always was ‘cultural’ in this sense, that is, always mediated by representations. They suggest that notions of truth, reference, and the non-cultural real have not ceased to exist, as Baudrillard claims, but that they are no longer unproblematic issues, assumed to be self-evident and self-justifying. The postmodern, as I have been

defining it, is not a degeneration into ‘hyperreality’ in a technological world in Baudrillard’s terms but a questioning of what reality can mean and how we can come to know it. It is not that representation now dominates or effaces the referent, but rather that it now self-consciously acknowledges its existence as representation—that is, as interpreting (indeed as creating) its referent, not as offering direct and immediate access to it. (32)

Hence, historiographic metafiction for her renders the public experience “specifically as discourse. How do we know the past today? Through its discourses, through its texts—that is, through the traces of its historical events: the archival materials, the documents, the narratives of witnesses . . . and historians” (34).<sup>19</sup> Hutcheon finds politics in the very act of representation as postmodernism “denaturalizes” history and makes distinctions between the events and facts of the past and how we construct them from their traces without denying them as events.

Hutcheon argues that while some feminists and postcolonial critics denounced postmodernism as debilitating for their interventional political agendas since its “deliberate open-endedness, its ‘both/and’ thinking, and its resolute lack of resolution risked immobilizing oppressed people” (“Legacy” 17), others found the same inclusive logic empowering in the twenty-first century since merely focusing on “ex-centricity, marginality, and difference” is “a crucial first step to action” (“Legacy” 17). Critics still find a political potential in the postmodern these days. In the words of Elizabeth Ermarth,

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<sup>19</sup> This point about the past being recovered through historical materials like archives, elaborate documents, and deposited materials by eyewitnesses or explorers will be argued in Chapter Four in my discussion of Coetzee’s *Dusklands*.

the postmodern condition re-opens political options that the culture of modernity has increasingly suppressed by its search for unity, rationality, and non-contradiction. Postmodernity acknowledges and even features precisely the inescapability of contradiction, of unmediatable difference; it shifts emphasis from rational resolution to negotiated contradiction in ways that have profoundly political implications. (qtd. in Hutcheon; "Legacy" 17)

When it comes to Coetzee's apartheid novels and their postmodern position on history, we will find that Coetzee problematizes the relationship between fiction and history in the ambivalent act of representing the real as both material and constructed, as an event that happens and is accessed textually, which often results in what Hutcheon calls "historiographic metafiction." This inclusive, contradictory logic of postmodernism is echoed by Hassan when he argues that postmodernism "demands a double view. Sameness and difference, unity and rupture, filiation and revolt," which are all necessary for understanding historical change ("Question" 32). Hassan's model of postmodernism highlights multivalence, difference, and openness and allows, like Hutcheon's, for indeterminacy and contradictions. This emphasis by the defenders of postmodernism on its openness to those who were not given a voice in the grand narratives of Western thought—the excluded other on the basis of race, gender, or class—shows that postmodernism gains more political potential through its confluences with the discourses of feminism and postcolonialism and in its attempts to overthrow binary logic.

### III. Postmodernism and the Periphery

In addition to postmodernism's politics of representation, its intersections with feminism and postcolonialism, with gender and race issues, are politically empowering. Coetzee's brand of postmodernism as far as the body is concerned is never free from the impact of feminism and postcolonialism. Hence, in line with postmodernism's celebration of pluralism and hybridity, I will be working at the intersections of postmodernism<sup>20</sup> and its offshoots: feminism (especially as it is inflected by

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<sup>20</sup> As Hassan concedes in *The Postmodern Turn*, the names we often associate with postmodernism "are far too heterogenous to form a movement, paradigm, or school. Still, they may evoke a number of related cultural tendencies, a constellation of values, a repertoire of procedures and attitudes" (85). Moreover, postmodernism, Hassan continues, and as a categorical term, "suffers from a certain *semantic* instability" (emphasis original; 87). Hassan also argues against strict binaries between modernism and postmodernism and says that they are "not separated by an Iron Curtain or Chinese Wall; for history is a palimpsest, and culture is permeable to past time, time present, and time future" (88). They overlap in time and are both subject to "the *historical* instability of many literary concepts, their openness to change" (emphasis original; 88). Hence, the dichotomies in the table he offers "remain insecure, equivocal. For differences shift, defer, even collapse" (92). In a postlude to *The Postmodern Turn*, Hassan reminds that the postmodern condition is "pluralist, conflictual, indetermanent" (226). In "From Postmodernism to Postmodernity," Hassan asserts the difficulty of defining postmodernism and sees that the term belongs to "what philosophers call an essentially contested category" (1). He argues: "In cultural studies, a highly politicized field, the term postmodernism is often used in opposition to postcolonialism, the former deemed historically feckless, being unpolitical or, worse, not politically correct" (2). He distinguishes between postmodernism as referring to "the cultural sphere" and its mutation, inclusive postmodernity as a general category referring to "the geopolitical scheme" closely associated with or "sometimes called postcolonialism" (3). It features "globalization" and "localization" (3) and margins and centers (13). He elaborates: "Nor does postmodernity equal postcolonialism, though the latter, with its concern for colonial legacies, may be part of the former" (3). For Hassan, it is postmodernity that covers and subsumes the political thrust of feminism, poststructuralism, and postcolonialism (3). This is part of his understanding of "indeterminacy" as "a combination of trends that include openness, fragmentation, ambiguity, discontinuity, decenterment, heterodoxy, pluralism, deformation, all conducive to indeterminacy or under-determination" (4). The recent work on postmodernism by Hassan focuses on such a mutation from cultural postmodernism to a geopolitical postmodernity covering globalization and counter-globalization. He asserts the same point about the expansion of postmodernism into "geopolitical postmodernity" in "Beyond Postmodernism" and argues that it tries to become a postmodernism "not of suspicion but of trust" (3) in the form of attention to others and the world. Postmodern theory has an affinity with globalization theory because despite its interest in the geopolitical, it defies boundaries and embraces the global. Hutcheon in *A Poetics of Postmodernism* presents postmodernism as primarily European and American theory, but this relates to theoretical and academic debates rather than its employment by writers or its global reach. I use "postmodernism" in this dissertation in both senses (the cultural and the generalized political) since I am arguing for a political/ethical dimension for the postmodern discursive treatment of the body in Coetzee's works. If postmodernism is deemed irresponsible or not serious due to its relativism and skepticism, its mutations and surrenders to other -

poststructuralism) and postcolonialism. Postmodernism emerges in this study as an umbrella term for these theoretical confluences.<sup>21</sup> These movements and theories developed substantially in the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. In addition to overlapping timeframes, they borrow ideas from each other. I will explore their overlap as far as the body is concerned, and specifically to the extent they make postmodernism more politically oriented. They all share a critique of dichotomous logic and embrace pluralism and difference. In their accommodation of dissidence and critique of essentialism, they unsettle hierarchical distinctions between centers and margins. They oppose patriarchy and oppression on grounds of race, gender, or class. Many postcolonial theorists tend to use poststructuralist notions of center/self vs. other/periphery and deconstruct them in their arguments. The deconstruction of such binaries via the body can be traced in Coetzee's fiction.<sup>22</sup> Besides, postcolonialism is concerned with the body and the psyche of the colonized, and is thus relevant as far as the body is concerned. According to Helen Tiffin, postcolonialism and postmodernism share many features:

A number of strategies, such as the move away from realist representation, the refusal of closure, the exposure of the politics of metaphor, the interrogation of forms, the rehabilitation of allegory and the attack on binary structuration of concept and language, are characteristic of both the generally post-colonial and

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isms make it more serious and historical. At the same time, postmodernism is not less serious in its failure to exist as an independent term because neither feminism nor postcolonialism or poststructuralism are pure theories or movements.

<sup>21</sup> It is no wonder that critics speak of postmodern feminism and postmodern postcolonialism.

<sup>22</sup> Apartheid, we should remember, as a system of oppression based on skin color and racial characteristics, was thoroughly dichotomous. Coetzee's apartheid fictions, we will see, make us question the Manichean oppositions between white and black, the center and the periphery, the imperial self and its barbarian other, the inside and the outside, and even those between health and illness.

the European post-modern, but they are energized by different theoretical assumptions and by vastly different political motivations. (172)

Their resistance to closure allows them to reject fixity and embrace multiplicity and otherness. As Arun Mukherjee asserts, “‘postmodernism’ is not an innocent term, a mere label to designate a cultural phenomenon, for those who have been through the experience of colonialism” (2). Postmodern thought (including literary postmodernism), Simon During argues, unlike postmodernity as a cultural or economic condition characterized by an absence of critical distance, “refuses to turn the Other into the Same” and allows “space for what postmodernity denies: otherness” (33). Another aspect of postmodern thought During lists is that “the Other can never speak for itself as the Other” (33). This can be understood, however, in postcolonial terms as the Other assuming the subject position and challenging the master discourses and vying for the position of power without necessarily becoming the Self or being reduced to sameness. For During, postmodernism applied to literature is not to be equated with postmodernity and is not thus devoid of ethical and political concerns. It is indicative that During titles his article “Postmodernism or Postcolonialism Today.” During argues against accusations like the one leveled by Craig Owens in “The Discourse of Others: Feminists and Postmodernism” that pluralism “reduces us to being an other among others; it is not a recognition, but a reduction to difference to absolute indifference, equivalence, interchangeability” (58). Although there were accusations against postmodernism for obliterating difference, there were many counter claims in praise of postmodernism for its attention to difference and cultural marginality.

Feminism, postcolonialism, and postmodernism share an interest in the body and its oppression in the course of history. Such conflated theories reject totalizing narratives or power structures and celebrate difference. They return to the body as a site of subjugation and share an interest in representation and its relation to material existence. They share the concept that cultural construction of femininity or otherness has been a primary source of oppression. Therefore, they want the marginalized to be the subject and not object of representation. They pay particular attention to destroying boundaries and recognizing differences. The result is a pluralist brand of postmodern politics that dwells on the construction and representation of reality while being simultaneously rooted in ethics, politics, and power relations. Although this does not mean that the marginal becomes the center or vice versa, postmodernism functions at the space of dissidence and allows for difference—sexual, racial, and otherwise. Postmodernism does not simply absorb differences and contradictions and thus does not reduce the other into the same because it foregrounds unfathomable difference and rejects exclusive logic. This is not simply reducing difference to sameness but challenging boundaries and centers and demanding recognition of alterity on its own terms. Postmodernism vehemently attacks all forms of essentialism, retains political ambivalence, and encourages pluralism.<sup>23</sup>

The openness of postmodernism should not be interpreted as a weakness but as a rejection of fixities and dominant oppressive discourses, as an emphasis on the fluidity between margins and centers and an interest in discursive formations of subjectivity and knowledge. A central premise in Margrit Shildrick's *Leaky Bodies and Boundaries* is the

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<sup>23</sup> In fact, the very grounds used to attack postmodernism as its “anything goes” pluralism and inclusive celebration of difference or reducing everything to discourse can be used to defend it from a deconstructive stance.

“leakiness as the very ground for a postmodernist feminist ethic” (12), and thus attempts to destabilize categories and binaries. She means lack of boundaries in the relation between material and constructed bodies and how materiality is a matter of representation and mediation via discourses. Shildrick’s postmodern and feminist ethical position on the body is that the “experience of any ‘underlying’ reality is put aside, not because it does not exist, but because it is inaccessible in any prediscursive state” (30). She argues: “Far from erasing the intelligibility of the ethical, the postmodernist approach necessitates an ethic of openness and responsibility towards differences where none is given prior privilege” (179). Donna Haraway in “A Cyborg Manifesto” uses the cyborg metaphor within a postmodern feminist framework to move beyond traditional dualisms and limitations of gender, race, and class and endorse a fluid structure of difference. The cyborg is her transgressive model out of the binary models of thought and toward empowering politics beyond patriarchal accounts of identity dualisms. Haraway concludes: “So my cyborg myth is about transgressed boundaries, potent fusions, and dangerous possibilities...” (571). The transgressed, leaky boundaries postmodern feminists highlight point to attempts to subvert power relations that subordinate women as the unprivileged part in dichotomous logic. While Coetzee does not employ cyborg bodies in the sense of blurred bodily boundaries between humans and animals or creatures which are partly humans and partly machines, we will see that he utilizes this postmodern, feminist logic of fluid bodies and transgressed boundaries as empowering rhetoric for the oppressed bodies, and especially female bodies.<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>24</sup> Such ideas will recur in Chapter Two as I discuss Coetzee’s female narrators Mrs. Curren and Magda.

As Deepika Bahri argues, feminist and postcolonial theories are concerned with “similar questions of representation, voice, marginalization, and the relation between politics and literature. Given that both critical projections employ multidisciplinary perspectives, they are each attentive, at least in principle, to historical context and the geo-political co-ordinates of the subject in question” (201). Hence, these conflated theories share an assertion of difference, a rejection of binary logic, and a challenge to authority.<sup>25</sup> Women and the colonized, Ashcroft argues, share “an intimate experience of the politics of oppression and repression” and both “have been forced to articulate their experiences in the language of their oppressors” (*Empire* 172). Above all, versions of feminist and post-colonial discourses, Ashcroft argues, attempt to “reinstate the marginalized in the face of the dominant” and subvert “the structures of domination” (173). Both discourses function at the intersection of race, gender, and class and realize that they have to reinstate themselves against systems of thought and power relations within language and authorship. Both are used to refer to discursive practices against oppression and marginalization, which is how they are used in Coetzee’s novels. While postcolonialism and feminism seem to offer the possibility of more direct intervention for political and social change, they have versions closely impacted by poststructuralism and deconstruction. After all, they, along with postmodernism, share a belief in textual politics as a preliminary step to any intervention in the real world, a brand of politics that sees writing as always political and ideological in its nature. All share a disbelief in

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<sup>25</sup> See, for example, Owens’s “The Discourse of Others: Feminists and Postmodernism” and Thomas Docherty’s “The Ethics of Alterity” on this point. Docherty argues: “To read postmodern characterization is to begin to construct the ethics of alterity, to discover what it means to speak always from the political disposition of the Other” (370). Docherty also argues that postmodern characters “are always differing, not just from other characters, but also from their putative ‘selves’” and that they dramatize “their own ‘absence’ from themselves” (366).

master narratives in western thought that seem to have empowered certain classes and races and perpetuated the status quo.

In *The Location of Culture*, Homi Bhabha speaks of a hybrid, ambivalent space of cultural encounters in the postcolonial world and thus celebrates ambivalence from a postcolonial/poststructuralist postmodernist perspective and rejects binary closures in favor of cultural difference and liminal negotiation. He locates culture at the spaces of hybridity, translation, and difference. He asserts: “The postcolonial perspective resists the attempt at holistic forms of social explanation. It forces a recognition of the more complex cultural and political boundaries that exist on the cusp of these often opposed political spheres” (248). Like feminism and postmodernism, postcolonialism rejects the binary construction of sexual and racial others and rejects misrepresentations and “holistic” logic. The result is that the conscious construction of the other body in terms of alterity of the sort we find in Coetzee’s apartheid novels, the paramount example being *Waiting for the Barbarians* here, is simultaneously a critique of this foundational logic and a tacit rejection of the fixities of colonial discourse.

Other critics who worked at the intersections of postmodernism and feminism highlighted the body as a site of conflictual politics and examined its relation to hegemonic discourses. In *Volatile Bodies: Toward a Corporeal Feminism*, the poststructuralist feminist Elizabeth Grosz examines (sexed/material) bodies in terms of social construction. The body for her is an inscriptive text. She brings together biology and culture and highlights the impossibility of pure corporeality without or beyond culture and social inscription. She denies that there are essential gaps between “the ‘real,’ material body on one hand and its various cultural and historical representations on the

other” (x). Material bodies for her, “ahistorical, precultural, or natural” (x), are culturally produced/represented in that “they are not only inscribed, marked, engraved, by social pressures external to them but are the products, the direct effects, of the very social constitution of nature itself” (x). She asserts that the body should be regarded “as a site of social, political, cultural, and geographical inscriptions, production, or constitution. The body is not opposed to culture, a resistant throwback to a natural past; it is itself a cultural, *the* cultural product” (23). Her point is that to oppose “essentialism, biologism, and naturalism, it is the body as cultural product that must be stressed” (23-24). This is an empowering counter-discourse because hegemonic discourses by men oppress women on the very grounds of bodily essentialism. Grosz speaks of the metaphor of the textualized body and reiterates a similar notion about bodies as “corporeal surfaces” for inscription of messages. In this case, the postmodern body is a surface, a (corporeal) text rather than a real body. She is in line with body theorists who acknowledge the discursive social status of the body and its relation to a pure material body. The overlap is rooted in questions of power, history, and signification.

The poststructuralist, postmodernist feminist Judith Butler in *Bodies That Matter* also reconsiders bodily materiality “as the effect of power” (2), as something contingent on and governed by cultural construction, regulating norms, hegemonic heterosexual power, and discourses. She argues that culture inscribes sexual norms on sexed bodies, that sex is a matter of social construction via discourse. Her main point is that matter is only conceived as matter as the other of discourse. Materiality is seen as materiality through discourse or with relation to discourse, i.e. what is non-discursive is an effect of positing as such. Butler essentially reformulates our understanding of materiality in the

light of the discursive performativity of sexuality and the construction of gender. She argues: “If gender is the social construction of sex, and if there is no access to this ‘sex’ except by means of its construction, then it appears not only that sex is absorbed by gender, but that ‘sex’ becomes something like a fiction, perhaps a fantasy, retroactively installed at a prelinguistic site to which there is no direct access” (5). Butler similarly considers what is outside discourse in terms of its relation to or how we think it in terms of discursive construction without denying “an ontological there-ness that exceeds or counters the boundaries of discourse” (8). Bodies that matter for her are bodies which materialize norms (16). She does not deny the materiality of the body but highlights the “normative conditions under which the materiality of the body is framed and formed, and, in particular, how it is formed through differential categories of sex” (17). So, she seeks to redeem a materiality bound up with, and yet exceeding, signification, exceeding its linguistic medium. Above all, her project is problematizing the relation between materiality and language. Her feminist advocacy of a return to bodily matter is a careful one, a return to matter as a “sign” (49). Butler is in the tradition of postmodern feminists who treat the body as a text and deny it materiality outside discourse. Unlike Butler, Susan Bordo in *Unbearable Weight: Feminism, Western Culture, and the Body* takes a cultural approach to the body and is aware that the body we come to experience is a product of mediation by “constructs, associations, images of a cultural nature” (35). However, she acknowledges cultural inscription and textualization of bodies yet emphasizes a materially located, situated body in Western Culture beyond textual production. She says: “When bodies are made into mere *products* of social discourse, they remain bodies in name only” (35). Bordo argues for a resistance against cultural

definitions of the body and a celebration of real bodies as a site of resistance. Countering attempts by some feminists like Butler to textualize the body, she tries to give attention to “the body’s material locatedness in history, practice, culture” (38). Hence, she complains: “If the body is a metaphor for our locatedness in space and time and thus for the finitude of human perception and knowledge, then the postmodern body is no body at all” (229).

The apartheid Coetzee novels I discuss in the chapters to follow seem to interrogate such notions about racial and gendered bodies because, as I will repeatedly argue, they problematize the body as what is resistant to language yet inescapably discursive—which allows Coetzee to avoid the theoretical extremes of body theorists and articulate levels of materiality within the scope of representation. In brief, the confluences of postmodernism with feminism and postcolonialism and as far as the body is concerned will be utilized to give more political weight to postmodernism and to highlight the contrast between the suffering material bodies of racial others and the constitution of such bodies in colonial, cultural, and feminist discourses. Coetzee’s apartheid novels warrant such a broad conception of a hybrid postmodernism, as we will see, because Coetzee populates his narratives with characters who are oppressed due to overlapping race and gender factors and whose bodies are constructed according to hegemonic discourses.

#### IV. Coetzee’s Postmodern Bodies: Bodily Events and Bodily Estrangement

In *The Illusions of Postmodernism*, Eagleton explicates postmodernism’s ambivalent conception of the body as a material body constructed culturally when he argues: “In speaking materially about culture, it began to speak culturally about the material, not least about the most obvious material bit of us, the body. It is ironic is this

light that postmodernism should be both suspicious of the body as material and devoted to specificity, since for traditional thinkers . . . , matter is precisely what individuates” (48). Moreover, Eagleton spells out postmodernism’s characteristic concern with the body: “Indeed from Bakhtin to the Body Shop, Lyotard to leotards, the body has become one of the most recurrent preoccupations of postmodern thought. Mangled members, tormented torsos, bodies emblazoned or incarcerated, disciplined or desirous: the bookshops are strewn with such phenomena, and it is worth asking ourselves why” (69). What is more important, however, is Eagleton’s assertion of postmodernism’s inclusive logic with regard to body politics: “The body, then, has been at once a vital deepening of radical politics, and a wholesale displacement of them” (70). The postmodern body, as a body whose materiality is mediated in culture and discourses, is a politically contested category. Many postmodernists transform the material body into an inscribed text, or rather, view the body as a text and pit it against language. In an age of technology and mass culture, what Patricia Waugh calls “the sensory, affective and visceral body” (136) is being modified and mediated. Waugh contends that recent scientific, cultural, and literary discourses “became obsessed with an understanding of the body as ‘written,’ as text, mutually reinforcing a fantasy of disembodiment and human invulnerability in the latest version of a technological sublime that required a self thinned and honed to the crystalline and sterile purity of the mathematical symbol” (133). The postmodern body loses its fixed boundaries and unified meaning and becomes a site for conflicting meanings and positions. Postmodernists celebrate the dissolution of the subject in language and the transformation of the world into a “text.” The postmodern body is also a fluid one without sure boundaries or meanings, and hence transgressive, existing between

the textual and the material, the human and the animal, the organic and the virtual. It is textualized or culturally constructed in the way reality and the subject are, which is in line with an interest in “writing” in general and the limits of literature and its relation to other disciplines. The postmodern body is seen as a carrier of cultural and political inscription and attributes. The material body is often entangled with and estranged behind tropes and discourses rooted in social, cultural, and political codes.

Postmodernism often problematizes bodies as cultural/linguistic texts and historical phenomena beyond their materiality. Postmodernists are concerned with health and illness, with the body per se and its discourses in contemporary literature and culture.<sup>26</sup> The physical body becomes richly metaphorical in a postmodern context and a discursive site for multiple significations that textualize it and constantly put its embodiment in question. Moreover, the undermined body that experiences health and illness, the biological given, is complicated and viewed differently as different discourses mediate it. The postmodern body in a world dominated by cultural images and texts is one whose materiality is estranged in service of body theories and discursive disembodiment. A specific look at the representation of the body in Coetzee’s apartheid novels captures this ambivalent logic of postmodernism whereby the body is subjected to discursive practices while remaining viscerally material and real. A historical materiality of the body in Coetzee is problematized by a postmodern textualized account of such bodies that includes substantial bodies and discursive codes. Coetzee has found a way of engaging political issues of the apartheid South Africa by representing materially suffering bodies and problematized/distanced this bodily materiality by making it an effect of discursive

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<sup>26</sup> See, for example, David Morris’s *Illness and Culture in the Postmodern Age* and Susan Sontag’s *Illness as Metaphor*.

construction. This postmodern way of representing the real acknowledges our ultimately mediated access to history. Bodily suffering and violence happen to the body, and the oppressed body exists in history as an event, but our relationship to real bodies is problematized in Coetzee's apartheid novels as embodiment is estranged through the construction of the body in language and our mediated access to it.

Coetzee writes about illnesses, disability, torture, pain, bodily violence, and grotesqueries—private bodily suffering or one caused by others—which situates him at the postmodern intersection of culture and the body. He unsettles the boundaries between texts and bodies and those between bodies and their “others.” The body in Coetzee is a postmodern text, one that is literally inscribed or marked by variations of disease, ageing, disability, torture, and humiliation or the proximity of “other” bodies. It is mediated by language via metaphors and is a site for inscription by discursive power practices. It can be textualized, read, and constructed in different (yet overlapping) interpretive models. However, it also exists materially prior to signification, cultural inscription, and the readings we give to it. Its materiality is a resistant, irreducible one. Coetzee does not deny the materiality of the body, but he problematizes it and shows its discursive accessibility. He uses the postmodern trope of the transgressive body with blurred boundaries to underscore the mediation of the body between the material and the textual. His consistent dwelling on the body and its limits situates itself as a postmodern preoccupation with bodies. The extent to which the culturally and textually constructed bodies remain transgressive material is an indication of a committed postmodern politics.

Coetzee's apartheid writings beginning with his first novel *Dusklands* and through *Age of Iron*, i.e. 1974-1990, engage apartheid history and politics discursively by

realistically representing suffering bodies and, in a postmodern fashion, problematizing this corporeal realism by making it an effect of discourse, cultural inscription, and textuality. Coetzee is aware that the only way of representing the historical real, without necessarily negating it, is textually within discourse and as a matter of construction—i.e. historiographically and metafictionally. Hence, Coetzee's fictions interrogate postmodern notions of the body, paradoxically perhaps, by way of highlighting the literal materiality of the body and thus articulating a specific brand of postmodern politics. While the postmodern body in Coetzee is often constructed and reduced to a text, it still insists on its material existence. And although the material body can lose its vitality or agency in the case of an extreme textualization, Coetzee is interested in the postmodern interplay between material and constructed bodies. Coetzee writes about bodily limits and transgressions, about the interplay between bodies and texts. While Coetzee's fictions reveal an interest in postmodern textualizing of the body, he combines such constructions of the body with a realistic sense of bodily life in order to articulate an idea of postmodern politics or explore the political limits of postmodernism and its relation to history. Coetzee asserts the political materiality of the body in the very process of constructing it and mediating or distancing its corporeality.

By looking at a postmodernism that problematizes representation and is informed by cultural and metafictional construction of reality, we find substantial bodies juxtaposed against discourses and attempts to textualize such bodies and thus estrange their materiality. Coetzee, like Hutcheon, does this by way of complicating our understanding of the past, of the representation of history and political relevance. The materiality of history is made a matter of ideological representation, and political

commitment can be found at their intersection. Coetzee is not negating the materiality of the body but reshaping it and complicating our understanding of it. The fact that suffering bodies populate the narratives and are posed for the reader in their inarticulate, silent, or even sick/hysterical states is in itself adequate.<sup>27</sup> Generalized/allegorized as this notion of politics can be, it is not to be dismissed as irrelevant. Coetzee's approach is of a political value as this way of representation is committed in that it problematizes our understanding of historical knowledge. Coetzee deserves consideration as a serious, politically engaged writer. As a postmodernist, he promotes the body as a historical, social, and political phenomenon. However, he does not seem to reject the body as a material essence. While bodies in Coetzee are created by and exist within language, they ask to be understood on their own terms. Such bodies are subsumed by language, but they enact their materiality and exist within language. The body may have a material, ontological existence, but it is still mediated by language and discourse, which in turn become its postmodern ontology. It is both a biological given and a linguistic construct, which defies the limitations of binary thought and endows the body with a political role beyond that of discourses.

In an interview with Attwell in *Doubling the Point* when asked to comment on the importance of the body in his works, especially with relation to *Foe*, Coetzee talks about power relations and the undeniable authority/alterity of the suffering body: "Friday is mute, but Friday does not disappear, because Friday is body" (248). Coetzee adds by way of asserting the ontological existence of the body: "Whatever else, the body is not 'that

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<sup>27</sup> Critics like Durrant, Meskell, and Weiss tend to see that Coetzee on purpose refuses easy closure in realist narratives about apartheid and insists on a generalized suffering that cannot be easily consoled, thus rejecting an easy denial of history. Meskell and Weiss see in this a warning not to allow oppressive regimes to reemerge, and thus a political/ethical message (97).

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" (emphasis original; 248). The suffering body in pain is beyond doubt in that material suffering, bodily mutilation and slavery in this case, is viscerally real to the victim of oppression, happening as a consequence of the power exercised on the victim. In a similar vein, Elaine Scarry writes in *The Body in Pain*: "The physical pain is so incontestably real that it seems to confer its quality of 'incontestable reality' on that power that has brought it into being. It is, of course, precisely because the reality of that power is highly so incontestable, the regime so unstable, that torture is being used" (27). The suffering body has an undeniable power for the writer who is implicated in historical guilt. Suffering in South Africa wields an authority on the white writer and is not to be dismissed. It even assumes its authority over the writer and overwhelms him. Coetzee writes in *Doubling the Point*: "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" (emphasis original; 248). Scarry also notes the implication of the body in power relations and argues that pain destroys and limits the world of the sufferer and opens that of the torturer as it "allows one person's physical pain to be understood as another person's power" (*Body* 37). Foucault similarly writes: "But the body is also directly involved in a political field; power relations have an immediate hold upon it; they invest it, mark it, train it, torture it, force it to carry out tasks, to perform ceremonies, to emit signs" (*Discipline* 25). Commenting on the elaborate and ritualized torture under the ancien régime in France, Foucault adds: "The tortured body is first inscribed in the legal ceremonial that must produce, open for all to see, the truth of the crime" (*Discipline* 35). Foucault may not be arguing against the

materiality of the body, but he, as a poststructuralist, makes such materiality inseparable from the power relations and historical forces and thus complicates the relationship between the body and its discursive formations. The body, for Foucault, is inscribed by political power structures, which is what we will find in Coetzee's apartheid novels.

Coetzee states in *Doubling the Point* that suffering overwhelms him, that his thinking "is thrown into confusion and helplessness by the fact of suffering in the world" (248). He articulates the postmodern difficulty of representing the reality of material suffering taking place in the world. He is aware that bodily suffering happens around us and constitutes material history, but he is also aware that such events are estranged and complicated when we represent them in fiction and translate historical materiality into the discourse of the novel. He grants non- or pre-discursive reality to the suffering body and simultaneously interrogates its discursive exploitation or production, which successfully links the body, pain, and language since language allows us to express our pain and relate to the pain of the other body.<sup>28</sup> Coetzee represents the torture that the barbarian girl endured in *Waiting for the Barbarians* as an event that took and that the magistrate cannot doubt because he is confronted with the scars left by the torture act on the girl's body. However, Coetzee estranges the tortured body because it is silent and because its pain is communicated to us by the narrating magistrate who constructs the girl's body.

While the materiality of the mutilated body in *Foe* is asserted within a context of colonialism and power relations and posed as a counter to linguistic construction in that Friday's body seems beyond and outside language, Coetzee adds a postmodern twist in

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<sup>28</sup> For a relevant argument about how belonging to a linguistic community allows us to collectively express pain and recognize the pain of others, thus sympathizing with them, see Negri's explication of Wittgenstein's analysis of pain (in the *Philosophical Investigations*) entitled "Wittgenstein and Pain."

the narratives woven in the novel around Friday and his muteness. We ultimately access this tongueless, enslaved body in narrated accounts (within a complicated, metafictional narrative structure) and in the light of discourses constructing the other body as the muted, grotesque alterity. Moreover, Coetzee estranges and casts the materiality of the oppressed body in the narrative in question as the cause and nature of Friday's mutilation(s) are suggested but never confirmed in the accounts other characters weave around him. Coetzee, however, asserts the material reality of the body as an existential given and bodily suffering as an event by stating that in *Doubling the Point* that "in South Africa it is not possible to deny the authority of suffering and therefore of the body" (248), which means that the body's position of suffering gives it undeniable power.

That the body transgresses its limits and exists as a material body and as an effect of discourse is an indication of its postmodern ambivalence. Coetzee employs this notion of bodily transgressions for an ethical end as well: highlighting the material existence of the body as an ultimate reality. The violated bodies of the colonized in *Dusklands* are concealed behind a metafictional narrative structure of colonial documents and records, photographic reproduction, narration, translation, and deposition. The body's transgressive materiality as slothful, dirty or sexually objectified is rendered in terms of colonial discourses. Above all, the violence that happens to it as an event is estranged and mediated/narrated by the narrators. The cancerous female body in pain in *Age of Iron* is written into language and made a trope for political turmoil and cultural associations of illness. Illness, suffering and pain happen to the body, but they are mediated through Mrs. Curren's subjective experience of pain transformed into a narrative. In *In the Heart of the Country*, the body's excessive materiality as a violated one is concealed within hysterical

linguistic ploys of an oppressed woman. The tortured, deformed body of the other in *Waiting for the Barbarians* and *Life and Times of Michael K* is made a site for the production of colonial discourses, disciplined and inscribed by various power relations, and treated as an enigmatic text to be coded. Again, bodily suffering happens as an event and dominates the consciousness of characters, but embodiment is estranged through the construction of the body in and problematizing its relationship to language.

Human bodies in Coetzee transgress their limits and spaces literally and metaphorically while remaining viscerally material and “real.” The body in Coetzee—whether suffering, aging, diseased, deformed, or subjugated—transgresses boundaries and challenges closure by way of demanding its presence as a body. There is a turn to realism in the representation of the body and disturbing graphic details in Coetzee’s apartheid novels, but this realism is often problematized in that bodies signify more than material essence and their relation to language is problematic. In *Giving Offense*, in a piece on “Apartheid Thinking,” Coetzee seems to suggest a relationship between his own conception of the undeniable presence of the material body in his work and the apartheid state’s attempt to contain and efface the body of the other. He writes:

As an episode in historical time, apartheid was causally overdetermined. It did indeed flower out of self-interest and greed, but also out of desire, and the denial of desire. In its greed, it demanded black bodies in all their physicality in order to burn their energy as labor. In its anxiety about black bodies, it also made laws to abolish them from sight. Apartheid did not understand itself and could not afford to understand itself. Its essence from the beginning was confusion, a confusion it displaced wildly all around itself. (164)

Coetzee makes it clear that the South African political context gives bodies per se a paramount importance, a material importance beyond their textualization and construction (even while he enacts such textualization in his work). In fact, the whole apartheid system appears to be one founded on an exploitation and attempted erasure of the materiality of the black body. This adds weight to my thesis that Coetzee creates a brand of postmodern politics by problematizing the body with relation to its construction.

In an essay in *Doubling the Point*, “Into the Dark Chamber,” Coetzee argues that *Waiting for the Barbarians* is about “the impact of the torture chamber on the life of a man of conscience” (363). The man in question is the magistrate who mediates/constructs (like the Empire he is associated with) the resisting tortured body of the barbarian woman by trying to read the marks of torture on her body and fathom her experience. Coetzee argues concerning pain and bodily violence: “These things happen. These things are done” (362). The impact of torture on the magistrate means that torture already happened, that it took place as an event and was carried out by an agent, and he is faced with its outcome in the figure of the tortured body of the barbarian girl. Coetzee shows how the body is an event in that torture and suffering actually happen somewhere and are, indeed, notable happenings for the body in pain, but Coetzee attempts to show that the suffering body as an event is also estranged from us and cannot be accessed directly for those who did not experience the same traumas. Bodily events are history in that things happen to the body, but they are narrated history as well because they get represented and approximated in language. Coetzee writes about what it feels like to be a body, a suffering body in pain, and embodiment is a strong theme in his apartheid novels. Since he cannot exactly reproduce daily suffering, he captures it through its absence as what

already took or takes place. The torture room, the place where a bodily event like torture takes place, Coetzee argues, is “a metaphor, bare and extreme, for relations between authoritarianism and its victims” (363). Coetzee here meditates on torture, its employment by the South African state, the relation between torture and the power imposed on the body, and how to represent the torturer. The “body in pain” Coetzee writes about in this particular novel and in this essay on torture is simultaneously material (tortured and materially oppressed) and constructed/inscribed via the power practices of oppressive regimes, which again supports my thesis about a politically committed postmodern treatment of the body. The body in Coetzee materially exists with an ontology of its own and suffers from variations of disease, pain, and oppression, but Coetzee denies us an easy or uncomplicated understanding of this materiality because the body is also interpreted as a text and given cultural attributes. While the materiality of the body is sometimes superseded by cultural and linguistic construction, it, at other times, overshadows such a construction. History in Coetzee is not repudiated. It is discursively constructed via the textualized materiality of the suffering, violated body. The representation of the body is politically engaged and refers to the real world of history but self-reflexively. While this can be attacked on grounds of lack of clear, active political agenda or resolution in the form of political change or intervention in the world, it cannot be dismissed as utterly unempowering since it is still unsettling, discomforting, and rooted in a politics of race and gender. The political and historical relevance of such writing stems from the way it tackles history.

Coetzee in his writings (de) “constructs” colonial history via juxtaposing past and present narratives of colonialism in *Dusklands*, dehistoricizing imperial history

allegorically in *Waiting for the Barbarians*, and then intensely subjecting the history of slavery to storytelling and intertexts in *Foe*. As a postmodernist, Coetzee engages history historiographically and metafictionally by problematizing the relationship between oppressed, marginalized bodies and the textual production of such bodies. In asserting the status of the material body, he empowers the victims of textualization and other forms of subjugation. The bodies in these novels share a common label of a grotesque, diseased body and a subordinate position in terms of gender or race. Women and people of color have been equated with the material body in western discourses and been oppressed accordingly. However, mutilated and sick as they are, such bodies are sites of resistance and a threat to dominant power structures. The heightened bodily consciousness and states we observe in the narratives are attempts to reclaim such colonized bodies, empower their otherness, and make the disenfranchised the subjects of discourse. The attention Coetzee gives to the suffering, marginalized body and all forms of bodily alterity endows his fictions with a moral and political thrust while the metafictional textualization of the body establishes the elusive status and ambivalence of his political vision. Thus, we find in the fictions attempts to come to terms with otherness not simply via the construction of subject positions other than those of the masculine western subject like marginalized and diseased women and men but via attempts at showing the material suffering of oppressed bodies within the narratives and the violence done to them. The other assumes an irreducible status and refuses to be the same as the traditional masculine subject and asserts its difference. It challenges boundaries of separation not to be the same but to assert the legitimacy of diversity, acknowledge it, and establish the existence of otherness on its own terms.<sup>29</sup> Coetzee is aware that despite the evasive nature of his

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<sup>29</sup> Some French feminists like Luce Irigaray argue a similar point in rejecting being “the other sex,”

writing and its appeal to European discourses on language and theory, the position from which he writes as a white South African is entangled with power and agency. The troubled, guilty consciousness of many of his narrators is not simply an attempt at evading the material forces of history on Coetzee's part since the degraded, suffering body haunts the narratives. Through an obvious interest in storytelling and reducing history to textualization and representation, Coetzee highlights that when we write we transform bodily events, which are history, to stories and texts accessible in narratives. However, for Coetzee textuality and discursive/metafictional representation are not an end in themselves. If we have no immediate access to reality beyond signifiers and representations, this does not mean that the world is not real or that texts are not complicit with sociopolitical realities. Discourse and representation can be violently hegemonic and can perpetuate unjust histories and ideologies.

#### V. Supportive Coetzee Scholarship and the Body

None of the critics who have praised Coetzee's works sought to historicize him or problematize his historical position by specifically looking at his treatment of the body. Critics like Attwell, Dick Penner, and Susan Ghallagher, among others, who took a supportive stance and tried to defend Coetzee's engagement with South African history and politics in full-length studies, sought to resituate or rehistoricize Coetzee discursively. Critics in this category contend that Coetzee's position is more complex and that political engagement is not an easy choice. However, in trying to defend Coetzee against charges of irrelevance, such scholarship mainly fell victim to its own treatment of

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celebrating difference, and insisting on a different, autonomous subject position that cannot be reduced to that of the masculine subject or thought in terms of it. See for example her "The Question of the Other." More on the relationship between Coetzee and French feminism is to follow in Chapter Two.

South African history and politics. In other words, it gave too much South African context, often at the expense of critical theory, global themes, and textual analysis. Critics in this category drew on their intimate knowledge of South African history to discuss the novels. Nevertheless, if we as global readers are to argue that Coetzee's politics lie in a discursively allegorical and postmodern treatment of history and politics via the material body, we do not need an extensive knowledge of a specific South African context. This should not mean, however, that we dismiss this conflictual historical context that Coetzee engages and transforms. We still need the South African context as a reference point.<sup>30</sup>

Attwell in *J. M. Coetzee: South Africa and the Politics of Writing* tries to contextualize Coetzee and his work within a South African context, one which Coetzee resisted.<sup>31</sup> The contexts given are biographical, intellectual, historical, and literary in which the novels are situated. He endeavors to relate the apartheid novels considered to the politics of South Africa of the time of writing them. In his view, Coetzee's fiction draws attention to its historicity and yet resists being subordinated to the discourse of history. While Attwell tries to highlight linguistic, theoretical, and fictive aspects of Coetzee's novels and how the novels discussed are postmodern and postcolonial, he finds himself drawn back to the contextualizing demands of placing the author within his life/work and times: "Coetzee has absorbed the lessons of modern linguistics—the textual turn in structuralism and poststructuralism—yet seriously addresses the ethical and political stresses of living in, and with, a particular historical locale, that of contemporary

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<sup>30</sup> As Susie O'Brien and Imre Szeman argue, "To ask the question of whether there is a literature of globalization is thus also to ask whether it is possible to think of literature outside the framework of national literatures, and correspondingly, to try to imagine what critical tools might be used to make sense of such literatures, and what in turn might be learned from and about them, in ways that open up new perspectives on the problems and possibilities that we face at the present time" (605).

<sup>31</sup> For evidence, see p. 25 in this Introduction.

South Africa” (1). The South African context in Attwell’s study is a limited one. For Attwell, the novels are located between language and South African history (2). His approach is “a description of Coetzee’s oeuvre as a form of situational metafiction, with a particular relation to the cultural and political discourses of South Africa in the 1970s and 1980s” (3). Attwell is one of few critics who acknowledge the early novels as constituting “a form of postmodern metafiction” (1). However, he dwells so much on South African history, and his argument shows deep understanding of that apartheid history. All six novels discussed are examined with relation to South African history, shot with references to historical events and personages. Examining the novels contextually is reading them, he contends, as “both *about* and written *from within* the South African situation” (emphasis original; 10), including “colonialism and decolonization” (14). Although this study represents a significant contextualizing trend in Coetzee scholarship, I push the South African context to the background without dismissing it. This same context is still implicated by my assertion about a committed postmodern conception of the body with postcolonial import. Moreover, this specific context is treated allegorically, as I argue in the next chapters. We, as global readers, do not need to be South African historians with a privileged position to appreciate the novels’ political relevance. Since Attwell discusses the novels as examples of “situational metafiction” by way of highlighting their intertextuality and language features and yet local context, this study adds weight to my thesis that Coetzee articulates a postmodern politics by constructing the body while simultaneously asserting its materiality. Attwell recognizes post-structuralism and postmodernism in Coetzee, yet he ties them back to Coetzee’s post-colonial situation and specific South African realities.

Gallagher's book on Coetzee also contextualizes Coetzee's apartheid novels within South African politics and history since she is "particularly interested in how his novels respond to the discursive practices of South Africa" (x). She argues that Coetzee "has acknowledged the overwhelming impact of his historical situation on his work" (17). Her reading of the novels is essentially, like Attwell's, historical as she reads the works as products of their apartheid time and place. She presents Coetzee as a South African writer, a label he often resisted, and reads the novels from the perspective of history, again something Coetzee problematized with relation to the discourses of history and fiction. The historical and biographical contexts given are something like torture by South African security officials for *Waiting for the Barbarians* and the State of Emergency and township violence for *Age of Iron*. For example, looking at social, cultural, and rhetorical discursive contexts, she argues that "the novels respond to the oppressive practices that have pervaded South African life for hundreds of years" (x). However, she is aware of Coetzee's indirect treatment of the South African context and argues that the novels "emerge from South African realities, but they suggest in their very form and technique that an alternative to those realities exists. Avoiding the authoritative voice of history, Coetzee presents us with a storyteller's elusive, ambiguous, yet melodious account of South Africa" (x). She argues that Coetzee is more interested in questions of authority, language, and mythmaking as part of the functioning of oppressive systems. However, she argues he is not simply a realist but herself tries to situate the novels within a South African context by relating them to actual historical events and heavily using Afrikaner myths. While she is privileged by a deep knowledge of South African history and politics, we, as global readers, do not need much knowledge about

this very context to see that Coetzee, within a postmodern scheme, problematizes issues of historical materiality over the body. Nor should this mean that we dehistoricize the historical. Global readers, with their distinct historical and cultural visions, bring something new to the understanding of Coetzee that South African-oriented critics do not with their limited focus on a specific context. This context is a drawback as it is an asset.

Away from the specificities of the South African context, Dovey uses a theoretical framework of poststructuralist psychoanalysis to show that Coetzee critiques certain sub-genres of African writing and deconstructs dominant discourses like those of exploration narrative, the pastoral, and the liberal humanist tradition. The novels are read in her book as psychoanalytic allegories of narration. The narrators, she argues, construct (contingent) identities in language, which results in failures of self-realization or attempts to validate their existence and thus find evidence of a real self. She argues that the novels “offer a critique of various modes of writing” and that these modes or discourses are also located within “prevalent Western ideologies” (11). Her goal is then to show how Coetzee’s novels “recuperate the themes of each model they inhabit for a thematics of the Lacanian subject,” which calls for “a deconstructive reading and a self-deconstructive re-writing of these themes and genres” (11). Dovey finds in Coetzee’s deconstructive writing mode “a form of resistance” (49). In a sense, Dovey does the opposite of the contextualizing studies that focus on South African history and politics. The study is an extreme departure to Lacanian psychoanalytic theory. And I am not interested in the Lacanian acts of narration or the Lacanian constitution of the narrating subject in

language.<sup>32</sup> I am interested in bodies in Coetzee and how they are written and read as texts, how they are represented in narration. However, the import of Dovey's argument is still relevant since I look at bodies as textualized and constructed, yet, and unlike Dovey, I assert the material existence of the body within the written discourse of Coetzee's novels. Dovey relegates this body to the level of discourse, language, and narration. Her study applies to the very early Coetzee and to first-person narratives in particular. She apparently engages a strong trend in Coetzee criticism in the early 1980s that initiated the Marxist critique of Coetzee's early fiction for lack of political relevance to the South African realities of apartheid. The subversive potential of his writing for her is textual and situated within language, which is an ideological position: "Via the Lacanian paradigm, it is possible to make claims concerning the subversive effect of writing which remain firmly within the novelistic discourse" (55). Dovey's apologetic stance, hence, is a reading of the novels as Lacanian allegories of narration and not, as I intend to argue, as postmodern allegories of the suffering body.<sup>33</sup>

However, it is to Derek Attridge that I would like to turn since he has provided a sustained tradition in Coetzee scholarship that bears more directly on this study. In "Ethical Modernism: Servants as Others in J. M. Coetzee's Early Fiction," Attridge reads Coetzee in terms of an ethics of otherness he aligns with the (late) modernist tradition.<sup>34</sup>

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<sup>32</sup> It should be acknowledged that a Lacanian conception of linguistic subjectivity is similar to/compatible with my claim about a postmodern conception of the body in Coetzee with a discursive aspect. Dovey reads Coetzee's early novels as psychoanalytic allegories of narration, and I read them as particular allegories of the body with different allegorical orders. See Chapter Five.

<sup>33</sup> As for recent supportive criticism, Durrant, in a 2004 study, tried to defend Coetzee's discursive relation to apartheid politics but in the light of a psychoanalytic, deconstructive approach that focuses on the work of mourning and memory in the postcolonial narrative. This study is Freudian in conception.

<sup>34</sup> Other critics like Watson and Neil Lazarus have pointed out an affinity between Coetzee and the modernist tradition in terms of a break with the realist representation (of apartheid in this case). Lazarus in "Modernism and Modernity" uses Adorno's account of modernism to sweepingly argue that

Coetzee for Attridge is a high modernist who resists/disrupts realist conventions (“the illusion of transparency” 655) and manipulates language by way of involving us ethically in the act of reading whereby the otherness of a literary work refuses to be easily rendered in terms of the familiar. For Attridge, otherness is staged and dealt with as we read these works. While I do concur with Attridge about the importance of finding the ethical force of Coetzee’s work and find this to be historically and politically empowering (Attridge contends that such a “concern with the ethical demands of the subordinate other is closely connected with the specific history of that country” 655), I do not find in modernism the only framework for establishing ethics and politics in Coetzee. Attridge does not take into consideration that the formal features Coetzee uses to disrupt a realist tradition and enhance the fictionality of the texts (655), and what Attridge sees as

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contemporary white South African literature of Gordimer, Coetzee, Breytenbach and Brink is acutely “self-conscious” and written in the minor/marginal literature tradition of Kafka and Beckett, and thus “modernist; especially it is borne in mind that as a discourse it is so *ethically* saturated, so *humanistic* in its critique of the established order, so concerned to *represent* reality, and so *rationalistic* that it would be quite inappropriate to describe it as postmodernist” (emphasis original; 148). Lazarus’s sweepingly discusses white South African literature as an “oppositional practice” (134) within a modernist scheme following Adorno. He speaks, for example, of Coetzee’s “ethical rationalism” (136) and such dissenting literature’s “truthfulness,” “resistance,” and “marginality” (140, 148). Like Attridge, he finds in the ethics, humanism, and realism of such literature grounds to make it “inappropriate to describe it as postmodernist” (148). The ethical content and rationalism for Lazarus are associated with modernism and not postmodernism. However, such accounts ignore a view of postmodernism as an intensification/extension of the self-reflexivity and metafictional devices of modernism and the political potential of postmodernism I try to restore to Coetzee’s apartheid writings via a discussion of the representation of the body. Besides, such arguments did not pay attention to the political and ethical potential for this so-called “modernism” in Coetzee, at least as far as the body is concerned, and wrongly assume that Coetzee, Gordimer and others were writing in a homogeneous tradition. Lazarus’s argument ignores the explicit metafictional thrust of Coetzee’s apartheid works like *Foe* and *Dusklands* by describing the texts as “so concerned to *represent* reality.” Only Attridge directly and consistently relates an ethical force in Coetzee to modernism. Attridge seems to ascribe an ethical critical stance and purpose to modernism rather than postmodernism. As far as modernism is concerned, the early Coetzee of the 1970s and the 1980s invites such affiliations since he mentioned in interviews and wrote about the impact great modernists like Rilke, Musil, Kafka, Joyce, Faulkner, Pound, Eliot, Beckett, Ford had on him. However, it seems that Coetzee was fascinated by their styles, sense of language, and sentence structures when he read them as a young man and a linguist and thus academically wrote about some of them from this stance. While this does not negate thematic influence, it does not negate a postmodern thematics of the body either. For an acknowledgement of Coetzee’s “literary paternity”, see his “Homage.” In this dissertation I advocate the critical view that modernism and postmodernism overlap and intensify rather than radically break with or exclude one another.

modernist “foregrounding of language” (669), can be seen as postmodernist, self-reflexive, and metafictional devices. Attridge dwells on formal, linguistic otherness—“textual otherness, or *textuality*” (emphasis original; 669)—and ignores a thematic concern with the other, wrongly assuming that “we do not need a J. M. Coetzee to tell us that the white world’s subjection of other races has been brutal and dehumanizing, for both its victims and for itself” (670). He assumes that the thematic condemnation of colonialism is already there but the force of the novels, for him, is their form, their “singularity” in “what they do, how they happen ... how otherness is engaged, staged, distanced, embraced, how it is manifest in the rupturing of narrative discourse...” (670). Although he sounds uncertain about what to call this—“Whether we want to call this ‘modernism’ is, finally, beside the point” (670)<sup>35</sup>—and acknowledges that Coetzee’s work was often criticized during the apartheid era and found “wanting when judged as a response to the South African situation” (656), he dismisses a tradition of critical reception that has identified postmodern tendencies in Coetzee’s work and uses the word “Modernism” as his very title. I argue that we do need a Coetzee to condemn the violence or pain that we cause to the other body, but we do not necessarily need a social realist Coetzee who condemns this violence traditionally. And we do need a Coetzee who, by depicting helplessness and befuddlement before bodily suffering, makes us question the very grounds on which this suffering happens and is caused.<sup>36</sup> As a postmodernist, Coetzee is deeply engaged in just how to represent suffering and pain on their own terms

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<sup>35</sup> Attridge sounds fairly Levinasian or late Derridean in his emphasis on the ethics of otherness, which is still an evidence of the anti-postmodern commitment of his method.

<sup>36</sup> We will see, in *Age of Iron* and *Waiting for the Barbarians* for example, that the Coetzee narrator is often helpless before suffering others and overwhelmed by their pain.

rather than in a straightforward fashion. And when it comes to problematizing representation and as far as the body is concerned, postmodernism is a necessary context.

In *J. M. Coetzee and the Ethics of Reading: Literature in the Event*,<sup>37</sup> Attridge also discusses figures of alterity and the ethics of reading as an experiential event. Attridge departs from the mainstream of Coetzee criticism that focuses on the political relevance of Coetzee's work, especially in the apartheid novels. The reading experience is treated as "an event," unpredictable, experiential, performative, and unique. Attridge's approach is that of reader-response and close reading rather than the allegorical or contextual one. He argues that in disrupting the realist conventions and foregrounding language, Coetzee as a modernist transforms the other into the incomprehensible and sets him against the dominant cultural discourses. In the absence of the ethical guidance in realist narratives, we can make no conclusive judgments about the actions and decisions of Coetzee's alterity figures. That is, such figures are often silent or reticent, and Coetzee himself performs his alter ego narrators to displace his narratives and make us ethically responsible for the other.

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<sup>37</sup> The companion book that discusses literature from the same but a broader perspective is Attridge's *The Singularity of Literature*. Both books were published in the same year. In both books, Attridge spells out interrelated notions of the occurrence of the literary work as an event performed upon reading that, when just/responsible, brings forth its singularity or otherness and pays attention to the alterity it encompasses. A literary work is an "event" that "happens to the reader" upon attentively responding to the text (emphasis original; *Singularity* 59). An ethical response to a text is one that takes into account "that otherness" and "the demands it makes upon us" (120). One of the salient characteristics of postmodernism listed by Hassan in *The Postmodern Turn* is their unfinished nature in that they record a process, a performance or a happening. (see pp. 91-92). In other words, Attridge's notion of literature as performance or as an event that happens to the reader can equally be discussed as a postmodern notion. And while Attridge seems interested in the event in terms of reception and reader-response theory, I am interested in the body as an event in that suffering takes place (happens to the body) and thus relates the body directly to history and politics.

The theme in Attridge's book is to try "to do justice to the singularity and inventiveness of a work" (x). He acknowledges that literature "*happens*" to readers, that the "event" influences the readers (emphasis original; xii), and that a just reading for it as an event is one that is "responsive to its singularity" (9). Attridge argues: "Coetzee's works both stage, and are, irruptions of otherness into our familiar worlds, and they pose the question: what is our responsibility toward the other?" (xii). He highlights literature as an event for the author and reader and how it comes to life/happens when read or recalled (9). He contextualizes Coetzee more within a (European) modernist, rather than a postmodernist, frame. The reasons are that the "modalities of otherness" he wants to explore in Coetzee go against the general tendency of postmodernism and its "homogenizing drive" of reducing "otherness to sameness" (6) and since Coetzee did not reject a label of "late modernism" in an interview with Attwell and his "work follows on from Kafka and Beckett, not Pynchon and Barth" (2). Attridge's assumption seems to be that postmodernism is less politically and ethically engaged than modernism. But the homogenizing trend ascribed to postmodernism has been argued against and found inaccurate for some forms of postmodernism. Much theoretical discussion of postmodernism in literary discourses praises it for the attention it gives to the other in history and how it unsettles binary ideological structures of hegemony, and hence postmodernism's confluences with feminism and postcolonialism. Moreover, Kafka and Beckett, whom Attridge cites as the modernist masters whose tradition Coetzee is writing in, have been repeatedly identified in critical commentaries as early postmodernists.

Attridge himself is still aware that postmodernism has more responsible versions that fit Coetzee's works in their ethical force and resistance to hegemonic discourses, as

he writes in a footnote, and that postmodernism in this sense “comes close” to what he calls “modernism” (6). However, this does not exclude the body from a postmodern label in Coetzee. Actually, we can use the insights Attridge uses to build the very case that the body in Coetzee is postmodern. Moreover, modernism is not always political or ethical and postmodernism is not devoid of commitment. In addition, these are loose labels and distinctions and much more difficult than the few pages Attridge dedicates at the beginning of a chapter for this issue. While Attridge seems to argue that Coetzee is thematically modernist, I will argue that Coetzee is also thematically postmodernist and can be read as such. My systematic reading of the body as discursively mediated and simultaneously material in representation will prove that the body in Coetzee is postmodern as well and not simply modernist.

That Coetzee’s works concern the ethics of otherness does not necessarily mean, as Attridge argues, that Coetzee fits in the category of “ethical modernism.” Attridge seems to deny the transgressive potential of the body in Coetzee and its constructedness. He also denies that Coetzee’s works negotiate an interplay between the materiality of the body and its constructedness in the very process of asserting ethics. Attridge goes against the allegorizing tendencies since these divert us from what is important about the work as a literary work. A literal reading for him avoids the political or historical we often go to in reading Coetzee or in discussing his political relevance. He appreciates Coetzee’s work particularly since it resists easy allegorization and an easy understanding of alterity, realistically, in terms of the familiar. The singularity of Coetzee’s fiction, he argues, invites us to read alterity in its own terms, to experience it without domesticating it in the event of reading. Rejecting the allegorical impulse is ethical on the part of the reader.

Since Coetzee gives no ethical guidance and disrupts realist narrative, it is difficult to judge the actions and decisions of his characters. In reading, he argues, we are asked to become responsible for the other. Although Attridge is generally convincing about the stark otherness of alterity figures, his claim that modernism is more apt for understanding otherness because postmodernism erases difference can be problematic. As I will argue in the subsequent chapters, it is the very difference of these alterity figures that is disruptive and transgressive. The bodies of alterity figures in Coetzee are not necessarily closed, static entities. The fact that alterity figures cannot be easily understood in terms of the familiar does not mean that these bodies do not challenge the space of normal bodies. More importantly, and as I argue in Chapter Five, Attridge does not seem to acknowledge that the literality he speaks of can be interpreted as an allegorical level of its own.

Finally, Brian May in an article discusses the body in Coetzee's early work, specifically *In the Heart of the Country* and *Waiting for the Barbarians*. He rightly argues that the body in Coetzee is not simply metaphorical, that it "is not in itself so insignificant that it may be used merely as a means of characterizing something else" and that it stands "in its own right" (393). He asserts that in these two works the body is "a thing that insists on its own thingness" (389). He highlights the body's "ineluctability" and "inescapability" on several occasions. He argues: "The body does not give way to a thing beyond bodies" (408) and is "unreadable" (408). Although he associates this unreadability with postmodernism's lack of concern with depth and interest in surfaces and resistance to fixity or an imposition of meaning (410), he dismisses the point saying: "Even if one resists thus comfortably situating this body amongst postmodern things,

clearly it is no modernist thing” (410). He argues that “bodies signify nothing but themselves” (410), but this is also an important level of signification as I argue later.

What is missing in May’s argument is how these (postmodern) bodies are constructed as well despite their existence as bodies, how they are inscribed as texts. While he asserts that bodies in the novels he discusses are undeniably material and thus “unreadable,” he ignores both the attempts at constructing such bodies in the fictions (regardless of their success or failure) and what we are supposed to make of such attempts. Moreover, inscription/construction is sometimes imposed on the body in Coetzee, and the body is forced into textuality. So, what are we to make of this imposed textualization? In addition, his argument does not take into consideration other Coetzee works or a larger context. It examines only two early novels. More importantly, although I agree that bodies in Coetzee can ontologically stand for themselves, I believe that May’s argument fails to acknowledge the distinction between what bodies in Coetzee signify and how they can be read as texts from the vantage point of the reader as opposed to how characters within Coetzee’s fiction try to read them. For example, May’s argument that the magistrate fails to read the body of the barbarian woman and that such a body remains stubbornly resistant for him does not necessarily mean that her body and the bodies of other barbarian prisoners are not constructed/inscribed by the Empire. The body in Coetzee is always beyond itself for us even when it seems to suggest otherwise.

Although such arguments are made problematic due to Coetzee’s own critical assertions about his allegiance to the art of the novel as a practice distinct from history and his attempts to evade a South African label, Coetzee’s own critical writings also feature accounts about the impossibility of avoiding the South African situation. While

Coetzee may have wanted to evade direct and realistic representations of the atrocities of apartheid in his novels because he found them morally deplorable and thus difficult to tackle without a sense of complicity/depravity, ignoring them was equally difficult and beyond the writer's control. It is this line of criticism that I take up and support in this dissertation by viewing the works as discursive, allegorical commentaries on the body. This gives them the universality and moral import beyond the South African context and simultaneously relates them to it politically and historically as this specific context is part and parcel of a larger human context and experience of oppression, suffering, and power relations. In other words, I begin with the premise that writing cannot but be implicated in social and political life, and the act of writing is itself a political one shaped by many factors like region, history, personal beliefs, among many others. The pressures that shape such an act within a South African setting should prompt us to seek any possible path of finding the political ramifications of Coetzee's works and then give them a universal value within a globalized scheme.

The critics cited in this section all endeavor to redeem Coetzee's ethical and political vision and his troubled relation to South African politics, and this dissertation is a contribution in this tradition, yet none of them examines the dynamics of the body in his work. They are aware of the discursive relevance of Coetzee to apartheid politics, but they do not examine it in the light of Coetzee's enactment of a postmodern, conflictual relationship between material bodies and discursive ones. In the chapters that follow, I look at Coetzee's apartheid novels and use his other fictional and non-fictional works to support the argument. The strong biographical content of Coetzee's memoirs<sup>38</sup> and their

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<sup>38</sup> I am thinking of Coetzee's *Boyhood* (1997), *Youth* (2002), and most recently *Summertime* (2009).

problematizing of the relation between fiction, life, and genre boundaries make one wonder about the extent to which Coetzee's conception of the body is also autobiographical, but this is beyond the scope of this dissertation. Similarly, there are rich insights into the postmodern body in Coetzee's post-apartheid novels, but these are also beyond the scope of such a project and less relevant for my timeframe.

## VI. Postmodern Allegory and the Body

To argue that Coetzee's apartheid novels are sustained attempts at engaging a history of suffering by displacing such a history onto the body and mediating corporeal suffering in language and discourse is necessarily to argue that the apartheid novels form allegories of the body. And since the representation of the material body is problematized with relation to language and the material body itself can be the body of the racial or sexual other, we are again working at the intersections of postmodernism with feminism and postcolonialism. The result is that, as I will argue more elaborately in my conclusion, Coetzee's apartheid novels can be read as postmodern allegories of the suffering, oppressed body at both traditional and more literal levels. Such an interpretation fits a problematized postmodern conception of history as a constructed discourse and is in line with what Hutcheon calls "historiographic metafiction." It also fits my general, discursive interest in a South African context. While I pay more attention to the peculiarities of allegory in Coetzee in Chapter Five, I briefly argue here that any thematically consistent reading of a body of works allegorizes them.

As a writer of fiction, Coetzee is an allegorist who discursively represents something in terms of another and whose work can be interpreted within a system of

relations between a surface meaning and a metaphorical one. Chapman in *Art Talk* argues that Coetzee “has remained consistent with his own belief that writers of fiction best convey their vision not in the interview or in the discourse of history or politics, but in modes of fictional narrative, the conventions of which approach the allegorical” (145). However, Coetzee’s allegories are significant because they are postmodern allegories with a postcolonial sense. According to Stephen Slemon, postcolonial allegory transforms our conception of history and complicates the relation between the textual and extratextual. It presents history as an open discourse mediated by language and in fiction and subject to interpretation since allegory favors the universal and dehistoricized. Slemon argues that “the binocular lens of allegory refocuses our concept of history as fixed monument into a concept of history as the creation of a discursive practice, and in doing so it opens history, fiction’s ‘other’, to the possibility of transformation” (161). Postcolonial allegory, in treating history as an unstable discourse and problematizing its representation, does what Hutcheon’s “historiographic metafiction” does. Hutcheon’s conception of a discursive history becomes allegorical for Slemon. Both critics seek patterns that allow them to read texts in a certain way.

Postcolonial allegory privileges the reader as an interpreter of texts. It exposes the allegorical/Manichean construction of the other used to extend oppositions. For example, Slemon finds in *Waiting for the Barbarians* a thematic level of allegorization within the text employed by the Empire and projected on the barbarians. The allegorical level is juxtaposed against another level in the mode of writing in which the novel is cast. Slemon sees in the gap between them “the possibility of transformation” in that Coetzee’s text shows that “allegory can itself be used to dismantle the system of allegorical thinking that

underwrites the act of colonisation” (163). For him, *Waiting for the Barbarians* subverts the “association between allegory and imperialism” and appropriates “allegory to a politics of resistance” (163). In showing how imperial dualistic logic works allegorically, Coetzee uses this logic against itself and hints at a particular way of reading.

All readings allegorize somehow in that they generalize and conclude by moving beyond the literal text to what it signifies. If allegories have levels of meaning and are a form of indirect representation, they characteristically reject, or modify, mimetic representation and work through analogies. They operate at one level of relations (a surface level) yet intellectually signify another level of meaning (a symbolic one), and hence they invite interpretation. Coetzee’s apartheid novels are sustained, consistent allegories of the oppressed body, not simply in a historical sense relating to personages and events in South Africa but in a more generalized sense covering oppressed, marginalized bodies in history and in a more literal sense that approximate real suffering. In addition to the abstract intellectual level of meaning often ascribed to allegories, we will read Coetzee’s apartheid novels as “visceral” allegories in which suffering happens and bodies live through this suffering. In other words, the suffering body appropriates both levels of meaning and bridges their gap. And to argue that these novels are political allegories of the oppressed body in history is itself a proof of their political commitment because allegory as Walter Benjamin puts it “is not a playful illustrative technique, but a form of expression, just as speech is expression, and, indeed, just as writing is” (162).

As global readers, we can read Coetzee in national and global terms because we can see the local in terms of the generalized. Coetzee’s detractors objected to the apartheid novels on national grounds as inadequately South African, but we understand

them from that same South African perspective. Jameson asserts that third world cultural productions problematize the relationship between the private and the public and that “even those which are seemingly private and invested with a properly libidinal dynamic—necessarily project a political dimension in the form of a national allegory” (“Third-World Literature” 69). This generalization, which Jameson admits to be “a sweeping hypothesis” (69) about third-world texts as national allegories, fits the historiographic metafictional model I use since the intellectual in the third-world<sup>39</sup> as Jameson argues is “always in one way or another a political intellectual” (74). I read Coetzee’s apartheid novels as postmodern allegories of the suffering body that blur the relationship between the national and the global, the literal and the metaphorical, and the material body and the discursively constructed one.

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<sup>39</sup> I realize that the term “Third World” is out of fashion and vague. It is an early term for what critics would call the postcolonial, which, in one sense, is “a global condition after the period of colonialism” and, in another sense, “a description of a discourse” on such conditions (Dirlik 332).

**Chapter Two: Transgressive Bodies/Texts: *Age of Iron* and *In the Heart of the Country***

I. The Female Body between Complicity and Subversion

Again if one is a woman one is often surprised by a sudden splitting off of consciousness, say in walking down Whitehall, when from being the natural inheritor of that civilization, she becomes, on the contrary, outside of it, alien and critical.

Virginia Woolf, "A Room of One's Own"

Where would the art of fiction be if there were no double meanings? What would life itself be if there were only heads or tails and nothing in between?

J. M. Coetzee, "As a Woman Grows Older"

In Virginia Woolf's "A Room of One's Own," the female narrator articulates the difficult position of women as inheritors of white civilization, and thus complicit with it, and simultaneously excluded from it. Resisting strategies of domination and the unprivileged status of women as writers is the focus of Woolf's essay. The white female narrators in Coetzee's *Age of Iron*<sup>40</sup> and *In the Heart of the Country*<sup>41</sup> are in a similar, ambivalent position. In the former novel the narrator is necessarily involved in the apartheid policies that dismay her while in the latter novel the narrator is involved in the

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<sup>40</sup> Hereafter abbreviated as *AI*.

<sup>41</sup> Hereafter abbreviated as *HC*. The edition I cite in this chapter is, however, the American edition entitled *From the Heart of the Country*. See Works Cited.

colonial situation established on an African farm by her father, an Afrikaner patriarch. Both women, hence, share an unprivileged status in a situation that implicates them in the oppression of the other. Describing the empty impact of her words on a militant black youth, Elizabeth Curren in *AI* observes: “The words of a woman, therefore negligible; of an old woman, therefore doubly negligible; but above all of a white” (79). Magda in *HC* refers to herself as one of the white “daughters of the colonies” courted by “masterful fathers” (3). Mrs. Curren and Magda occupy what Sheila Roberts calls in Magda’s case “a second-in-command colonizer” (21) and what Dominic Head calls “a dual function as both victim and perpetrator of the colonial structure” (51).<sup>42</sup> Rich sums up Magda’s problematic position by arguing that the “unmarried white woman in a colonial society is usually a marginal figure: part of a masculine dominated colonial world, but not of it; sharing a certain common cultural oppression with the black colonized, yet alienated from them by an insuperable cultural barrier defined ultimately through violence” (70). The same applies to Mrs. Curren who lives as an old and lonely woman in the apartheid South Africa. Both women are aware of their identification with the patriarchal Afrikaner culture that places them in the position of the colonizer and yet disempowers them. They are part of and outside the power structures that oppress them and make them at once white colonizers and colonized.<sup>43</sup> As a consequence, their critique of their situation is a complicit one, close to what Hutcheon calls a “paradoxical postmodernism of complicity and critique, of reflexivity and historicity” (*Politics*11).

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<sup>42</sup> Attwell similarly notes that Magda is “a displaced subject, a narrator who is not one of the primary agents of colonization but who lives in the conditions created by such agents, and who endures the subjectivity this position entails” (*South Africa* 56).

<sup>43</sup> The term “the colonized” applies to them and includes, according to Edward Said, “women, subjugated and oppressed classes, national minorities...” (“Representing” 207).

Coetzee addresses the concerns of postcolonialism and feminism and engages the postmodern intersection of race/gender in the attempts of the subjugated other to resist hegemonic discourses. Magda's and Mrs. Curren's accounts protest their oppression as women cast in a masculine colonial order. They suffer from the alliance of colonization with patriarchy, and become doubly oppressed. Oyèrónké Oyěwùmí argues: "African females were colonized by Europeans as Africans and as African women. They were dominated, exploited, and inferiorized as Africans together with African men and then separately inferiorized and marginalized as African women" (340). But Mrs. Curren and Magda are not "African." Their double colonization comes from an oppressive colonizer they are identified with, what Magda refers to with reference to her Afrikaner father as a "complete masterful self" (55) or the apartheid state in Mrs. Curren's case. In each novel, the hierarchical logic of colonialism is maintained to the disadvantage of the marginalized. One is reminded of Gayatri Spivak's assertion in "Can the Subaltern Speak?" that: "If, in the context of colonial production, the subaltern has no history and cannot speak, the subaltern as female is even more deeply in shadow" (287). Spivak argues the double colonization of patriarchy and imperialism and their impact on producing a "gendered subaltern": "Between patriarchy and imperialism, subject-constitution and object formation, the figure of the woman disappears, not into a pristine nothingness, but a violent shuttling which is the displaced figuration of the 'third-world woman' caught between tradition and modernization" (306). Again, Magda and Mrs. Curren are not "third-world" or native women, but they partake in the subordination of women brought about by a patriarchal colonial order and seek discursive empowerment.

Tiffin points out that “the subversive is characteristic of post-colonial discourse in general” and that such literature acts counter discursively with relation to dominant structures (“Post-Colonial Literatures” 18). Consequently, resisting and subverting dominant codes via a postmodern brand of politics inflected by postcolonial and feminist notions is the underlying theme in both novels. In the words of Leela Gandhi, “Feminist and postcolonial theory alike began with an attempt to simply invert prevailing hierarchies of gender/culture/race, and they have each progressively welcomed the poststructuralist invitation to refuse the binary oppositions upon which patriarchal/colonial authority constructs itself” (83). According to Ato Quayson, postcolonialism and postmodernism “may be brought together in common thematic, rhetorical, and strategic concerns, especially as these are brought to bear on questions of marginality” (“Postcolonialism and Postmodernism” 88). Quayson argues that what feminist studies share with postcolonial studies is “the desire to contest the centrality and authority of distinctive systems of domination, jointly contributing to deciphering systems of representation thought to have been either designed or appropriated to validate institutional subordination and silence the voice of competitors” (95). Quayson further argues that for most postmodernists reality cannot be considered

outside the way in which it is represented and that any attempt to do so is to ignore the implicatedness of any perspective within the very object that is being described and vice versa... Because the desire of what passes under the rubric of postcolonial theory is also frequently concerned with representational discourses, postcolonialism also regularly takes representations as the primary target of

analysis, with material conditions being accessed only insofar as they can be related in varying ways to representational regimes. (88)

Because Magda and Mrs. Curren write from a subordinate position as an oppressed body, they transform this material body into a resistant discourse. They speak from the unprivileged position of sickness (cancer/hysteria) and seek to unsettle power relations via the excessive bodily content of their ruminations. There is a historical materiality of the body that is distanced in language. History for postmodernists cannot exist without its narrative representations. The very politics of representation postmodernism is engaged with gives it relevance to feminist and postcolonial critics. Coetzee, I argue, experiments with giving the female subject a voice within a patriarchal, colonial culture.

The main question I try to answer in this chapter is: How do both novels attempt to deal with a history of oppression and, thus, what is their oppositional value? The postmodern brand of politics and the novels' problematic relation to the historical real, I contend, revolve around the body. A problematic representation of the colonized body is a politicized choice, for material conditions of oppression are never free from language and discourse. The body is closely aligned with the body politic, the material and historical conditions in which it exists; it ambivalently wavers, within representation, between the ineluctably material and the discursively formed. Coetzee strikes a balance between bodily pain and the ultimate construction of such experience in language. It is the body that figures the colonial situation the narrators are in because it is visibly readable as the oppressed, suffering body. The material body asserts its figural status in that we read it beyond its immediate context of subordination. Disease, disfigurement, and violence enacted on the gendered body are signs of colonialism and oppression as the

female body is a more appropriate metaphor for social and political turmoil. As Flora Veit-Wild argues, “women’s bodies are often equated with a map or colonized space” (125). The body is material and real, but, discursively, it is also a trope for larger historical injustices. The material body allegorizes the South African colonial situation. It stands for and mirrors political injustices perpetrated on countless bodies in history. Coetzee creates a situation that allows us to read the material body metaphorically but without the abstract intellectualism of traditional allegories.

Because Coetzee is not a realist, he engages history and politics as a postmodernist. The body is viscerally material, yet we cannot access bodily materiality without the mediation of language and cultural construction. Therefore, Coetzee allows his female narrators to write about material suffering under what I will call “a cancer narrative” in *AI* and feminine “writing of the body” in *HC*. There is a sense in which history is a narrative construct and a fictional creation. In both novels, the real is transformed into and mediated through narrated language. There is a strong presence for the material body within the agonized consciousness of the female narrators who author their texts and incorporate the material body within their “constructed” narratives. The material body as a pre-discursive reality is still communicated via language. Coetzee conflates postmodern, feminist, and postcolonial themes by way of avoiding a political quietism some ascribe to postmodernism. Both novels are more than private stories of suffering restricted to the imagination and memories of the narrators, and hence are politically relevant. The irreducible materiality of the suffering, disempowered body is entangled with questions of representation, power, and the relation between language and history. Coetzee is problematizing the representation of history.

Both novels are first-person monologues in the form of a letter or diaries and in which the narrators transform their bodily lives into writing. Coetzee enacts a postmodern treatment of the body by pursuing the interplay of material and constructed bodies. The body exists, but it is aligned with language and textuality.<sup>44</sup> Coetzee problematizes notions of embodiment as the body is implicated in the political and historical and is conflated with the body politic. The body is presented as the matter for stories—which testifies to Coetzee’s postmodern conception of the body as substantially material yet accessed textually. The result is a discursive engagement with politics and a historiographic understanding of history within a colonial context. The body resists marginalization by transgressing the limits of bodies and texts. It is a contested site of political meanings as Coetzee adds feminist and postcolonial thrusts to a postmodern textualization of the body. As Dennis Slattery maintains, the body is “both a location and a field for experience as well as for interpretation” (8). The novels engage the body, paradoxically, as a figure with diverse significations. It appears in different capacities and attributes: it is prone to disease; it performs biological functions, but it is also a site for the interplay of gender, history, and race. It is not free from the discursive historical phenomena it is rooted in. It is a trope for political injustice and a site for resistance.

In *AI and HC* as narratives of illness, Coetzee imitates what a diseased or deranged woman thinks about her plight<sup>45</sup> by presenting us with narrators who are

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<sup>44</sup> There are, however, degrees of construction. For example, we will see that Mrs. Curren writes into her cancer narrative a more material body in pain than the more intensely “paper” body Magda seems to construct, deconstruct, and even play with, despite the grotesque attributes she gives to it in her self-defeating diary entries. The latter seems more of a projection of her diseased mental state.

<sup>45</sup> In “Fictional Beings,” Coetzee argues that stories “give access to no one’s mind but the storyteller’s” (133) and that storytellers perform imitations of what characters “would ‘think’” (134) without necessarily having full access to the minds of their fictional creations be they humans or animals. It follows that Coetzee is not simply appropriating women’s voices in his imitation or performance of them but, perhaps,

engaged in a monologue and unsure about their audience. The “intellectual” storytellers<sup>46</sup> frame their bodies and other bodies within their narratives. Disease works metaphorically against the situation and times in which such women are placed, making literal illness a fitting political metaphor that figures the narrators’ oppression and complicity in that oppression. Cancer and hysteria represent a situation of political corruption and victimization these women suffer from and are complicit with. What follows is a peculiar interplay of postmodern themes that poses yet questions the materiality of the body and seeks to empower it. The bodies in the texts are postmodern not only by virtue of their excessive materiality but also because this materiality is sometimes cast in doubt as a linguistic, cultural construct. The bodies represented are rooted in histories of injustice, but they are problematized as this historical materiality is inseparable from the narratives in which the body is implicated. Historical and political relevance emerges as an ambivalent concern with writing and constructing history via the textualization of the oppressed body. Eagleton’s assertion that “[t]he politics of postmodernism...have been at once enrichment and evasion” (*Illusions* 24) can be understood in the sense that Coetzee’s interest in the constructedness and textualization of the body does not negate, but enriches and problematizes, a historical materiality of the body. The textualization of the body and its problematized relation to language should not be seen as an “evasion” of the political real since a postmodernist like Coetzee is aware that history can be a discourse. The conflation of the construction of the body within the texts and the ethical/political stance in which the body figures in race, gender, and class issues

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skillfully identifying with them. I concur with Laura Wright’s claim that “Coetzee’s project can be read as an attempt to resurrect a feminine ethos repressed by patriarchal colonial politics” (56).

<sup>46</sup> In an interview with André Viola, Coetzee points out a common “intellectualism” that these female narrators have in common and that they share with Susan Barton in *Foe*. Coetzee expresses an admiration for such an intellectualism (7).

enhances a hybrid model of postmodern politics and gives Coetzee's writings political value. Critics ignore Coetzee's construction of suffering bodies in language, and thus his distancing of an easy relationship to a material history of suffering. I highlight the overlap between material suffering and the metaphorical meanings given to the body which mediate it in discourse.

The marginal position from which the narrators speak allows them to use excessive language: a lengthy letter to a daughter occasioned by diagnosis with cancer and numbered, yet chaotic, diary entries about a secluded life on an African farm. Even though language becomes their sole weapon, they use a language that dwells on excessive materiality and pays attention to bodily matters. These female bodies are disruptive, challenging boundaries between illness and health, sanity and insanity, and cleanliness and uncleanness. They challenge repressive systems via a transgressive rhetoric woven around them and are symbolic of larger disintegration. In postmodern terms, illness is symptomatic whereby the body is also a historical matter rooted in oppression. The body is the site of interaction for the cultural, the historical, and the biological. The narrators are symbolic of the identification of women with the materiality of the body and exclusion from language. The association between such bodies and the body politic and the view of the body as a creative source of a feminine writing counter patriarchal control and the subjection of the female body. The body that has been viewed for long by feminists as a source of subjection becomes a contested site for speaking out.

## II. *Age of Iron*: A Cancer Narrative

The ill person who turns illness into story transforms fate into experience; the disease that sets the body apart from others becomes, in the story, the common bond of suffering that joins bodies in their shared vulnerability.

Arthur W. Frank, *The Wounded Storyteller*

*AI* expresses the urgency of its times. If one is to call it an “emergency novel,” Coetzee argues in an interview with Viola, it is because: “It was written during the years of the State of Emergency in South Africa. It reflects not only the outward manifestations of those years—the boycott of schools, the running battles in the townships, the relentless control of the media by the state—but some of their inward temper as well: bitterness and rage on the one side, despair and exhaustion on the other” (6). Set in Cape Town during the late 1980s, the novel offers one of Coetzee’s most direct engagements with apartheid realities.<sup>47</sup> However, the dying narrator is a retired classics professor dealing in words, and the novel’s epistolary form enhances its metafictional thrust. As a result, the novel does not seem to offer much for the neo-Marxist critic. As Coetzee contends, her authorities, “the authority of the dying and the authority of the classics” are “denied and even derided in her world” (*Doubling* 250). The diseased body, nonetheless, is used as a political metaphor for the disease of the body politic as Mrs. Curren herself makes this connection. Her disease and impending death are still more than a private story since she

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<sup>47</sup> The setting in previous Coetzee novels is often dislocated and distant as in *Dusklands* and *HC*. Coetzee takes us to America during the Vietnam War years and then to the 18<sup>th</sup> century colonial exploration of the interior South Africa in *Dusklands* and to a remote African farm in the “heart” of nowhere in *HC*. The setting is even unspecified in *Waiting for the Barbarians*, a frontier post in the desert. *Foe* takes us to a desolate island and then to England. Among Coetzee’s apartheid novels, only *Life and Times of Michael K* is close to *AI* in its clearly identifiable and somewhat present South African setting.

is complicit in the apartheid policies. As a white liberal, Mrs. Curren cannot escape her position as an agent of the oppression she is made to encounter, and cancer is metaphorically fit for her plight.<sup>48</sup> So, we read her diseased body metaphorically as a text inscribed by the larger disease of South Africa's apartheid. Coetzee writes that he is not simply privileging the ethical against the political or denigrating the ethical (*Doubling* 113), which indicates that a narrative about a sick woman confronted with the alterity of other bodies still has a political dimension that intensifies the ethical one. In the course of the narrative, Mrs. Curren relates and makes connections between her own physical plight, the decay and stratification of social relations around her, and the political upheaval of her country. Therefore, my reading of this novel covers Mrs. Curren's attempts at restoring a filial bond with her exiled daughter via her writing/storytelling, her cancer pain, her politically-oriented and metaphorical understanding of her plight, and her encounters with the products of an unjust racial system, the alterity figures of Vercueil, Bheki, and John. It is her physical deterioration that allows her to be exposed to the injustices taking place around her and to understand her condition figuratively.

Mrs. Curren's body is constructed via her reading and recounting of her illness. The diseased body is allegorized, written as a story about the relationship between the domestic space of the body and the public one, the political body rooted in linguistic tropes. Cancer makes the body a rich site for sociopolitical and historical meanings. Mrs. Curren makes her body a letter and political discourse as cancer requires a story, one in

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<sup>48</sup> Cancer—with its negative associations of malignance, ravaging growth, abnormality, destructiveness, seriousness, and even fatalism—provides a fitting commentary on the South African situation during the Emergency years in the late 1980s that the novel covers. As I argue in this chapter, the state violence against the youth in the black townships and the rising militancy among the black youth in the final years of apartheid are in line with the metaphorical associations commonly attributed to cancer.

which the body is the site of an ethical position. The body testifies to political injustices and acts as their living witness. Mrs. Curren's cancerous body is transgressively rich in meanings. Cancer, metaphorically, marks the body and opens it to our readings. It marks her body as a text that tells a symbolic story of suffering beyond the limits of the personal. At the same time, and when its treatment options are visible as with chemotherapy results or mastectomy, cancer is open to our readings. As Slattery argues, "Wounds, misshapen bodies, scarred or marked flesh always tell a story through their opening onto the world" (14). Mrs. Curren's cancer tells a story about political violence. Its onset triggers reflections and insights as it makes Mrs. Curren aware of suffering and violence and willing to be open to the oppressed. Upon learning of her terminal bone cancer, she begins writing the letter that is the novel to her distant daughter, seeking to kindle a broken bond with part of herself.

Mrs. Curren writes her diseased body into her letter and makes it the driving force of the ongoing narrative, thus making it a signifying text. Her narrative stems from and is occasioned by her diseased body. She renders the body a linguistic construct in the form of a carefully/painfully written letter to an absent daughter who left South African dissatisfied with its politics and estranged herself from her mother. The novel for Attwell is a "refracted" narrative of a woman impossibly narrating her own death to her daughter and "intercepted" in the process by us as readers ("Dialogue" 174-175). Because of the distance between her and her daughter, she has to communicate in words and textualize her body. The novel is her anguished mediation of her experiences in the form of a confessional letter. She sends her body in words for her daughter to read and taste:

So day by day I render myself into words and pack the words into the page like sweets: like sweets for my daughter, for her birthday, for the day of her birth.

Words out of my body, drops of myself, for her to unpack in her own time, to take in, to suck, to absorb. As they say on the bottle: old-fashioned drops, drops fashioned by the old, fashioned and packed with love, the love we have no alternative but to feel toward those to whom we give ourselves to devour or discard. (9)

Words in this image are used by Mrs. Curren to textualize the body and to be, in turn, ingested by the recipient, echoing a form of nurturing in which a mother nurses her daughter. The letter is, according to Marais, a “generous giving of self to the other” (“Ethics” 169). The absent daughter is to receive a textual offering in which the mother is made a text. Since disease is her occasion for storytelling, she is compelled to write and regardless of her targeted audience or whether she actually gets the letter: “To me this letter will forever be words committed to the waves: a message in a bottle with the stamps of the Republic of South Africa on it, and your name” (32). This implies that we as the recipients of her letter equally “become the ‘you’ that the letter instantiates” (Clarkson 62). Mrs. Curren herself tells her daughter that she writes “to you but not to you; to me; to you in me” (6). The dying Mrs. Curren cannot be sure her daughter will get the letter or that she will be able to complete its writing. However, writing becomes her only resort for a sincere communication with her daughter and ultimately herself.

Mrs. Curren dwells on the intimate relationship between the body and writing. As a storyteller, she sees her words as a legacy bequeathed to her daughter: “This is my life, these words, these tracings of the movements of crabbed digits over the page. These

words, as you read them, if you read them, enter you and draw breath again. They are, if you like, my way of living on” (131). The old, diseased mother overcomes barrenness and the surrounding death<sup>49</sup> by transmitting her emotional words that gain a new life once embraced and read by the absent daughter. The letter allows her to speak to her daughter (and to the reader in a meta-literary language) from a position beyond mortality and evoke material conditions and corporeal bodies in language: “It is through my eyes that you see; the voice that speaks in your head is mine. Through me alone do you find yourself here on these desolate flats, smell the smoke in the air, see the bodies of the dead, hear the weeping, shiver in the rain” (103). The images she constructs in language were common scenes in the burning and violent townships of South Africa.

While language voraciously textualizes Mrs. Curren’s body, she as well parasitically lives on through her daughter. The diseased body lives through language as its materiality is temporarily erased in writing and then evoked in reading. Mrs. Curren writes and her words issue forth from a “cancerous” heart (156),<sup>50</sup> and thus she metaphorically bleeds words on paper in the act of mothering her text. Remembering the profuse blood of a black youth, she says: “How thin, by comparison, my bleeding onto the paper here. The issue of a shrunken heart” (137). Words get embodied and fleshed by issuing from her sick body and being transcribed on paper. The novel revolves around

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<sup>49</sup> Mrs. Curren describes the alley behind the garage: “Now it is a dead place, waste, without use, where windblown leaves pile up and rot” (3). Her house suggests the death pervading her life: “With what slow steps did I enter this empty house, from which every echo has faded, where the very tread of footsole on board is flat and dull!” (5). Her deserted house echoes her own old age and the distorted human relations of her country under apartheid: “This house is tired of waiting for the day, tired of holding itself together. The floorboards have lost their springs. The insulation of the wiring is dry, friable, the pipes clogged with grit. The gutters sag where screws have rusted away or pulled loose from the rotten wood. The roof tiles are heavy with moss. A house built solidly but without love, cold, inert now, ready to die” (15).

<sup>50</sup> Mrs. Curren claims to be suffering from “cancer of the heart” (156) to the police who come to her home to arrest a black youth. Of course, she has bone cancer, but she refers to her shame and rage against her country’s racial problem, which is difficult to solve now as indicated by the advanced stage of her cancer.

this materialization of the letter upon being received and read by its addressee. As Negri argues in his discussion of Wittgenstein's analysis of pain (in the *Philosophical Investigations*), a collective subjectivity "constituted through language" is necessary for the "mastery" and expression/mediation of pain in that our collective language as a community is what enables us to know and relate to our pain as well as that of others (354-55). Mrs. Curren draws on the linguistic medium of the written letter that her distant daughter (or any reader) can understand to relate her personal as well as collective pain of apartheid, the "profuse" blood of blacks. Without language, the experience of pain is inaccessible to Mrs. Curren's daughter and eventually to us as readers.

Mrs. Curren's reflective letter about her life and the history of her country and her attention to bodily others are rooted in her experience of pain, in her disease. Drew Leder contends: "When in pain, the body becomes the object of an ongoing interpretive quest. We obsessively probe and palpate even when this increases discomfort" (78). She writes after she takes pain pills and bone pain is temporarily subdued. There is a moral aspect for her confessional quest and her attempts to lay something off her shoulders before death. She reads the story of her country on her cancerous body. As A. Frank puts it:

Ill people's storytelling is informed by a sense of responsibility to the commonsense world and represents one way of living *for* the other. People tell stories not just to work out their own changing identities, but also to guide others who follow them. They seek not to provide a map that can guide others—each must create their own—but rather to witness the experience of reconstructing one's own map. Witnessing is one duty to the commonsensical and to others.

(emphasis original; 17)

Understood in this context, Mrs. Curren's extended letter to her daughter is one that stems from her sense of obligation for her exiled daughter and the man who is entrusted with sending the letter, Vercueil—or even any reader of her text. If the letter is her way of “living *for*” her daughter, as Frank asserts, perhaps by perpetuating herself in a written form, it is also a way of “witnessing” her life and times. While Frank writes about real people who tell stories about real illnesses, Mrs. Curren assumes the same position within her letter as a real cancer patient telling a story within this illness narrative.

Frank repeatedly asserts that illness is “an occasion for stories” (53) and that telling a story of illness is “the attempt, instigated by the body's disease, to give a voice to an experience that medicine cannot describe” (18). Mrs. Curren's confessional letter is a story about her illness and her body's relation to the social and political milieu she inhabits. It remains a story that renders her body as a text narrated to others and a story that evokes the materiality of the suffering body through storytelling. Frank argues: “Stories have to *repair* the damage that illness has done to the ill person's sense of where she is in life, and where she may be going. Stories are a way of redrawing maps and finding new destinations” (emphasis original; 53). Mrs. Curren's letter, occasioned by her diagnosis with advanced cancer and close exposure to otherness in the figure of Vercueil who takes his abode in her backyard on the same day she is diagnosed with cancer, is a reflective statement on her life so far and her desire to be saved from the political quagmire that is her country. Frank adds: “Quest stories meet suffering head on; they accept illness and seek to *use* it. Illness is the occasion of a journey that becomes a quest. What is quested for may never be wholly clear, but the quest is defined by the ill person's

belief that something is to be gained through the experience” (emphasis original; 115). Mrs. Curren confronts her suffering by writing it, by constructing a body in pain, in an attempt to fathom her and her country’s illnesses.

Mrs. Curren finds in illness an occasion for telling a bitter truth about her life in South Africa. What she addresses to her daughter is addressed to herself as a witness. Frank elaborates: “The witness offers testimony to a truth that is generally unrecognized or suppressed. People who tell stories of illness are witnesses, turning illness into moral responsibility” (137). If Coetzee seems to be writing in line with postmodern notions about illness and storytelling, it is because he is interested in problematizing the real as embodied in the material body and with respect to language/construction, not simply to recycle such notions. Mrs. Curren’s consciousness is rooted in and haunted by her increasing pain, and disease is a reality she lives with. So, the body still asserts itself despite its construction in symbolic disease and politics. It is still a deteriorating, mortal body. As Mark Ledbetter notes about Mrs. Curren, pain has an authority that displaces language: “Language is unnecessary; the pain, a constant reminder of her body’s desire to die, speaks loudly enough” (108). Pain in her case acts as a bodily consciousness stemming from the materiality of the dying body. Paradoxically, the body that she feels as materially visceral and real and even beyond language has to be relayed in language, or else pain will be an alien experience for those not in pain. The body that resists language is still bound by it, and the material is conflated with cultural representation.

Morris in *Illness and Culture in the Postmodern Age* approaches similar themes to those pursued by Frank regarding the essential construction of diseased bodies in the stories told about illness and in the cultural associations people attach to illness. Morris

argues the construction of illness by the intersection of culture and the body, how illness is shaped by “the densely interwoven network of experiences and interpretations we bring to it” (6). For him, postmodern illness is characterized by this “awareness of the elaborate interconnections between biology and culture” (11). Hence, postmodern illness emerges in this book as “biocultural” (19), “*situated at the crossroads of biology and culture*” (emphasis original; 71). Morris asserts the value of meanings and stories we weave around diseases, which is in line with a postmodernism that “indicates a world that we recognize as inescapably ‘constructed’” (25). Such theorists concur that postmodern illness is constructed through distinctive stories we tell and our communal thinking about illness. Postmodern pain is “biocultural” for Morris in that it is “saturated in emotion, memory, and consciousness—and inseparably linked to the individual meanings we make of it” (134). Bodies in postmodernism, Morris argues, are not only bodies materially but also surfaces inscribed with meanings, “culturally constructed and hotly contested social spaces where we can observe the complex signs of human fantasy and of human trespass” (146). In “How to Speak Postmodern,” Morris reiterates how postmodern illnesses are constructed at the intersection of culture and biology and argues that “the postmodern narrative of illness increasingly tells the patient’s story” (8). Viewed in this light, Mrs. Curren’s constructed story about her cancer and the metaphorically rich meanings of cancer she evokes, and which we grasp, problematize the materiality of the body/pain described and foreground the postmodern mediation of the material body in the cultural.

Attwell has recently described the subject in Coetzee’s novels as “frequently a subject living unhappily in a body, often a body in pain, marked by contending social forces” (“Estrangements” 233). In a sense, Attwell, like Morris, hints at the body as an

inscriptive space for the sociopolitical. Mrs. Curren describes pain in metaphorically aggressive terms that culturally construct her body: “An attack: it was just that: the pain hurling itself upon me like a dog, sinking its teeth into my back” (10). Sontag, in analyzing the violent fantasies and political metaphors associated with the personal pain of cancer, argues that cancer acts as “a ruthless, secret invasion” (5). Mrs. Curren experiences her body as materially visceral because of the pain it feels and its physical deterioration. However, this material body is constructed because Coetzee represents it as a material body and because illness heightens Mrs. Curren’s bodily consciousness and makes her tell the story of such a body, which highlights the cultural, historical meanings woven around it. There is, thus, a difference between how Mrs. Curren perceives her body as viscerally material and real and how this body is narrated by her and given metaphorical significance and how we receive it discursively. The body, then, exists and functions at different levels. The inscribed body for Mrs. Curren, the material body marked by illness, becomes silent and (dis)embodied before language and the distance between the two is blurred, making the body itself the silent narrative/text and making her “what she writes” (Ledbetter 116). Although language is not adequate for personal and political suffering, Mrs. Curren has to go on with the letter regardless of the outcome. “Curren writes the death of apartheid on to her body, and she writes her body’s death. Each death is an apotheosis emanating from the sacred space of the inscribed body” (Ledbetter 117). The material and the political converge on her body, and language is what brings pain close to us.

Because Mrs. Curren’s cancer figures her colonial situation, the body becomes a rich source for the metaphorical. Sontag writes: “Any important disease whose causality

is murky, and for which treatment is ineffectual, tends to be awash in significance” (58). Cancer in medical and cultural discourses is viewed as a naked aggression with political connotations of invasion. Sontag elaborates: “Cancer was never viewed other than as a scourge; it was, metaphorically, the barbarian within” (61). Cancer, Sontag writes, is “the ultimate insult to natural order” (68). Sontag establishes cancer as an illness of mystification and fatality with political connotations, for describing “a phenomenon as a cancer is an incitement to violence. The use of cancer in political discourse encourages fatalism and justifies ‘severe’ measures—as well as strongly reinforcing the widespread notion that the disease is necessarily fatal. While metaphors are never innocent, it could be argued that the cancer metaphor is a worst case: implicitly genocidal” (83-4). Hence, the cancer metaphor juxtaposed against Mrs. Curren’s real, and terminal, cancer shows the irredeemable or destructive politics of her country under a diseased and dying apartheid system. In this sense, cancer stands for the fatalistic and apolitical, what is hopelessly beyond the political. Via Mrs. Curren, Coetzee elaborates postmodern notions of the troubled relation between the body and language, i.e. the metaphors and meanings with which we textualize the body.

Mrs. Curren highlights the diseased body as an end, as a material entity apparently separate from bodily consciousness: “What do I care for this body that has betrayed me? I look at my hand and see only a tool, a hook, a thing for gripping other things. And these legs, these clumsy ugly stilts: why should I have to carry them with me everywhere? .... What have they to do with me?” (12-13). A diseased body, already old and deteriorating as it is, has betrayed Mrs. Curren. Sontag contends: “The diseases around which the modern fantasies have gathered—TB, cancer—are viewed as forms of

self-judgment, of self-betrayal” (40). Mrs. Curren’s consciousness is yet preoccupied by this abject body that she sees and carries around and even constructs in terms of betrayal. Antonio Damasio defines consciousness as “the key to a life examined” (5) and as what “begins as the feeling of what happens when we see or hear or touch” (26). Mrs. Curren’s body is a constant reminder for her of her visible physical deterioration, and her consciousness turns to the sick body she sees and touches. Mrs. Curren remains a material body: “An old woman, sick and ugly, clawing on to what she has left” (54). Above all, she has bone cancer that marks her body from inside and allegorically testifies to a material history of bodily violations in the South Africa of her times. She states: “The bones prized above all by archaeologists, I remember, are those gnarled with disease or splintered by an arrowhead: bones marked with a history from a time before history” (23). She sees a cancerous body in line with cultural notions of sickness as betrayal by the body against the self. In her case, bodily betrayal is metaphorically associated with inner shame at political injustices and thus a materialization of this shame on her body as a cancer: She tells the militant John, the black friend of her housekeeper’s son Bheki, by way of speaking against such youth dying in comradeship and articulating the metaphors of the relationship between the body and the body politic: “I have cancer. I have cancer from the accumulation of shame I have endured in my life. That is how cancer comes about: from self-loathing the body turns malignant and begins to eat away at itself” (145).<sup>51</sup> The body as a lived reality cannot be separated from sociopolitical and

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<sup>51</sup> In Coetzee’s short story “As a Woman Grows Older,” the aging Australian writer Elizabeth Costello, at 72 and with heart problems, is acutely conscious of her lonely life—her children having moved to France and America—and the possibility of physical deterioration and lonely death as she grows older. She tells her son John: “Kill yourself at twenty and it is a tragic loss. Kill yourself at forty and it is a sobering comment on the times. But kill yourself at seventy and people say, ‘What a shame, she must have had cancer.’” She

cultural experiences that inscribe and mediate it. It cannot be abstracted from the metaphors within which it is inscribed. Sontag argues: “According to the mythology of cancer, it is generally a steady repression of feeling that causes the disease” (22). Mrs. Curren’s cancer, as she metaphorically understands it, is a product of self-hatred, inhibition, and shame for being implicated in what she is powerless to change.

Mrs. Curren takes cancer to be the metaphorical inscription of corrupt apartheid politics on her body. She says: “Perhaps I should simply accept that that is how one must live from now on: in a state of shame. Perhaps shame is nothing more than the name for the way I feel all the time” (86).<sup>52</sup> It is shame of a crime committed before apartheid against the indigenous South Africans and one that continues in the apartheid system Mrs. Curren is complicit with. For Sontag, cancer “arouses some feelings of shame” (17). Such feelings can be “sexual” or “violent feelings” of “rage” (22) or “painful feelings” (50) like depression and isolation. Sontag explains: “the cancer personality is regarded more simply, and with condescension, as one of life’s losers” (49), i.e. associated with “political defeat” or failed ambitions (49). Mrs. Curren fails as a white liberal who cannot effect political change against the segregationist policies imposed by whites on other races in the apartheid South Africa. Her body also fails in its functions and figures larger sociopolitical failure. Her cancer is conducive to textualizing the body in pain by telling its story of suffering and perceptively viewing things from the enlightened position of transfigured suffering. Mrs. Curren tells Vercueil: “Like every crime it had its price. That

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hints at a correlation between old age and shame, but with relation to humiliating cancer this time and away from politics.

<sup>52</sup> Shame here is the equivalent of humiliation. Nashef rightly argues that in Coetzee’s early novels humiliation “is primarily induced by a political situation” (1). Old age and disease intensify Mrs. Curren’s feeling of shame as a price for her complicity in apartheid. Magda, we will see, sees the humiliation of rape as a price for her complicity in the oppression of her father’s servants. As white women, Mrs. Curren and Magda partake in a collective colonial guilt.

price, I used to think, would have to be paid in shame: in a life of shame and a shameful death, unlamented, in an obscure corner. I accepted that. I did not try to set myself apart. Though it was not a crime I asked to be committed, it was committed in my name” (164). As an Afrikaner who benefits from the privileges of the apartheid system, she is aware of her complicity in what she condemns and of cancer as figuring her humiliation.

Cancer is a reference to the corruption of the body politic since illnesses, Sontag argues, “have always been used as metaphors to enliven charges that a society was corrupt or unjust” (72). Mrs. Curren makes the metaphorical relationship between her cancerous body and a politically diseased South Africa explicit enough.<sup>53</sup> Hence, Fiona Probyn emphasizes the cancer metaphor in *AI* and argues that Coetzee “manipulates the cancer metaphor to provide a commentary on South African race relations” in that “the connection between the body and the body politic in South Africa is made clear in the collision of the two events which change Elizabeth’s life forever: the coming of Vercueil and the diagnosis of cancer” (220). According to Graham Huggan, the associations Mrs. Curren makes between mounting violence in townships and her cancer give her story “the ringing tones of moral allegory” (“Evolution” 193). Physical cancer is a metaphorical one in a politically corrupt state. Coetzee is not simply recycling metaphors about cancer but rather using them to highlight the proximity between the body and corrupt politics and the impossibility of considering the material body without the mediation of stories and

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<sup>53</sup> The equation itself among apartheid, corruption, and cancer is a simple one. However, the meaning of “corruption” should be understood against its relational binary term “generation” just as illness can be understood as the opposite of health. And just as the healthy body can generate its own cancer, apartheid can be seen as generating its own corruption from within its system. In this sense, Coetzee might be deconstructing the binaries of health/illness and generation/corruption to show how apartheid was not an unexpected degeneration of an earlier system but rather an intentional system of segregation.

cultural metaphors. The result is that the material body is equally constructed and the historical real, although pre- and non-discursive, is mediated in language.

Mrs. Curren is aware of the transgressive potential of her disease as one that blurs the boundaries between the real and the constructed, as a literal disease producing allegorical, metaphorical meanings. She flings the word “cancer” at the policemen who come to arrest a black youth in her house when they carry her out and relishes the stunning impact of the news on them: “It stopped them in their tracks like a knife” (155). Rosemarie Thomson argues: “Bodies that are disabled can also seem dangerous because they are perceived as out of control. Not only do they violate physical norms, but by looking and acting unpredictable they threaten to disrupt the ritualized behavior upon which social relations turn” (246-247). Advanced bone cancer is, indeed, a form of physical disability that restricts Mrs. Curren’s movements and yet makes her free with words. However, this time she answers the police that the pain comes from her heart, that her cancer is that of the heart, one she got by “drinking from the cup of bitterness” (156). Sontag argues: “Investigations carried out by a few doctors in the last century showed a high correlation between cancer and that era’s complaints” (51).<sup>54</sup> Cancer figures Mrs. Curren’s situation as it metaphorically fits the political cancer of South Africa and echoes her own rage and emotional extremes. Cancer’s allegorical/metaphorical meanings are very helpful for understanding the political field.

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<sup>54</sup> Yet, Sontag’s statement should not mean that cancer can mean anything to anyone at any time, and Sontag here refers to the 19<sup>th</sup> century in particular. The metaphorical/allegorical meanings of cancer are yet particularly useful for understanding the political in many parts of the world. For example, in my region of the world, the Middle East, I grew up hearing and reading phrases about Israel being a “cancer” in the Arab world that has to be excised. In such a case, Arab nationalists were using this expression as a political metaphor to signify the occupation of part of the Arab world in Palestine.

The police shoot a black boy in Mrs. Curren's house, and she wanders off and sleeps in the streets. This makes the narrative embedded "in dwelling" and suggesting "the narrator's own emplacement in a form of dwelling" (Strode 178). She becomes an "internal exile" (Strode 207) who loses her exclusive access to her property because "these spaces become porous, more subject to trespass, more likely to admit what they had formerly excluded" (Strode 197). Spatial relations intensify the transgressive potential of the body as what resists enclosure. When some boys open Mrs. Curren's mouth with a stick to steal gold teeth, she tells them she is sick and that she will make them sick and they withdraw (158). She understands her cancer as morally infectious. Sontag argues cancer as disease is thought to be "morally, if not literally, contagious" (6). They come back and force a stick in her mouth and she gags: "An ugly noise came from my throat, a dry rasp like wood splitting" (159). Because of her heightened bodily consciousness, she has thoughts of beetles on their backs and weakly waving their legs when attacked by ants tearing their flesh (159). Her body, metaphorically, bears the weight of histories of humiliation, but she literally suffers as well as a result of the homelessness and poverty of other bodies. What touches her body also touches the soul she tries to redeem, and the cancer outside finds its echo in the cancer within her body: "I am trying to keep a soul alive in times not hospitable to the soul" (130).

Mrs. Curren is dissatisfied with South Africa's politicians, whom she calls using insect metaphors "a locust horde, a plague of black locusts infesting the country, munching without cease, devouring lives" (28). The apartheid politicians she condemns are described in terms of cannibalistic imagery she applies to her own cancer as a pregnancy devouring her from inside and rendering her a hollow woman. Sociopolitical

turmoil yields bodily suffering and deformations outside and a corresponding deformity within the diseased body. She describes her cancer in metaphorically and politically suggestive terms:

For twenty years I have not bled. The sickness that now eats at me is dry,  
bloodless, slow and cold, sent by Saturn. There is something about it that does not  
bear thinking of. To have fallen pregnant with these growths, these cold, obscene  
swellings; to have carried and carried this brood beyond any natural term, unable  
to sate their hunger: children inside me eating more every day, not growing but  
bloating, toothed, clawed, forever cold and ravenous. Dry, dry: to feel them  
turning at night in my dry body, not stretching and kicking as a human child does  
but changing their angle, finding a new place to grow. Like insect eggs laid in the  
body of a host, now grown to grubs and implacably eating their host away. My  
eggs, grown within me. (64)

The monstrosity and cannibalism of her cancer's metaphorical descriptions evoke the deformity and damage effected by apartheid and colonization. Dry with menopause as an old woman, her pregnancy with embryonic cancer cells is a travesty of the normal. Sontag writes: "The language used to describe cancer evokes a different economic catastrophe: that of unregulated, abnormal, incoherent growth" (62). Sontag adds: "Thus, cancer cells do not simply multiply; they are 'invasive'" (64). They, Sontag specifies, "colonize" the body (46). The violence associated with colonization and racial oppression is suggested by Mrs. Curren's description of her cancerous pregnancy and the spread of cancer inside her body. Saturn, according to common associations and notions like hardness, coldness or melancholy, is fit for the dryness she associates with cancer and her

own dispirited mood, which suggests larger associations between the private and the public. She did not literally bleed like the oppressed other, and hence the dryness she ascribes to her illness and the shame she feels for their suffering.

Mrs. Curren underscores the transgressive nature of cancer as disruptive of boundaries and claims, metaphorically, she is emptied/eaten from within: “I am hollow, I am a shell. To each of us fate sends the right disease. Mine a disease that eats me out from inside. Were I to be opened up they would find me hollow as a doll, a doll with a crab sitting inside licking its lips, dazed by the flood of light” (112). Commenting on the “punitive notions” associated with cancer, Sontag argues that it is conceived in terms of victimization, killing, fighting, and attacks (57). Cancer, Sontag argues, was used to describe the “ruthless, implacable, predatory” (61). The cancer metaphor fits the aggression and violence Mrs. Curren is exposed to. It fits the “cannibalism” of apartheid as a self-destructive system that preys on itself. Mrs. Curren thinks she contracted cancer as a death curse, as a result of the injustices of apartheid. Cancer for Sontag “equals death” (7) and is thought to be “obscene” (9), a disgrace to its patient. It is ultimately, Sontag writes, a “lethal growth” (12) with bodily tissues turning into “something hard” (13) and “a demonic pregnancy” (14). Sontag speaks of an “ancient metaphoric connection between cancer and a pregnancy” (44). In attempting to elucidate the relationship between illnesses and figures of speech, metaphors and myths, Sontag is implicitly arguing that bodies and illnesses have been read, textualized, and made the subject of discourses. The tropes she describes as often associated with cancer are helpful in terms of the cultural function of such illnesses and regardless of their truth value.

Although Sontag attempts to argue against such metaphorical thinking (3), the tropes of cancer as a pregnancy, a fatal punishment, an obscenity, or a rampant disruption of natural order eating away at the body are useful since Mrs. Curren sees her cancer as a result of the disgrace of apartheid and as a monstrous pregnancy eating at her body from inside. She thinks of her cancer in a body rhetoric of childbearing and parenting. Cancer for her is “a child inside that I cannot give birth to. Cannot because it will not be born. Because it cannot live outside me. So it is my prisoner or I am its prisoner” (82). In her barren state as an old, sick woman, Mrs. Curren is metaphorically pregnant with the depravity of the racial system she has internalized. The value of such a metaphorical understanding of cancer is its rootedness in the political field and its contribution to the discursive understanding of the materiality of the body. Coetzee makes Mrs. Curren exploit such metaphorical thinking about cancer not to repeat clichés but to highlight the interplay between the material body and the politically and culturally constructed one and ultimately assert an inclusive, ambivalent brand of postmodern politics.

The metaphorical associations attributed to her cancer and relating to deformed pregnancy/birth and disfigured parenting find an echo in her understanding of the stratified and abnormal human relations under oppression. Mrs. Curren draws negative images of parenting to highlight the damage done by apartheid to human relations and family structures.<sup>55</sup> She writes the estrangement between children and parents and the ingratitude of the young to the old into her understanding of her plight. This young generation is cruel, fragmented, and unloving. The “age of iron” of the novel’s title is suggestive of changed human relations, of distance and even sterility. Albert Memmi

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<sup>55</sup> For more on the theme of the failure/deformity of family life in this text and in other Coetzee texts and the implications of “the family subtext,” see Paola Splendore.

states that “Colonization distorts relationships, destroys or petrifies institutions, and corrupts men, both colonizers and colonized” (151). It is no wonder that Mrs. Curren metaphorically thinks about Vercueil’s oppressed body in such socially negative and sterile terms: “He is dry. His drink is not water but fire. Perhaps that is why I cannot imagine children of his: because his semen would be dry, dry and brown, like pollen or like the dust of this country” (196). As a sick woman seeking salvation from political corruption outside and a corresponding infestation within her body, she considers purgation by fire as necessary for a clean start:

Death by fire the only decent death left. To walk into the fire, to blaze like tow, to feel these secret sharers cringe and cry out too, at the last instant, in their harsh unused little voices; to turn and be gone, to be rid of, to leave the world clean. Monstrous growths, misbirths: a sign that one is beyond one’s terms. This country too: time for fire, time for an end, time for what grows out of ash to grow. (65)

Her cancer-infested body, she thinks, needs a dry death by fire in the same way her country needs the purgation of fire for a new start. She is already experiencing a different form of metaphorical burning other than that she sees outside in the burning townships: “The country smolders, yet with the best will in the world I can only half-attend. My true attention is all inward, upon the thing, the word, the word for the thing inching through my body. An ignominious occupation, and in times like these ridiculous too, as a banker with his clothes on fire is a joke while a burning beggar is not” (39). She communicates a sense of unspeakable monstrosity and obscenity associated with cancer, which she describes in military terms as an “occupation.” There is also an ironic contrast between the political turmoil around her and her private suffering.

So far, I have tried to argue Mrs. Curren's construction of her body in storytelling and in body metaphors and cultural associations woven around cancer. But because Coetzee seeks to politicize his postmodern construction of the body, he allows Mrs. Curren to dwell on the material body as an end, as the focus of her epistolary discourse, and endows this body, whether hers or the other body, with ethical import. Mrs. Curren sees cancer as a necessary preparation for death: "We sicken before we die so that we will be weaned from our body. The milk that nourished us grows thin and sour; turning away from the breast, we begin to be restless for a separate life" (13). Pain and suffering are what she faces; they make her experience her body as ineluctably real, as the site of a bitter truth. She writes: "There is no truth but the shock of pain that goes through me ... Death is the only truth left" (26). Ronald Schleifer calls pain "the overwhelming material fact" and one of the "crucial aspects of our human bodily existence" (xx). Pain, Schleifer argues, is "the *most* corporeal sensation" (emphasis original; 152). Pain makes Mrs. Curren experience her body as a body beyond doubt, as the incarnate truth of her life beyond the constructed. She feels increasing pain in the hips and joints, which makes her shift to her own body as an immediate experience and temporarily suspend thoughts about the sociopolitical body. When she has a hot bath, she sees a wretched body and muses: "my legs, mottled, blue-veined, struck out like sticks before me. An old woman, sick and ugly, clawing on to what she has left. The living, impatient of long dying; the dying, envious of the living. An unsavory spectacle: may it be over soon" (54). Sontag, arguing within the metaphors of cancer, notes: "Cancer, as a disease that can strike anywhere, is a disease of the body. Far from revealing anything spiritual, it reveals that the body is, all too woefully, just the body" (18). So, within our cultural understanding of

it, cancer still refers to the body as an end or as a body. There is nothing ennobling about cancer, a miserable bodily state that acts literally before any metaphorical meanings we can give to it. Ironically, the non-discursive materiality of the body can be conveyed and related to within language. And the humiliation of cancer does not prevent a reflective stance associated with enlightened suffering.

Mrs. Curren's bodily experience dominates her life as her narrative progresses and as her condition worsens with time. She coughs, shivers, and suffers from acute hip pain; her physical movement gets worse, she is unable to carry things, and she urinates where she lies (158). Pain medications are used more often for her increasing pain. Cancer gnaws at her bones, on an already thin body, to the end. She says: "Only this creature is faithful to the end. My pet, my pain" (112). Pain is rendered as a subjective experience of suffering. In the words of Ariel Glucklich, it is peculiarly "conscious by definition" (qtd. in Schleifer 127). It stems from a diseased body, and yet turns attention to the same body. The body becomes preoccupied with its own ailing status. Mrs. Curren writes: "The pain was creeping back, bringing with it nausea and the first edge of the familiar shadow of depression" (184). And then adds: "When the pain bites deepest and I shudder and go pale and a cold sweat breaks out on me, he [Vercueil] sometimes holds my hand" (191). She is caught in the grip of a material body in pain. Scarry notes that "in serious pain the claims of the body utterly nullify the claims of the world" (33). Intense pain obliterates mental processes or empties us of mental content other than reflections on pain and redirects everything to an occupation with the body. Despite her metaphorical understanding of her illness and her concern for her country, Mrs. Curren cannot avoid her preoccupation with her own ailing body. Pain manipulates her conscious

life and appropriates her being, which explicates the corporeality of cancer that gets represented in her narrative. Scarry writes that pain is unique among “psychic, somatic, and perceptual states for being the only one that has no object. Though the capacity to experience physical pain is as primal a fact about the human being as is the capacity to hear, to touch, to desire, to fear, to hunger, it differs from these events, and from every other bodily and psychic event, by not having an object in the external world” (161).<sup>56</sup> Highlighting Scarry’s description of the “objectlessness” of pain as a unique feeling devoid of a referential import, Schleifer writes that this objectlessness “makes pain more than any other perception or sensation almost purely *embodied*: it marks the body in pain as only itself, without voice, without community or place, without self-consciousness itself” (emphasis original; 133). Because the pain of cancer is real in Mrs. Curren’s case, it marks the body as a material entity before any meanings or associations we as readers, or she, can think of. As such, the body is privileged over the language it is contingent on.

However, and because pain dominates consciousness and secludes us from others, the need for expressing and communicating it to others, to Mrs. Curren’s daughter in this case or the reader of her letter, becomes more urgent. So, we are faced with the dilemma of material suffering and the mediation of such suffering. Mrs. Curren ends up in bed with Vercueil who is to relieve her from her pain for good: “He took me in his arms and held me with mighty force, so that the breath went out of me in a rush. From that embrace there was no warmth to be had” (198). As Leder argues, “Yet pain, like any other experiential mode, cannot be reduced to a set of immediate sensory qualities. It is

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<sup>56</sup> In principle, Scarry’s claim is not accurate if we consider how other states and desires like ecstasy and melancholy or even general anxiety may have no definite objects. While Scarry’s pronouncement may be a sweeping one, its validity stems from the overwhelming and private nature of pain. When we are in great pain, we understand pain as simply pain and without reference to external objects beyond the body.

ultimately a manner of being-in-the-world. As such, pain reorganizes our lived space and time, our relations with others and with ourselves” (73). It is physical pain as a lived, existential reality that opens Mrs. Curren intensely to the bodily other and to her own physical being. However, the effect of pain is not the constriction of spatial and temporal spheres as Leder elsewhere argues (75, 76) but can be the opposite, a focus “outward upon the world, or dwelling in our past or a hoped-for future” (76). Pain makes her more attentive to the pain of others. It makes her write out her pain and the pain of others in a letter that takes the form of a cancer narrative. It makes her think about her material body in metaphorical terms and cultural associations we ascribe to cancer, which is the postmodern tendency to mediate reality via discourses and representation. Coetzee’s is a postmodern conception of the material body as never free from narration, cultural inscriptions, and metaphorical associations. The body transgresses as a constructed text, and the text similarly passes as a corporeal presence full of pain and suffering.

Mrs. Curren’s body is not the only body represented in terms of its deviant materiality in the narrative. The excessively material body of the homeless Vercueil is a product of her narrative and her observations. He is subjected to her judgments, and her textualized account of his body as the oppressed other is what we get. On the day she is diagnosed with bone cancer, she returns home to find this man lodging in the alley by her garage, making himself a house of “carton boxes” (3). Her diagnosis with cancer seems to be the spark that gets this letter moving and initiates a series of encounters with other bodies. The first encounter between her and Vercueil occurs at the level of physical proximity: “For a while I stood staring down on him, staring and smelling. A visitor, visiting himself on me on this day of all days” (4). She is visited by what she calls one of

the “scavengers of Cape Town, whose number never dwindles. Who go bare and feel no cold” (5).<sup>57</sup> This vagrant is the natural product of a stratified society. She constructs his body for us as one of the oppressed, unprivileged bodies in South Africa. Attridge argues that Vercueil is an other in the role of the impinging “arrivant” Mrs. Curren finds herself responsible for (“Trusting” 69). His body, like hers, is at once characterized by its excessive materiality, and hence transgressive. The body is a marker of difference and a site of oppression. Vercueil is described as “tall, thin, with a weathered skin and long, carious fangs” (3). His face is “all bone and weathered skin” (11). Although we are not to trust everything Mrs. Curren tells us about Vercueil because she gives her subjective reaction to him, he is an incarnation of the other body. Her keen observation of his bodily habits may well be heightened by her sense of her own dying body. However, she sees his body in line with colonial discourses that pit the civilized self against its “dirty” material other. She tells us that Vercueil has an “unsavory smell about him: urine, sweet wine, moldy clothing, and something else too. Unclean” (4). She pays attention to this other body in terms of health and cleanliness: “A horsy, weather-beaten face with the puffiness around the eyes of an alcoholic. Strange green eyes: unhealthy” (6). Vercueil smells of “moldering leaves, of underwear rotting in the ash heap” (160). His teeth are “Yellow horse-teeth” (75). She does not like how he smells: “The feet worst of all: the horny, caked toenails” (84). He breaks wind (88), shamelessly spits and urinates in front of her (8), and even sleeps on the toilet seat (108). His body is transgressively beyond the

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<sup>57</sup> This suggests that Vercueil is not one of the fortunate whites of South Africa of the apartheid period. Although he is not racially identified, we assume he is black or colored. Other figures of alterity include Bheki and John, who inhabit Mrs. Curren’s backyard and sleep in her car. Bheki says to the objecting Mrs. Curren: “Must we have a pass to come in here?” (47). This suggests the dismantling of apartheid’s spatial demarcation in the late 1980s and a new defiant attitude in the black youth.

limits of decorum in behavior and appearance. It is associated with repulsive odors and visceral functions and depicted as animal-like in qualities. It signifies lack of order; it challenges the boundaries of her secluded, middle-class life as a retired professor and the “clean” space of her own “white” body.

Although Vercueil’s body does not have clearly articulated cultural and metaphorical associations like those ascribed to Mrs. Curren, his material body is still created in language and within her letter. The body we access is simultaneously material and constructed. As an angel associated by Mrs. Curren with the annunciation of her death, Vercueil is even the transgression of death into life. In his homelessness and addiction to alcohol, as with his smell of urine, he is a transgressive body beyond social norms. His ex-career has left him with a damaged right hand, with “crooked fingers” and “dirty nails” (11), and a disability pension. He inhabits Mrs. Curren’s home and becomes part of her life. He even comes to sleep in her bed and becomes part of her in their final embrace at the end of the book. Two odd bodies are united as she is finally ready to “relinquish the narrative of her writing and her body” by entrusting both to Vercueil (L. Wright 71). As a material body, Vercueil is not different from the black bodies Mrs. Curren sees in the black townships and in her own house. While Vercueil’s body is represented as viscerally material and real, it is equally constructed as long as he is silent and as long as his body is mediated by Mrs. Curren who narrates the story. The materiality of Vercueil’s body is a constant reminder for Mrs. Curren about the materiality of her own (mediated) body: “When I write about him I write about myself” (9). Disability and marginalization are a common destiny for them.

The materiality of Vercueil's body ethically demands Mrs. Curren's close attention and disturbs us as readers.<sup>58</sup> She can do nothing against this stranger who intrudes into her life and challenges her Afrikaner lifestyle. She has to accept Vercueil in her place and feed him, and the reason: "To be full enough to give and to give from one's fullness, what deeper urge is there?" (7). Her spiritual salvation is contingent on her charity toward the other. The other body compels her to overlook the racial policies of her times<sup>59</sup> and willfully give. Vercueil as the other body demands her attention. Paradoxically, this other body demands its material existence through the construction of such materiality in Mrs. Curren's narrative. In fact, interpreting the other body and subjecting it to our views often come after and as a result of its materiality. Vercueil's abject, disabled body challenges its outside status of otherness via its incompleteness and physicality. It challenges paradigms of hegemony and cultural boundaries of exclusion. This fuses the ethical with the political since attention to the materially oppressed body in close proximity, as in Mrs. Curren's attention to Vercueil, can, or is supposed to, yield an ethical concern for it. Moreover, the disfigured body of Vercueil, because of its materiality, serves as a correlative of the stratified and deformed relations Coetzee speaks of in his Jerusalem Prize acceptance speech.<sup>60</sup>

While Vercueil is the first alterity figure Mrs. Curren encounters upon the news of her fatal disease, two other black kids arrive at her home subsequently. Not wanting her son to be involved in the mounting township violence, Mrs. Curren's maid, Florence,

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<sup>58</sup> As Coetzee once remarked, "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" (emphasis original; *Doubling* 248). I have already made this point in my Introduction and want to reiterate it here.

<sup>59</sup> The composition years provided at the end of Mrs. Curren's letter are 1986-89, which cover the Emergency years and the mounting black resistance to apartheid policies.

<sup>60</sup> See my Introduction, pp. 25-26.

brings her son Bheki to the safety of Mrs. Curren's Cape Town house. Bheki's friend, John, comes as well, and they inhabit her garage, sleep in her car, and occupy the servant's quarters in her house. Mrs. Curren is transformed by her experience with the black youth who flee the burning townships, refuse to join state schools that seek to fit them into apartheid structures, and come to share her house. Such militant youth are made hard by their times. Their abnormal lives, as Mrs. Curren comes to realize, are the result of stunted human relations under oppressive regimes. Bheki and John crash into the back of a parked truck when pushed by a police van and Bheki's palms, when she rushes to help, "were *raw*, the skin hung in strips" (my emphasis; 62). This raw physicality hints at the unmediated within Mrs. Curren's already mediated narrative. The other boy, John, has his forehead open and his blood streams across his face as she tries to staunch his wound while waiting for the ambulance: "I did not know blood could be so dark, so thick, so heavy" (62). She faces the sick, injured other and sees black blood on the floor and benches. The boy's blood, to her surprise, is "darker and more glaring" than what she is used to see (63). She stares "fascinated, afraid, drawn into a veritable stupor of staring" (63). People bleed around her profusely while she is eaten from within drily. She sees raw black flesh and blood and is made to encounter black bodies on an equal basis of suffering. She too is in pain, an old dying woman with no authority in the apartheid state. At the hospital looking for John, she is oppressed by the sight of the sick and dying. She thinks the patients catch on her "the smell of death" (69). She is so sensitive to Verduyn's bad smell, but she is aware she is not much different from him in her diseased body and sick psyche:

In silence we waited in the car, Vercueil and I, like a couple married too long, talked out, grumpy. I am even getting used to the smell, I thought. Is this how I feel toward South Africa: not loving it but habituated to its smell? Marriage is fate. What we marry we become. We who marry South Africa become South Africans: ugly, sullen, torpid, the only sign of life in us a quick flash of fangs when we are crossed. South Africa: a bad-tempered old hound snoozing in the doorway, taking its time to die. (70)

Coetzee makes Mrs. Curren ascribe distorted and damaged human relations and symbolic ugliness to a concurrent political climate and moral bankruptcy: “How ugly we are growing, from being unable to think well of ourselves!” (132).<sup>61</sup> Memmi argues: “oppression is the greatest calamity of humanity. It diverts and pollutes the best energies of man—of oppressed and oppressor alike. For if colonization destroys the colonized, it also rots the colonizer” (xvii). Memmi adds that colonization disfigures both: “The body and face of the colonized are not a pretty sight. It is not without damage that one carries the weight of such historical misfortune. If the colonizer’s face is the odious one of an oppressor, that of his victim certainly does not express calm and harmony” (119). Mrs. Curren’s approaching ugly death mirrors that of the apartheid state in its final years and that of the victims of racial oppression. Her escape from this ugliness and her salvation is ethically loving the other. She says of John: “I must love, first of all, the unlovable”

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<sup>61</sup> Coetzee in *Doubling the Point* makes the point that colonialism and apartheid create “deformed” and “stunted” human relations and that his writing is no exception in that (97-98). I cite his Jerusalem Prize speech in my Introduction, pp. 25-26.

(136).<sup>62</sup> Her salvation depends on charity and love toward the other body in times hostile to such sentiments, on not being desensitized by the violence around her.

Since personal pain makes her see new things and be open to material oppression, Mrs. Curren has a difficulty articulating how to react to racial injustice and how to redeem herself; or she experiences the failure of language to articulate the truth of political injustice and adequately represent material suffering. She finds normal language inarticulate in adequately describing the unspeakable deformations effected by apartheid. On a rainy night, she drives her maid to the township of Guguletu to fetch Bheki who rejoined his militant comrades in protest against racial injustice. What she sees was hidden to her in her privileged life as part of the apartheid system. She, an old professor of classics, is faced with the problem of how to represent pain that itself is difficult to represent in language: “To speak of this you would need the tongue of a god” (99)<sup>63</sup> she says to Mr. Thabane, an ex-school teacher and a cousin of her housekeeper, upon seeing the burning of trees and shacks, destruction, and the filth of violent townships.<sup>64</sup>

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<sup>62</sup> For a discussion of the novel in terms of humanist/maternal discourses and ethics of love and the reliability/tensions of such discourses, see Gilbert Yeoh’s article on *AI*.

<sup>63</sup> This can be interpreted as Coetzee’s self-conscious, metafictional engagement with the postmodern problem of representation that I have highlighted in my Introduction. What gets represented in language, Coetzee seems to be saying through the words of Mrs. Curren, remains subject to its limitations. Moreover, Mrs. Curren’s pronouncement is indicative in another sense: allegory has often been viewed as “a mode of writing about what is impossible to know or impossible to articulate” like God, abstract concepts, and the non-human (Hunter 268). If we include human experiences in Hunter’s list, we arrive at the potential failures of mimetic realism to speak of historical injustices, which accounts for the primacy of the allegorical method Mrs. Curren’s pronouncement seems to invite.

<sup>64</sup> Wesley Kort in *Place and Space in Modern Fiction* argues: “We are beginning now to read places as our cultural ‘scriptures’ and to identify and evaluate ourselves and other people spatially. This is why spatial orientation and place-relations are basic to what is often referred to as a postmodern culture. The primary texts of postmodern discourses are spatial, and their principal interpreters are cultural critics, theorists, and human or cultural geographers” (5). He adds: “postmodernism marks the emergence of spatial language as a dominant over temporality” (11). I would argue that the relation between temporality and space is more difficult; they are intertwined, and the politics of space in postcolonial narratives necessarily stems from troubled times.

Scarry argues that “Because the person in pain is ordinarily so bereft of the resources of speech, it is not surprising that the language for pain should sometimes be brought into being by those who are not themselves in pain but who speak *on behalf of* those who are” (emphasis original; 6). Mr. Thabane, himself a township dweller and wronged by apartheid, tries to make her condemn his pain and the pain of other black youth shot for resisting apartheid because he assumes she is somewhat distanced from the spectacle of suffering before her. Ironically, she speaks of pain in terms of inability and powerlessness. The unspeakable cannot be spoken of realistically or adequately in conventional language. While she is aware of her weak position as an old, dying woman who cannot effectively condemn political injustice, Mrs. Curren also articulates the impossibility of representing the real without the discursive mediation of language.<sup>65</sup>

Durrant argues that the suffering, disfigured bodies in Coetzee show the writer’s mode of bearing witness to an inconsolable history of oppression but indirectly or negatively through silence or “by refusing to translate that suffering into a historical narrative” (*Postcolonial* 24). However, Durrant’s claim becomes problematic if we consider how Mrs. Curren partakes in the suffering of the oppressed Africans and how the whole novel complicates her attempts to relate a material history of suffering. Indeed, Mrs. Curren is confronted by mauled and bleeding black bodies she describes in the accident involving Bheki and John. Her inability, rather than refusal, to describe a scene of township violence does not preclude a strong presence for the suffering body within her letter. The suffering body exerts its authority on us and baffles us. Mrs. Curren is

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<sup>65</sup> Unhappy with her answer, a man in the crowd retorts “Shit” (99). That she talks “shit” suggests her powerless position as a colonized. Magda in *HC* directly uses this kind of visceral language to similarly figure her outrage at a colonial situation of oppression.

“overwhelmed” by the fact of suffering in the world, a suffering before which she is “helpless.”<sup>66</sup> Her marginal position as a white woman among blacks during her visit to Guguletu is even more evident. She cannot represent the pain of the other in proper language. Mr. Thabane elicits her response to what she sees, and she reacts to him: “There are terrible things going on here. But what I think of them I must say in my own way” (98). And then asserts: “I must find my own words, from myself. Otherwise it is not the truth” (99).<sup>67</sup> In a sense, Mrs. Curren is articulating a postmodern problematic of speaking the unspeakable. Probyn asserts the “doubledness” of postmodernism and how it “highlights the necessity of speaking within the tensions of (im)possibility” (119). Faced with the death of the other, Mrs. Curren is, in the words of Emmanuel Levinas, “no longer *able to be able*” because she “loses [her] very mastery as a subject” (emphasis original; *Time* 74). Parry sees in speechlessness in Coetzee’s novels “a metaphor for that portentous silence which signifies what *cannot* be spoken” (emphasis original; 154). Mrs. Curren has no power over the event of death happening to others and eventually to her. She is incapable of changing things since it is too late for her age and health. Coetzee dramatizes the difficult position of the liberal who feels repelled by yet complicit in political atrocities. If divine intervention is needed for the writer to successfully speak of historical realities, the writer becomes more confirmed in discursive representation as the alternatives to an impossible “truthful” representation. For Gallagher, the novel “traces the efforts of liberal white South Africans to find an ethical position in the paradoxes and contradictions of their history” (198). That Mrs. Curren cannot find human terms to

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<sup>66</sup> Mrs. Curren registers one’s powerlessness and speechlessness before the suffering body. There is an echo of a similar assertion by Coetzee in *Doubling the Point* (248) and cited in my Introduction, p. 55.

<sup>67</sup> In *Doubling the Point*, Coetzee adds: “These fictional constructions of mine are paltry, ludicrous defenses against that being overwhelmed, and, to me, transparently so” (248). Representations of overwhelming suffering are never tantamount to the real event/experience of suffering.

describe political violence without betraying the event of violence itself indicates that though language may be inadequate in capturing history, the historical real cannot escape representation and reproduction in language no matter how abortive the attempt is.

In the scene in the township of Guguletu, Mrs. Curren is struck by the transgressive materiality of the other body that demands an ethical response. Her eyes are opened to other bodies. Bheki is shot by the police for protesting against apartheid<sup>68</sup> and is later found along with other bullet-ridden corpses: “his feet were bare. His eyes were open and staring, his mouth open too. The rain had been beating on him for hours...; their clothes, their very hair, had a flattened, dead look. In the corners of his eyes there were grains of sand. There was sand in his mouth” (102). His “dry” death suggested by the particles of sand in his eyes and mouth is reminiscent of her own dry dying. However, the shot corpses of Bheki and his friends sharply contrast with Mrs. Curren’s approaching dry death because their bodies have bled and lain in the rain while hers has been eating itself inside out in the privacy of her home. She experiences an epiphany of sorts: “And I thought: Now my eyes are open and I can never close them again” (103). What she sees is the effect of a past event, not direct street fighting and burning, but the consequences of such violence. Such a gruesome sight of death and killing has the effect of assault on her. She is confronted by the suffering body of the other not through “images” or “at a distance” but, as Sontag argues, “watching up close,” “without the mediation of an image” (*Regarding* 117). Actual sight as opposed to photography or the media, Sontag

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<sup>68</sup> During the 1980s, an increasing opposition against apartheid by militant black youth was taking place in the country’s schools and universities. The black youth who did not receive equal educational opportunities refused to attend schools that condition them for the apartheid system. In *AI*, Bheki and his friends are apparently modeled after such resisting youth.

argues, has a peculiar “raw power” (*Regarding* 118).<sup>69</sup> As Viola maintains, “Confiscated corpses can thus engender traumatic experiences, but bodies in fiction can also represent—through a process of metonymy—the whole of the South African land, and in a sense, give it voice” (7). Mrs. Curren identifies with those segregated bodies and sees her own cancer as the materialization of their physical suffering. She realizes she is implicated in this war that lives within her as she lives within it (103). Discussing the double encounter with the alterity of death and the alterity of the death of the other person, Levinas argues: “The relationship with the Other, the face-to-face with the Other, the encounter with a face that at once gives and conceals the Other, is the situation in which an event happens to a subject who does not assume it, who is utterly unable in its regard, but where nonetheless in a certain way it is in front of the subject. The other ‘assumed’ is the Other” (*Time* 78-79). Mrs. Curren comes to terms with alterity not in terms of its traditional distance but in terms of the closeness of familiarity and common subordination. The materiality of the other body is not to be erased from her memory: “I thought of the five bodies, of their massive, solid presence in the burned-down hall” (104). She says she grieves for Bheki because she saw his dead face (125). The proximity of the other body ethically unarms her. Her helplessness is the exact opposite of the violence such black bodies were subjected to.

Mrs. Curren is ethically disturbed by Bheki’s “deadness, his dead weight. It is as though in death he became very heavy, like lead or like that thick, airless mud you get at the bottom of dams” (124). She further says: “Now he is lying on top of me with all that

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<sup>69</sup> In *Dusklands*, we will see the opposite. Eugene Dawn carries war pictures from Vietnam. The violence in the pictures is thus a framed one as Dawn did not actually visit Vietnam, as he claims, and did not experience such violence immediately. Coetzee’s *Dusklands* is discussed in Chapter Four.

weight” (124). What applies to Bheki applies to John whose thick, black blood she observed. She sees the undeniable materiality of the suffering body, one that compels recognition and disturbs the viewer. The death of the other faced directly on its face overwhelms her. She tells Vercueil that black bodies if burned will not burn: “They might lose their sharpness of contour, but when the flames subsided they would still be there, heavy as ever” (124). The brute materiality of the oppressed body, which is still evoked and mediated in Mrs. Curren’s narrative but communicated to us through language as such, haunts her imagination. It is a materiality that will not “burn,” one as heavy and hard as the “iron” times in the novel’s title. She tells Vercueil that when she walks “upon this land, this South Africa, I have a gathering feeling of walking upon black faces. They are dead but their spirit has not left them. They lie there heavy and obdurate, waiting for my feet to pass, waiting for me to go waiting to be raised up again. Millions of figures of pig iron floating under the skin of the earth. The age of iron waiting to return” (125-126). The result is that the proximity of the other brings about an epiphany and a corresponding mental proximity, both countering the alienation and separation effected by apartheid. Mrs. Curren is close to the other body by virtue of her situation as a diseased woman. In the words of one critic, she “executes her desires, in deciding to become the other, the damned and the dying” (Islam 141). However, she already finds herself in this position of the other body and easily identifies with other bodily others. Levinas argues: “The other involves us in a situation in which we are obliged without guilt, but our obligation is no less for that. At the same time it is a burden. It is heavy, and, if you like, that is what goodness is” (*Alterity* 106). She is exposed to the death of the other and experiences her responsibility for this other. Levinas writes: “The other concerns me as a neighbor. In

every death is shown the nearness of the neighbor, and the responsibility of the survivor, in the form of a responsibility that the approach of proximity moves or agitates” (*God* 17). Levinas dwells on this close encounter with the face of the other and argues that “there is an essential poverty in the face” and that “the face is what forbids us to kill” (*Ethics* 86). The face in Levinas’s thought makes immediate ethical demands on us and commands us to assume responsibility for the other because it speaks or expresses language to the self. This is why Mrs. Curren is touched by staring at the dead black faces and speechless in reaction to the violence perpetrated on them.<sup>70</sup> In death, the face of the other is even more defenseless, “poorer” in Levinas’s logic.

In *AI*, Coetzee highlights the materiality of the suffering body, the transgression of this body in its refusal to be contained socially and spatially, the construction of the diseased body with relation to the body politic and in line with cultural meanings of cancer, and, ultimately, writing the body within narratives. Although Coetzee shows us cultural and metaphorical associations that construct the body, he equally depicts Mrs. Curren’s undeniable pain and suffering and even makes her ponder the ineffaceable materiality of the other body. The materiality of the body is never negated by but problematized with relation to the discourses that the body is involved in.

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<sup>70</sup> Some critics have also detected the ethical import of the text and thus highlighted the tensions and overlap between the ethical and the political in the novel but without focusing on bodily encounters. For example, Marais, in “‘Little Enough, Less than Little: Nothing’: Ethics, Engagement, and Change in the Fiction of J. M. Coetzee,” argues that Coetzee engages history unconventionally, while apparently refusing “to treat history as an a priori system,” and is continually relevant as “this concern with otherness is deeply ethical in that it involves not only respect, but also responsibility, for the Other” (160). Marais also argues that Coetzee engages history by “attempting to create the conditions that are necessary for the ethical to mediate the political” (173). Again, Coetzee discusses the political in terms of the ethical.

### III. *In the Heart of the Country*: Writing the Body

The body, then, has been at once a vital deepening of radical politics, and a wholesale displacement of them.

Terry Eagleton, *The Illusions of Postmodernism*

While the materiality of the body in *AI* is mainly part of a representation of real bodies and thus a historical reality close to the South African situation, Magda's body in *HC* is less material compared with that of Mrs. Curren. In *AI*, Coetzee represents material bodies written and constructed into a cancer narrative. The text does not negate Mrs. Curren's bone cancer or the material suffering of other bodies. The metaphorical and cultural associations given to the body and the novel's structure as a sustained letter complicate the material body but never efface real suffering. Coetzee shows in *AI* how we cannot access material suffering without some form of mediation. In *HC*, things are more complicated as Coetzee denies us any solid grounds for the existence of material bodies. The novel's preoccupation with its own constructedness problematizes and puts to doubt any historical reference it might have. The body's materiality is constructed within a self-defeating psychological realism consisting of 266 numbered sections that shatter the linearity of the narrative and emphasize its constructedness. Coetzee uses this "montage" strategy of numbered sections "as a way of pointing to what is not there between them" (*Doubling* 59). Magda writes from a lonely farm as a repressed, irrational female body.<sup>71</sup> Compared with the consistency of an extended letter in *AI*, *HC* only

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<sup>71</sup> It is insightful that Magda is placed within and reacting to the genre of the farm novel or "plaasroman" Coetzee is aware of and subverts here. See for example his article "Farm Novel and 'Plaasroman'" that first appeared in *English in Africa* and was then republished in *White Writing*. Coetzee writes in the anti-pastoral tradition of Olive Schreiner's *The Story of an African Farm*. The novel depicts everything but an idealized rural farm, which might be an implicit critique of different forms of colonial order.

establishes material bodies to erase them in self-conscious, deconstructive diary entries that rewrite and contradict each other. As best put by Robert Post, the diary “takes us into the fragmented, nightmarish world of Magda with its probable fantasies, including those of incest, murder, suicide, and rape” (70). *HC* further complicates and distances bodily materiality without totally dismissing it because, as in *AI*, it is the body that figures the colonial situation the female narrator is in and induces her hysterical diversions. Between constructedness in language and excessive materiality, the body is a site for the interplay of the mediated and the political because the diaries dwell on suggestive bodily details.

Écriture féminine is Magda’s decolonizing discourse in its rejection of binary patriarchal logic and marginalization; it is her postmodern politicized discourse. In the works of the French feminists, writing the body challenges discourses of mastery. Écriture féminine is subversive of rules and boundaries, and hence empowering. French feminists acknowledge language as oppressive and, paradoxically, potentially subversive. A feminine writing should issue diffusely from the body and challenge phallogentric discourses. It is in harmony with the unconscious and the semiotic (in Kristeva’s sense of the term) as a threat to the symbolic order; it is rooted in the body as a site of the historical oppression of women. Attention to the body’s drives and repressed desires can be liberating for the oppressed body. Magda’s feminist discourse is reminiscent of the semiotic discourse of Kristeva that forms a challenge to the symbolic order.<sup>72</sup> Magda

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<sup>72</sup> Gallagher is one of very few critics who notice and highlight Magda’s as a “feminine story” with features of feminine writing like fragmentation, lack of closure, repetitive nature, fluid imagery, and fragmented nature but not within a postmodern context or with reference to the interaction between material and fictive bodies. See Gallagher’s book, pp. 105-111. L. Wright also points out Coetzee’s apparent familiarity with the French Feminists (p. 60). Both accounts are inadequately short. They are not contextualized with a postmodern preoccupation with the body and do not explore the political implications of such a correspondence.

writes her body into language, into a feminine text about hysteria.<sup>73</sup> The hysteric body is made a text that signifies a racial and gendered identity. She writes as a “hysteric,” an outsider to male discourse, and hence she uses bodily drives as empowering rhetoric. Her self-consciousness is rooted in her body, and her interiorized account revolves around sexual and racial violence. Her oppressed position and transgressive body rhetoric make her textualized account, the ruminations of a hysteric female, politically significant.

Magda’s femaleness as a body seems the source of her hysterical condition. Her virginity makes her view herself as a woman with a hollow space at the center, a woman with “a hole between my legs that has never been filled, leading to another hole never filled either. If I am an O, I am sometimes persuaded, it must be because I am a woman” (41). She hints at a relationship between her marginalized position and her lacking body. Because she sees herself as “a lonely, ugly old maid” (42) with an unused aging body, she wants to be loved, married, penetrated, and fall pregnant. Her loneliness and misery remind one of Mrs. Curren’s situation, and the smell she speaks of reminds one of Vercueil’s although it is more of a figural representation of her hysterical spinsterhood: “I blush for my own thin smell, the smell of an unused woman, sharp with hysteria, like onions, like urine. How can he [Hendrik] ever wish to burrow his nose in my armpit, as I mine in his!” (86). We should recall that the word “hysteria” that Magda uses to describe her state comes from the Greek “hystera” which originally meant a disease in which the uterus became errant and floated around inside the body causing physical symptoms and extreme emotional states, and hence the connection between the female reproductive

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<sup>73</sup> In this section, I will not be simply equating feminine writing with mental illness. If there are some symptoms of hysteria in feminist texts, these can be subversively used to deconstruct the health/illness opposition as a basis for the subordination of the female body. In sexist discourse, we should remember, a healthy male body gains privilege against a “diseased” female counterpart.

body and the sexual dissatisfaction assumed to cause hysteria. As a displacement of symptoms from mind to body or from one bodily part to another, hysteria accounts for the irregularities in Magda's narrative or the diverse ailments she describes.

Magda describes herself in line with Freudian notions of female lack and inferiority.<sup>74</sup> She is incomplete as a woman, unused, and “forgotten, dusty, like an old shoe” (41). She makes it clear that her lack as a female is what causes her nervousness. She renders herself as a grotesque, open body trapped in linguistic games: “I am incomplete, I am a being with a hole inside me, I signify something, I do not know what ...” (9). She frames her plight as one caused by spinsterhood and grotesque materiality: “But who would give me a baby, who would not turn to ice at the spectacle of my bony frame on the wedding-couch, the coat of fur up to my navel, the acrid cavities of my armpits, the line of black moustache, the eyes, watchful, defensive, of a woman who has never lost possession of herself?” (10). Childless and ugly as she is, or as she thinks she is, it is no wonder that she is a hysterical patient per se. She considers herself in passive sexual terms as “a sheath,” and “a vacant inner space” (41). She is not a phallic edge but as “a hole, a hole with a body draped around it, the two spindly legs hanging loose at the bottom and the two bony arms flapping at the sides and the big head lolling on top. I am a hole crying to be whole” (41). If she is not “whole,” it is because, she believes, she has “a hole.” Spinsterhood makes her a pathological female with emotional extremes.

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<sup>74</sup> Coetzee's creation of Magda testifies to his European intellectual allegiances and seems at the surface detached from the specific realities of his country. I have argued in the Introduction, however, that Coetzee tackles the particular from the perspective of the globalized, and discursive, experience of oppression associated with colonial movements. His appropriation of a female voice and female bodily experience is an indication of his adoption of a feminine mode of writing/discourse that goes against the biological essentialism of phallogentric, masculine discourses.

Lack of sexual fulfillment accounts for Magda's hysterical rambling, for hers is an unhealthy preoccupation with her "open" female body. She is represented as an absence, as an abject woman who lacks what the patriarch has: "To my father I have been an absence all my life. Therefore instead of being the womanly warmth at the heart of this house I have been a zero, null, a vacuum towards which all collapses inward..." (2). Magda articulates her own insignificance for her father in deconstructive terms. Although we have no means of ascertaining the truth value of her claims, Magda's description of her life and of those minimal others around her remain marked by excessive, hysterical attention to physical details, real or imagined. Her body is the excessively material body of a spinster described as "an angry spinster in the heart of nowhere" (4), as "a miserable black virgin" (5), as a "black widow in mourning for the uses I was never put to" (40-41), as a "black bored spinster" (5),<sup>75</sup> as "the mad hag I am destined to be" (8), as "a mad old bad old woman with a stooped black and a hooked nose and knobby fingers" (123),<sup>76</sup> and as "a lonely, ugly old maid" (42). She "situates herself and is situated by the author Coetzee as the 'madwoman in the attic' of feminist theory" (Poyner; *Paradox* 48). She sees in spinsterhood the cause of her madness. She thinks she is physically unattractive because of her many teeth, and she contemplates pulling some out and treating her "dull and pallid" skin and "thin and heavy" flesh (22). She says she is a thin woman with "horny toes" (34). The contradictory terms she uses to describe herself and her

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<sup>75</sup> Post argues: "Magda, the suffering white female, empathizes with the oppressed black race to the point where she practically considers herself to be black" (70). Derek Wright similarly observes that she "virtually thinks herself black" ("Fiction as Foe" 114).

<sup>76</sup> Magda's foregrounding of her madness sheds light on an important aspect of her colonial situation. Fanon argues the mental disorders and symptoms of colonial oppression based on his experience in psychiatric hospitals in Algeria. These equally affect both oppressor and oppressed. See *The Wretched of the Earth*, pp. 181-233. For an account of psychosomatic disorders as physical illnesses related to mental conflict, see *The Wretched of the Earth*, specifically pp. 216-219. The pathological conditions created by colonialism are confirmed by Coetzee's own references to the pathological relations effected by apartheid in South Africa and echoed in South African literature. See my Introduction, pp. 25-26.

description of herself as a “hag” establish the material body she constructs and equally puts to question. The self-abusive nature of her language hints at this construction. She degrades herself in such grotesque, blatant bodily descriptions that figure her oppression.

Magda’s clothes, according to her account, “cake with dribble” and her feet “blossom with horny callouses” (8).<sup>77</sup> Such physical descriptions bring to mind the materiality of Vercueil’s body in *AI*. She transgressively describes herself, in animalistic terms that go beyond the norms of what applies to humans, as “a thin black beetle with dummy wings who lays no eggs and blinks in the sun, a real puzzle to entomology” (18). She is aware her narrative vents a preoccupation with obscenity and indecency. She asks: “Is there something in me that loves the gloomy, the hideous, the doom-ridden, that sniffs out its nest and snuggles down in a dark corner among rats’ droppings and chicken bones rather than resign itself to decency?” (23). Her self-disparagement as unattractive revolves around her body which is constructed in material terms as a repulsive one. She describes herself as ugly, old, and constantly sick with migraines: “I take nothing for the migraine, knowing that nothing will help me and being anyhow a cultist of pain. Pleasure is hard to come by, but pain is everywhere these days, I must learn to subsist on it” (34). Migraines as well as influenza and smallpox dominate her life, and she is used to them (67). Bodily pain in the form of migraines, as with Mrs. Curren’s cancer pain, makes her “lost in the being of my being” (35) and “a poetess of interiority, an explorer of the inwardness of the stones” (35). However, nothing guarantees that her references to bodily being are “real.” The embodiment she describes can be a construction of her imagination, and her devotion to pain figures a sociopolitical reality before it describes real pain.

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<sup>77</sup> The abject images Magda creates herself in are reminiscent of those of “the monstrous-feminine” one would encounter in patriarchal discourses. See Barbara Creed for an account on this term.

Magda's narrative functions at the space where the semiotic of drives and bodily functions challenges the symbolic within the signifying process. She seems at a natural, pre-cultural stage closer to a subversive body destabilizing the cultural and linguistic control of dominant structures. While she is writing from a position of marginalized subjectivity, the content of her subject position is subversive. This embittered spinster challenges her marginalization and otherness via her hysterical body. She asserts: "I may be only a ninety-pound spinster crazed with loneliness, but I suspect I am not harmless" (50). The harm she is capable of, however, does not exceed an exaggerated rhetoric that captures our attention and explicates her plight at the textual level. She admits that much about her "is only theory" (43) and complains about loneliness that makes her lose "all human perspective" (53). Although Hélène Cixous argues in "Castration and Decapitation?" that symbolic decapitation for women is imposed silence (loss of tongue or head) and is tantamount to castration (42-3), she argues that it is the body of the hysteric that talks since "silence is the mark of hysteria" (49). Men, Cixous argues, reduce women to the body—"and man doesn't hear the body" (49)—and force silence on them or reduce their speech to the unheard speech of hysterics and insane women. However, a hysterical body excessively talking/writing like Magda's is not necessarily innocent. "In the end," Cixous argues, "the woman pushed to hysteria is the woman who disturbs and is nothing but disturbance. The master dotes on disturbance right from the moment he can subdue it and call it up at his command" (49). But Magda is, significantly, a "spinster with a locked diary" (3) who strives not to be "one of the forgotten ones of history" (3) and asserts that she is more than "an uneasy consciousness" (3). The "master," in this sense, cannot unlock her diary or cease it. She even exploits

hysteria and undermines it as a wishful or romanticized rhetoric. She thinks of herself as “this brittle, hairy shell with the peas of dead words rattling in it” (37). In this transgressive image, “brittle” mitigates/negates the transgression of “hairy” while “dead words” gain more force from “rattling.” The female body is seen to determine a new mode of writing that challenges masculine discourses by virtue of the negative attributes imposed on it. As Mary Jacobus argues adopting Freudian models, “The body of the hysteric becomes her text, and the text of the analyst” (qtd. in Boehmer 269). We as readers construct Magda’s body as a hysteric’s text to be read and analyzed in the same way her narrative constructs/mediates her body. The body, metaphorically in this case, is subversive of boundaries and binaries and is excessively rooted in language. Elleke Boehmer argues that the hysteric “expresses her condition through converting ‘mind’ to ‘body,’ translating her fears and repressions into a language of body images” (269). Because Magda writes as an oppressed, colonized/colonizing hysteric, her mental inhibitions materialize in the form of a grotesque, disturbing materiality.

Flora Veit-Wild argues that the native, especially woman, often finds himself/herself in a “nervous condition” and suffers from a gendered “mental colonization.” She argues that women in a colonial situation find themselves on the border of “sanity and insanity, between reality and irreality” (123). Magda, although an Afrikaner rather than native woman, similarly emerges as a sick victim of colonial and patriarchal oppression. Sickness is still political as it is in *AI* because it figures Magda’s marginalized situation; however, it is more mental in this case. It is a neurotic, pathological illness of the ambiguous, inconsistent sort Fanon attributes to the North African under French colonization and calls “the North African syndrome” with “no

lesional basis” (*African Revolution* 6). Fanon elaborates: “Without a family, without love, without human relations, without communion with the group, the first encounter with himself will occur in a neurotic mode, in a pathological mode” (*African Revolution* 13). Fanon generalizes the damaging mental impact of the colonial situation on the colonized and writes that the colonized “suffers from an imaginary ailment”<sup>78</sup> (*African Revolution* 9). Colonization negatively affects the psyche of the colonized. Racism and inferiority feelings make the colonized a sick man even when no organic basis is detected. If Magda is not sick at the physical level, unlike the cancer-stricken Mrs. Curren, her nervousness is intertwined with patriarchal colonial oppression in the same way Mrs. Curren elaborates the alliance between bodily and political cancer.

The female protagonist ruminates about her life and much happens in her mind. Her consciousness haunts her monologue, the self-conscious narrative. As a result, in the words of Caroline Rooney, “the distinction between inner and outer reality collapses” (431). Magda seems stunted in language because she uses it to figure the deformity and disfigurement of her oppression. The material bodies her imagination weaves are transgressive not only because of their excessive materiality but also because such a materiality functions at a textual level. In a sense, Magda is an unstable, postmodern subject immersed in the textuality of her diary entries. “Postmodernism depicts the self as a social, ideological construct which is endlessly in process, and identity as being constituted performatively, by what the self does” (Gregson 41). While Coetzee agrees with an interviewer’s comment that Magda is “a voice” made up of words and even calls

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<sup>78</sup> Although Fanon writes about the context of the colonization of Algeria and about the colonized Arab in particular, his claims are still relevant because of their general truth about the colonial situation.

her a “verbal artist,”<sup>79</sup> the materially oppressed body is constructed within this voice. The voice of Magda, like that of Mrs. Curren, is “a series of countervoices” (Clarkson 193). For postmodernists, the subject is “merely the place from which a voice speaks; or it is constituted by the play of desires” (Hart 50). Like Mrs. Curren, Magda writes excessively and her desperate voice dominates her narrative. Connor argues: “Some postmodern narratives appear, by contrast, to depend on the voice rather than on the eye, or, more precisely, to make the voice hard to encode either as a way of seeing or as itself something seen” (“Postmodernism” 64). It is Magda’s voice speaking in the narrative that freely vents corporeal language. The excessive materiality of interracial sex, interracial rape, parricide, and scatological imagery, we will see, is concealed within what Magda sees as her pointless imagination. She is trapped in a cold discourse determined by patriarchy and imperialism and tries to surpass it to love and be loved. Magda sees herself as a “poetess of interiority” (35) but vents the violence of rape and parricide as rooted in her status as an Afrikaner woman who carries the guilt of colonial history.

Magda struggles to shape herself and her life between the extremes of realism and linguistic play, between material bodies (history) and discursive ones (language). As Chiara Briganti puts it, Magda’s narrative “stretches the boundaries of realism, on the one hand, by taking the stuff for its story from literature, and, on the other, by creating a

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<sup>79</sup> See J. Scott, “Voice and Trajectory: An Interview with J. M. Coetzee,” pp. 90- 91. Because Coetzee sees Magda as a “verbal artist,” Attridge is right to call her “his most Beckettian, both in the broader scheme of an introspective and wordy monologue whose relation to reality is not always easy to fathom and in the small details of style” (“Coetzee’s Beckett” 83). Aside from the Beckettian monologue form of *HC*, Magda as a “solitary narrator in the void” full of self-doubt and “making up stories” to herself, the entries that form the novel, is also a potential Beckettian influence (Yeoh “Coetzee and Beckett” 340). Although Yeoh makes this point with reference to the confined magistrate in *Waiting for the Barbarians*, I think this point is more valid in and more applicable to Magda’s case as a solipsistic narrator who goes on writing her story despite her sense of nothingness and insignificance. In addition to metafictionality, Magda’s corporeal morbidity that I have already highlighted also sounds Beckettian.

narrator who is able to find evidence of her own existence only in her own writing” (34). However, Magda does more than utilize literary discourses on hysteria as Briganti argues. The Magda Coetzee creates is aware of discourses on the body and textuality and their interrelationships, which enacts a postmodern understanding of the body as mediated in language regardless of its physicality. Her consciousness haunts the narrative and makes us question the “real” described within the novel. She blurs the fictive and the real and shows that reality may well be a product of representation or even a distorted product of misrepresentation. Her self-centered preoccupation with her thoughts does not efface the body from her narrative, as in her violent, incestuous fantasies. But the materiality of the body is distanced within diary entries Magda poses to be writing and then within specific diary entries which negate/question their verisimilitude status as the fictive ramblings of a crazed narrator. We are not to trust this grotesque materiality described as it might be a game she entertains herself with, a point given force by the chaotic transitions, multiple questions, tautologies, and repeated commas within the entries.<sup>80</sup> Moreover, Magda’s entries give different versions of the same events she describes and repeat words like “perhaps,” “possible,” and “or.”<sup>81</sup> She paraphrases the same “event” in different ways sometimes or gives similar beginnings of some entries. She metafictionally draws our

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<sup>80</sup> For example, continuing her streak of self-disparagement, Magda begins the following segment from an entry tautologically and wanders through language: “If I am an emblem then I am an emblem. I am incomplete, I am a being with a hole inside me, I signify something, I do not know what, I am dumb, I stare out through a sheet of glass into a darkness that is complete, that lives in itself, bats, bushes, predators and all, that does not regard me, that is blind, that does not signify but merely is” (9).

<sup>81</sup> For example, her early account about her father coming home with a new bride in a cart drawn by a horse is negated: “Or perhaps they were drawn by two plumed donkeys, that is also possible” (1). She then denies that she was even watching them when they came: “I was in my room ... reading a book, or more likely, supine with a damp towel over my eyes fighting a migraine” (1). Other examples of this indeterminate language include her rape by the farm laborer Hendrik, her father’s seduction of Hendrik’s wife, and her killing of her father.

attention to the construction of her numbered diaries entries<sup>82</sup> and denies us any firm grounds for the excessive materiality described in her diaries.

The numbered diaries, just like the sustained self-conscious letter of Mrs. Curren, indicate the mediation of Magda's narrative in language, and the different versions of the same events told involving bodily violation give an indication about their construction as linguistic tactics. The material bodies populating her narrative are also mediated in language and storytelling. Coetzee said during a reading from this novel that "In the course of the action people get killed or raped, but perhaps not really, perhaps only in the overactive imagination of the story teller" (qtd. in Penner 56). Her active imagination dominates her being, and Magda herself says: "Deprived of human intercourse, I inevitably overvalue the imagination and expect it to make the mundane glow with an aura of self-transcendence" (14). However, this should not undermine the value of the excessive bodily content in "the overactive imagination" of Magda as Coetzee uses her to problematize the real. She establishes the real as interwoven with conscious writing, fabrication, and rewriting. The novel begins with the following numbered section:

1. Today my father brought home his new bride. They came clip-clop across the flats in a dog-cart drawn by a horse with an ostrich-plume waving on its forehead, dusty after the long haul. Or perhaps they were drawn by two plumed donkeys, that is also possible. My father wore his black swallowtail coat and stovepipe hat,

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<sup>82</sup> Attridge argues that the numbering of paragraphs "announces from the outset that we are not to suspend disbelief as we read" and that whatever happens or is communicated as thoughts and feelings takes place "against the background of a constant awareness of their mediation by language, generic or other conventions, and artistic decisions" ("Ethical Modernism" 663).

his bride a wide-brimmed sunhat and a white dress tight at waist and throat. More detail I cannot give unless I begin to embroider, for I was not watching. (1)

To “embroider” draws our attention to the textual artifice of her story. Such a beginning is complicated on the same page a “constructed” event and as she claims: “I am the one who stays in her room reading or writing or fighting migraines” (1). Her proliferating entries that rewrite each other are instances of a semiotic style challenging a dominant discourse in their unpredictability, excess, and instinctual nature. Her narrative is one of internalization, fragmentation, and transgression of boundaries. A few pages later, we encounter a contradictory rewriting of the first entry but the focus now is on Hendrik: “38. Six months ago Hendrik brought home his new bride. They came clip-clop across the flats in the donkey-cart, dusty after the long haul from Armoede. Hendrik wore the black suit passed on to him by my father with an old wide-brimmed felt hat and a shirt buttoned to the throat” (17). Cixous asserts: “A feminine text starts on all sides at once, starts twenty times, thirty times, over” (“Castration” 53). It is, Cixous argues, characterized by “the metaphorical form of wandering, excess” and is “very disturbing” as a result (“Castration” 53). The two entries given by Magda about the arrival of her father/Hendrik with a new bride draw on a similar language to highlight the discursive nature of Magda’s diary entries. Magda deconstructs any truth values she presents and establishes herself as a disembodied, unreliable narrator with no clear relation to the outside world. She says with respect to the second entry: “I have never seen Armoede, I seem never to have been anywhere, I seem to know nothing for sure, perhaps I am simply a ghost or a vapour floating at the intersection of a certain latitude and a certain longitude...” (17). She revises her entries or questions/negates her assertions. In one

section she shoots Hendrik (99), in the next section she describes the same event in different words and Hendrik and his wife seem to escape (99), and in another section Hendrik and his wife “are unscathed” (100). As summed up by Brian Macaskill, Magda’s account is “marked by signs of doubt, erasure, denial, and speculation” (457).

A mentally diseased, solipsistic Magda constructs grotesque and substantial bodies and then deconstructs them by her constant questioning and reshaping of narration. It is no wonder that Dovey reads Magda in this novel as a manifestation of a Lacanian subject “trapped in the realm of the Imaginary” (“Writing” 21), and thus in a relation with herself. Dovey highlights Magda’s failure to achieve an identity in language, through the Father of the Lacanian paradigm, and her not gaining access to the Symbolic (164). For Dovey, Magda’s repetitive narrative and her violent linguistic ploys represent “not the normal process whereby the child accedes to sexual identity, to subjectivity, but the symptom of a fixation: evidence that this necessary transition has not been successfully effected” (165). That Magda is stuck in the Imaginary means that she represents the dilemma “of a narrating self which can neither realize the independent existence of the self, nor *transcend* the self” (emphasis original; Dovey 177). Magda is trapped in language and fantasies, and her language has no sympathetic ears. However, while Dovey argues for Magda’s failure in relating to the Symbolic, I argue Magda’s Kristevan semiotic focus on the body and her feminine/subversive way of writing it.

Magda writes her body into self-conscious diaries and wants her story “to have a beginning, a middle, and an end” (42). Language distances her from the real, and she tautologically claims: “My stories are stories, they don’t frighten me, they only postpone the moment when I must ask: is it my own snarl I hear in the undergrowth?” (50). “Is it

possible,” she asks, “that I am a prisoner not of the lonely farmhouse and the stone desert but of my stony monologue?” (12). She further claims by way of asserting her immersion in language and the effacement of the real behind the fictive: “This monologue of the self is a maze of words out of which I shall not find a way until someone else gives me a lead” (16).<sup>83</sup> However, the material body and the textual, disembodied one exist side by side in her entries: “Am I, I wonder, a thing among things, a body propelled along a track by sinews and bony levers, or am I a monologue moving through time, approximately five feet above the ground, if the ground does not turn out to be just another word, in which case I am indeed lost?” (62). As with Mrs. Curren, Magda’s isolation and absorption in language make her look for an existential proof of her material being and ponder the intimate relationship between language and the body, between life and fiction: “The words that whisper through those blue lips are mine. Drowning, I drown into myself. A phantom, I am no phantom. I stoop. I touch this skin and it is warm, I pinch this flesh and it hurts. What more proof could I want? I am I” (54). In the absence of real life exchanges, she has no assurance of a reciprocating other, and thus remains trapped in her own excessive language. Her self-presence is not enough to spare her from being lost in her intricate monologue. Loneliness makes her see herself as a trace of words devoid

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<sup>83</sup> Magda is similar in conception to some of Beckett’s protagonist narrators. Coetzee is indeed familiar with Beckett’s fiction since he wrote for his Ph.D. dissertation a stylistic analysis of Beckett’s fiction at the University of Texas, Austin. Magda, for example, is similar to the narrator in Beckett’s *The Unnamable* in her loneliness, hesitation, somberness, and immersion in language. Both narrators as self-conscious writers give fragmented monologues and foreground their constructedness in the language they cannot escape. In both cases, we are never sure whether the narrators speak of an objective reality they see or just imaginatively invent. As Beckett’s unnamable narrator says, “That is to say I have to go on” (334). And later: “The search for the means to put an end to things, an end to speech, is what enables the discourse to continue. No, I must not try to think, simply utter” (344). Despite a potential gender difference between the narrators, Magda and Beckett’s narrator both present the workings of consciousness as compared with the real.

of materiality and rootedness in time or place, a woman in the middle of nowhere with no fulfilling human contact to guarantee a return to material existence.

Although she might experience an intensified material being in her condition as a proclaimed ugly spinster, Magda has no means of relaying her experiences in the absence of a web of words she plays with. Her self-absorbed diaries make her question a substantial body existing outside language. Lonely and bored, she is immersed in her own words, in the “fictive” reality her mind shapes. Just as Mrs. Curren says “I wrote. I write. I follow the pen, going where it takes me” (108), the introspective, unrecognized Magda writes: “I create myself in the words that create me, I who living among the downcast have never beheld myself in the equal regard of another’s eye, have never held another in the equal regard of mine” (8). Magda depends on her writing for her substance; she is unable to transcend the master/slave discourse she is trapped in. A self-doubting monologist, she leads a life mediated by words. Socially “dead” because of her isolation and alienation, she is also “dead” as an author who is spoken by language. Magda, as Ian Glenn argues, repeatedly reminds us that she is “both writer and character” telling a story (123). She is created by the same language she fabricates. “In the idiom of poststructuralism, Magda does not write her story; her story writes her” (Cantor 95). The words and voices she hears from flying machines make her question her bodily materiality: “I am sure that I am real. This is my hand, bone and flesh, the same hand every day. I stamp my foot: this is the earth, as real to the core as I” (127). Her seclusion and absorption in language make her doubt the substantial presence of her body. The voices she (thinks she) hears “accuse me, if I understand them, of turning my life into a fiction, out of boredom” (128). While the voices accuse her of spinning what she

narrates, she is aware of her reliance on yet dissatisfaction with words. She challenges traditional notions of realism/representation and the relation between language and the world by claiming that “Words alienate. Language is no medium for desire. Desire is rapture, not exchange. It is only by alienating the desired that language masters it” (26).<sup>84</sup> Words distance her from the physical world. Language fulfils no function in real life relations and satisfies not through reciprocation but through displacing and deferring desires. Language distances the real in the process of trying to capture it; it fails to bring her closer to her father and the servants because it effects distance and more hierarchies.

A patriarchal language like her father’s is implicated in perpetuating the feudal and colonial distance among the farm dwellers. It is a tool in her oppression. Therefore, Magda seeks an alternative language, as Sue Kossew explains, “to break free of the colonizing power of words” (*Pen* 69). Magda complains: “I was born into a language of hierarchy, of distance and perspective. It was my father-tongue. I do not say it is the language my heart wants to speak” (97). While her words “come from nowhere and go nowhere” and “have no past or future” (115), “the true language of the heart” (133) she seeks is judged by what she writes, not by what happens within the diaries. A colonial language she grew up with fails to achieve the human contact she desires, but she subverts this hierarchical language via the excessive bodily content of her diaries.<sup>85</sup>

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<sup>84</sup> In an interview with Jean Sévry, Coetzee highlights his interest in linguistics and in “problems of language throughout my novels” (1). He sees his interest in language as in line with what he does as a writer (1). Hence, Mrs. Curren’s problematizing of the relationship between bodily materiality and linguistic construction in *AI* finds its echo in *HC* in Magda’s intricate positioning of herself with relation to language. While *AI* approaches language in terms of three main issues (the cultural and metaphorical meanings of cancer, Mrs. Curren’s bodily pain, and the problem of relating the pain of the other), *HC* is more problematic in its treatment of language due to its nature as incoherent diary entries.

<sup>85</sup> A critic like James Wohlpart argues that Magda fails to subvert “the ideology of power” that is “encoded into language” (220). According to Wohlpart, the conclusion of the novel—in which Magda does not

Describing Hendrik's, the colored servant's, robust sex with his wife, she confesses that her knowledge of sexual life and bodily matters is mediated via dictionary language. She imagines what might have happened and describes it vividly:

The window is shut, the air in the cottage rich with human smells. They have lain naked all night, waking and sleeping, giving off their complex odours: the smoky sourness of brown people, I know that by heart, I must have had a brown nurse though I cannot recall her; (I sniff again, the other smells are harder) the iron smell of blood certainly; coming piercingly through the blood the thin acrid track of the girl's excitement; and finally, drenching the air with milky sweetness, the flood of Hendrik's response. The question to ask is not, How do I, a lonely spinster, come to know such things? It is not for nothing that I spend evenings humped over the dictionary. Words are words. I have never pretended to embrace the night's experience. A factor, I deal in signs merely. (27)

The sexual couplings of the brown servants she describes, real or imagined, cannot escape her representational maneuvers. Magda, a characteristically unreliable narrator, also hints at the ontological interest of postmodernists in constructing the world, world-building in language. Her incestuous fantasies and hyperbolic bodily language are trapped within her self-conscious diaries. She is a "subject-in-process" whose speaking position is being constructed and self-cancelled in her ongoing numbered diaries. She

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escape her condition or bring about a radical change in her destiny, is a reinforcement of this point (222). However, Magda does attempt to subvert patriarchal, hierarchal language from within via her semiotic, non-linear accounts about killing her father, killing the servants, and various other bodily acts she describes. Moreover, Magda subverts colonial language and not just the generic patriarchal language via the references she makes to the sexual vigor and the active sexual life of the black servants and her own sexual victimization by Hendrik. In such descriptions, as in descriptions of her rape, she, intentionally we might argue, emerges the object rather than subject of colonial discourse. See, for example, my discussion, pp. 150-154, in this chapter.

creates herself and her abject body in words and makes us aware of the shifting position of subjectivity and the interplay of signifiers. She constructs her subject position in speaking and writing: “I know this is in one sense just a way of speaking, a way of thinking about myself, but if one cannot think of oneself in words, in pictures, then what is there to think of oneself in?” (41). She lacks reciprocation in a relationship with the other and remains self-centered. Her assertion that she is a fictional construct undermines any truth claims or verisimilitude her narrative might have.

Magda’s inhibited desires revolve around her father’s new bride and his sexual life. Her jealousy of her father’s new wife is an indication of the unsettling content of her account, an incestuous transgression to be confirmed later on in the diaries. She is aware of her oppression by patriarchal and colonial power structures. She is a spinster, one of “the daughters of the colonies” who are “lost to history” and “wooded” as girls by patriarchal fathers (3). The seduction she hints at is but a probable Freudian fantasy: “The childhood rape: someone should study the kernel of truth in this fancy” (3). She casts herself in the role of the miserable, seduced daughter born, without a choice, in a desolate colony to a father who upholds a colonial order. Actually, it is her loneliness and powerlessness that drive her to writing. She asks and answers: “Who is behind my oppression? You and you, I say, crouching in the cinders, stabbing my finger at father and stepmother” (4). In the absence of her mother due to death, Magda is subjected to the strong will of her father. She says: “But my father was harsh and domineering only because he could not bear to ask and be refused” (130). This “baas” acts as the master who expects “yes” from his daughter and the servants. The father’s “relentless sexual demands” on a frail mother to deliver “the rough rude boy-heir my father wanted” (2)

deprived Magda of a compassionate soul on the farm. The father has kept her on this secluded farm, and he is her point of reference when it comes to male presence in her life. Her incestuous thoughts on her father and his new bride center on the sexed body: “but when I think of male flesh, white, heavy, dumb, whose flesh can it be but his?” (9). Following Freudian notions about “penis envy” and female lack, the father’s member is hysterically described as “the tired blind fish, cause of all my woe, lolling in his groin” (11). She, a subordinate female, cleans his clothes, heats water for him (9), cooks (14), and darns his socks (31). The masculine is pitted against its counterpart: “My father is the absence of my mother, her negative. She the soft, the fair; he the hard, the dark” (37).

Magda’s bodily consciousness is apparent everywhere in the narrative in that she makes repeated references to bodily functions and drives, especially excremental ones. Her excessive language is corporeal and disruptive. Frequent references to blood, semen, urine, smell, bodily orifices, shit, and death all make her diaries disrupt the ordered male discourse of patriarchy by privileging the Kristevan semiotic/object over the symbolic. Anne-Marie Smith writes that “at the basis of the theory of the semiotic are the corporeal origins of any linguistic subject” (16). And Magda dwells on the alliance of the body and writing. She kills or thinks she kills her father and his new bride with an ax: “Like a ball on a string it floats down at the end of my arm, sinks into the throat below me, and all is suddenly tumult. The woman snaps upright in bed, glaring about her, drenched in blood, bewildered by the angry wheezing and spouting at her side” (11). Her stepmother is not spared the ensuing violence: “Leaning forward and gripping what must be one of their four knees, I deliver much the better chop deep into the crown of her head. She dips over into the cradle of her lap and topples leftward in a ball, my dramatic tomahawk still

embedded in her” (11). This dramatic physical violence adds to the transgressions of the narrative an element of parricide, and she confesses: “I have broken a commandment, and the guilty cannot be bored” (11). After the supposed murder of her father and his bride, what she describes as “this bloody afterbirth” (15), she has to deal with the blood on the floor and mattress and dispose of the corpses: “What of the bodies? They can be burned or buried or submerged” (15). Magda, however, kills her father twice, and twice the father reappears as still alive. After the first ax-murder of her father and his bride who substitutes her dead mother, she shoots him again after he has a sexual affair with the wife of his black servant. Her father is shot by her—or injured in a hunting accident as she plans to explain it (70)—and sits in a pool of his blood: “What I have not seen is the gaping wound in his back from which blood seeps steadily. Petals of flesh stand out from it. I wash delicately around them. When the sponge touches raw flesh he jerks. But at least the bullet is out” (69). The conflicting accounts describing her patricide, with their excessive gore, indicate the constructedness of the transgressive act in language.

In one scene, the severely injured father lies motionless. The emphasis shifts now from gore to abject bodily waste: “I raise the bedclothes and look. He is lying in a sea of blood and shit that has already begun to cake. I tuck the bedclothes back under his armpits” (77). Flies buzz in the sickroom and an unbearable stench pervades. When the body is carried by her and Hendrik and washed in the bathroom, “water discolours and strings of excrement begin to float to the surface. The arms hang over the sides of the bath, the mouth gapes, the eyes stare. After half an hour’s soaking we clean the clotted hindparts. We bind the jaw and sew the eyes to” (82). This scene is followed by their arduous efforts to bury the dead master in a narrow grave by pushing and kicking (90-

91). Magda as a victimized female emerges as the violent victimizer in such murder scenes. Her narrative disrupts the masculine discourse with its contradictions, rewritings, and description of bodily fluids and wastes. Her fantasies have a graphic, visceral quality. Cixous writes: “A feminine textual body is recognized by the fact that it is always endless, without ending: there’s no closure, it doesn’t stop, and it’s this that very often makes the feminine text difficult to read” (“Castration” 53). Her father is not dead after all, and his appearance in subsequent diary entries wholly unscathed confirms the constructedness of her murderous, parricidal acts: “For he does not die so easily after all. Disgruntled, saddle-sore, it is he who rides in out of the sunset, who nods when I greet him, who stalks into the house and slumps in his armchair waiting for me to help him off with his boots” (16). She kills this patriarch and brings him to life in her imagination.

The Magda Coetzee creates seems aware of feminist theorizing on the body. The body she writes into her diaries is one in line with feminist discourses about writing the body. Coetzee allows her to problematize the relationship between language and the body and revel in the inescapability of the textualized body. The contradictions and rewritings of her diary entries testify to the fluid narrative strategies Cixous calls for. The fluid female body is strongly present in her narrative. She has thoughts about herself in terms of hermit crabs migrating among empty shells (43) and later about herself exploring “the pleasures of drowning, the feel of my body sliding out of me and another body sliding in, limbs inside my limbs, mouth inside my mouth” (53). She subverts patriarchal fixed definitions of the female body and identity by constructing a fluid, multiple, or contingent subjectivity rooted in the body. The body is a liberating force that while it can still identify with the experiences of oppression of raced and gendered bodies by being raped

and exploited, writing such experiences and dwelling on the abject materiality of the body are still a liberating feminine inscription of the body and an attempt to reclaim it. The migrating bodies she thinks of are transgressive of boundaries, at least mentally. She has thoughts about Hendrik forcing his body into hers and she existing as a fluid body. Just as she compares her body to a shell of a hermit crab that can be deserted for another shell, she imagines her fluid body leaving her to fit itself on the body of the colored maid:

if it has to be in this body then on different terms in this body, if there is no other body, though there is one I would far prefer, I cannot stop these words unless I cut my throat, I would like to climb into Klein-Anna's body, I would like to climb down her throat while she sleeps and spread myself gently inside her, my hands in her hands, my feet in her feet, my skull in the benign quiet of her skull where images of soap and flour and milk revolve, the holes of my body sliding into place over the holes of hers, there to wait mindlessly for whatever enters them, the song of birds, the smell of dung, the parts of a man, not angry now but gentle, rocking in my bloodwarmth, laving me with soapy seed, sleeping in my cave. (108-9)

Desperate for human contact, Magda identifies with Hendrik's wife and transgressively imagines their intertwined bodies waiting for Hendrik's loving sex. In her ramblings, she breaks codes on interracial sex between the white female Afrikaner and the colored servant. In "The Laugh of the Medusa," Cixous calls on women to write "through their bodies," to create "the impregnable language that will wreck partitions, classes, and rhetorics, regulations and codes" (886), and put themselves "into the text" (875). If sexual codes are not literally broken with Hendrik, Magda mentally breaks taboos. To write her story as a woman, Magda returns to the body as both a source of oppression and a

potential start for liberation. She ends up writing her body, but a fluid one marked by an open, receptive nature. As Irigaray argues in “When Our Lips Speak Together,” the female anatomy challenges masculine closure and invites openness, continuity, reciprocity, and richness of experience: “Between us, the movement from inside to outside, from outside to inside, knows no limits. It is without end” (73). Irigaray adds: “We know the contours of our bodies well enough to appreciate fluidity” (77). The female body is seen to constitute a base for capturing a feminine subjectivity and making women the subjects rather than the objects of discourse.

Cixous similarly calls for a brand of writing that is close to the female body in its boundless nature. Since a woman’s “libido is cosmic” and similarly “her unconscious is worldwide,” Cixous writes, “Her writing can only keep going, without ever inscribing or discerning contours, daring to make these vertiginous crossings of the other(s) ephemeral and passionate sojourns in him, her, them whom she inhabits long enough to look at from the point closest to their unconscious from the moment they awaken, to love them at the point closest to their drives” (“Laugh” 889). The fluid female body should find an equivalent in a feminine language that resists the fixations of phallogentric language. Irigaray, just like Cixous, calls on women to write their bodies. Cixous’s notion of “writing the body” calls for women to be the subject of discourse via the female body. In *écriture féminine*, Cixous finds a way for gendered women’s writing to avoid the binary oppositions of phallogentric discourses and unleash their unconscious. Magda does something similar in her focus on giving a narrative that breaks codes and transgresses bodily boundaries, even if imaginatively. The disturbingly elaborate, scatological language Magda uses to describe her and her father’s bodily functions concerns abject

matter and blurred bodily boundaries. Rejecting the compartmentalization of patriarchy and its exclusive logic, Magda recounts the dissolution of bodily boundaries. The feminine text for Cixous is not “predictable,” excessive, and thus “very disturbing” (“Castration” 53). Along the same lines, Magda writes:

Every sixth day, when our cycles coincide, his cycle of two days, my cycle of three, we are driven to the intimacy of relieving our bowels in the bucket-latrine behind the fig-trees in the malodour of the other’s fresh faeces, either he in my stench or I in his. Sliding aside the wooden lid I straddle his hellish gust, bloody, feral, the kind that flies love best, flecked, I am sure, with undigested flesh barely mulled over before pushed through. Whereas my own (and here I think of him with his trousers about his knees, screwing his nose as high as he can while the blowflies buzz furiously in the black space below him) is dark, olive with bile, hard-packed, kept in too long, old, tired. ... Where exactly the bucket is emptied I do not know; but somewhere on the farm there is a pit where, looped in each other’s coils, the father’s red snake and the daughter’s black embrace and sleep and dissolve. (32)

This language marks a breaking down of the boundaries of the self and a transgression of abjection in the form of intertwining male and female turds. Excremental filth threatens the boundaries of the body and the distinction between what is outside and inside it. It threatens the identity of the subject and its sense of a coherent self. The excessive bodily content in Magda’s language is disruptive of the oppressive hierarchies and power structures. Such a language she employs is unsettling because it is, as Cixous would argue, unpredictable in its openness to bodily functions. The excremental image Magda

gives is more than a naturalistic description and is, instead, a common “trope” in postcolonial fiction whereby the colonized are made unclean and excrement is used and operates counterdiscursively. Joshua Esty argues: “Beyond its more straightforward functions as a counterdiscursive trope, scatology also marks one of the central representational problems in postcolonial literature” (55). “In postcolonial writing,” Esty elaborates, “shit can redress a history of debasement by displaying the failures of development and the contradictions of colonial discourse and, moreover, by disrupting inherited associations of excrement with colonized and non-Western populations” (25-26). Esty sees in shit not only material detail but a discursive sign within postcolonial literature relating to discursive representation of natives as filthy. More importantly, excremental language is used by Magda to figure her colonial situation on her father’s farm, i.e. the failure of hierarchical power relations set by her father and her absolute rejection of an oppression she identifies with filth.<sup>86</sup> The father and daughter meet not at the intimate, equal level of filial and parental love/care but at the level of foul matter. This stunted and abortive language Magda uses signifies the failure of communication among the colonizers themselves and between the colonizer and the colonized.

Magda uses a postcolonial feminist trope to signal the break of boundaries between the patriarchal master and his subordinate other, at least at the imaginative level. She calls our attention via such strong scatological language to her speaking position as a resistant outsider to the hegemonic discourses that relegate her. The abject content of her diaries unsettles strict, oppressive boundaries; it is potentially a liberating bodily rhetoric

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<sup>86</sup> Coetzee in an exclusive interview with Attwell in 2003 similarly argues the relative failure of the European colonialism in Africa, a colonialism he sees himself as part of. See Works Cited. In Magda’s case, the excremental language she uses conveys an emotional response to a repelling colonial situation.

that draws attention to what should be “abjected.” Esty contends: “If, in the colonial era, shit often functioned as a sign of the actively denigrated native, it also comes to function in the decolonization era, as a sign of the actively repudiated ex-colonizer, the alien and unwanted residue of a sometimes violent political expulsion” (30). Magda, a woman who claims she got her knowledge of the world from dictionaries and who fashions herself after the highlights of Western intellectual theories, employs the excremental trope to figure her despicable situation and to question an easy bodily materiality existing away from the metaphorical. Her narrative respects no boundaries and dwells on what breaks norms. She admits that her father’s sleeping with Hendrik’s colored wife “breaks codes” (36), the taboo of miscegenation. The transgressed codes and boundaries contained within her narrative make it disturbing and politically significant. Magda defies silence and the imposed order of patriarchal or colonial systems of domination.

The unfolding drama of sexual oppression and jealousy takes a new turn when Magda returns to her victimization as a sexual object and Coetzee makes her use the conventional trope of black sexual potency/size vs. white impotence/smallness. The father’s sex, what she lacks and desires, is described as “smaller than I thought it would be, almost lost in a bush of black hair straggling up to the navel” (69). On the other hand, Hendrik’s member during a sex scene with his wife she (imagines she) watches is described as “grotesquely larger than it should be, unless I am mistaken” (77). Her father contributes to her spinsterhood by keeping her on his desolate farm just as colonial miscegenation taboos distance her from sexual relations with the black servants. However, her patriarchal father, in seeking sexual dominance in his farm, seduces and sexually exploits Klein-Anna, Hendrik’s wife. The interracial sex taboo that is broken

makes her describe/fantasize successive retaliatory rape scenes involving her and Hendrik whom she describes as sexually potent. No wonder, as Fanon argues in *Black Skin, White Masks*, for the black man “everything in fact takes place at the genital level” (135), and he has “a hallucinating sexual power” (136). The sexual anxieties and fantasies of Magda are exaggerated and imposed/projected on Hendrik. In other words, Magda constructs the black/colored body in the same way she constructs her own. She dwells on yet negates the validity of her claims in her contradictory, highly self-conscious writing style. The rape scene involving her and Hendrik is given in different graphic versions and apparently on different occasions that repeat elements of each other. In one of them, the act itself and its aftermath are described in more detail:

He heaves on and on, he groans against my ear, tears run down the back of my throat. Let it stop, let it stop! He begins to pant. He shudders lengthily and lies still on me. Then he draws out and away. Now I know for sure he was inside me, now that he is out and all the ache and clamminess sets in. I press my fingers into my groin while beside me he fastens his trousers. It is beginning to seep out of me, this acrid flow that must be his seed, down my thighs, on to my clothes, on to the floor. (105-106)

The humiliation Mrs. Curren encounters as an old, dying woman with a repulsive body is echoed by a sexual form of humiliation here. In each case, shame is viewed as a price for historical injustices. Magda says: “I cry, there is no end to the humiliation. I am soggy, it is revolting, it must be with his spit, he must have spat on me while he was there. I sob and sob” (107). Hendrik’s masculine position nullifies the color and class barriers

separating him from his white mistress.<sup>87</sup> While the different versions she gives for the rape scene(s) undermine their truth value as to what actually took place, the same versions can indicate that the event of rape has essentially taken place and that Magda's struggles are just with narrating the event and rendering the body in language. At least, the "event" is intensely imagined and related to because sexual oppression as a historical injustice is also constructed and mediated discursively. If sexual consummation with a black servant is just a fantasy, then it speaks for her neglect and desire to change her situation. Fanon argues: "when a woman lives the fantasy of rape by a black man, it is a kind of fulfillment of a personal dream or an intimate wish" (156) as the black male for a white woman is "at the intangible gate leading to the realm of mystic rites and orgies, bacchanals and hallucinating sexual sensations" (*Black* 154). As opposed to her oppressive father, Hendrik has the power to liberate her sexually and socially by accepting her into an intimate relationship that transcends class and color barriers. However, he does not do that because he is depicted as wanting to hurt and humiliate her rather than fulfill her.

Hendrik now assumes the master's (sexual) role, even dons his clothes (97), and beats her (104). On another occasion, Magda says: "I do not yet like the smell of his seed. Does a woman grow used to it, I wonder" (110). She is raw and bloody from sex with him. She complains about her body: "I am eating badly, growing even scrawnier, if that is possible. I suffer from rashes about the neck. I have no beauty to lure him on with" (111).

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<sup>87</sup> If Magda as a white woman is the carrier of white culture and "the heart of the country," as the novel's title might indicate, protected and preserved by the patriarchal white father, her rape is the emasculation of the white man whose assumed death implies her violation too. However, we have seen that Magda was for her father an absence rather than the warmth of a hearth. Her mistreatment by the servants should not come as a surprise.

The abject nature of her diaries is enriched by sexually interracial transgressions as Magda is cast in the same role of Hendrik's wife Anna-Klein and the master/servant power structures are overthrown: "Sometimes the fishy smell of her comes to my nostrils when he undresses. I am sure they make love every night" (112). This interracial sex can be motivated by what Fanon calls a desire "to be white" or "a thirst for revenge" (*Black* xvii). A revenge for inferiority complexes, historical injustices, and a colonization that robs the colonized of his manhood and exploits his woman can be a sexual revenge on the white colonizer. Fanon also writes: "Between these white breasts that my wandering hands fondle, white civilization and worthiness become mine" (45). Hendrik's sexual domination of Magda, even if hypothetical, is thus symbolic. It is a retaliatory act for the subjection and exploitation of the colonized woman by the colonizer, and Magda remains a double victim of patriarchy and a colonization she is complicit with.

Magda presents herself as the passive victim of forced rape: "Things are happening to me, things are being done to me, I feel them far away, terrible incisions, dull surgery" (105). Her description of her sexual humiliation continues the focus on the abject materiality of the oppressed body: "He turns me on my face and does it to me from behind like an animal. Everything dies in me when I have to raise my ugly rear to him. I am humiliated; sometimes I think it is my humiliation he wants" (112). For McDonald, citing Coetzee's view on the ban on representing certain topics, interracial rape and sex is but a 'pathological' response on Coetzee's part to "governmental anxieties about representations of interracial intimacy" (*Literature* 308). The pathological relations governing the colonizer and the colonized are enacted on Magda's hysterical body, just as they are enacted on Mrs. Curren's cancerous body. Magda asserts the Freudian dictum

“anatomy is destiny” and reiterates her feelings of emptiness and “desire to be filled, to be fulfilled” (114). She speaks of Hendrik’s “angry corrosive seed” (117) driven in hatred. He does not talk to her, she complains, and wants to degrade her: “He has the means but not the words, I the words but not the means; for there is nowhere, I fear, where my words will not reach” (117). Indeed, her words reach us, and she writes her oppressed body into subversive language even if the rape scenes she describes are imagined or “words” only. Cixous urges women to write their bodies to counter inhibiting discourses and regain attachment to their subjugated sexualities: “Write your self. Your body must be heard” (“Laugh” 880). A woman’s sexuality is diverse and her writing/imagination “can only keep going, without ever inscribing or discerning contours” (“Laugh” 889). Therefore, a flowing feminine text, like Magda’s, is bound to be subversive by its nature (“Laugh” 888).

While we have established that shit figures Magda’s situation as a subjugated other and her rejection of such a status, we should note that the excremental imagery Magda uses and her references to blood, gore, semen, and corpses fall under the abject/semiotic content of her account, and thus conform to the blurring of boundaries she dwells on as an empowering rhetoric. The abject body as other is grotesque and marginalized. It causes disgust, and its filth threatens the unity and clear boundaries of the self. For Julia Kristeva, the semiotic realm is that of bodily drives connected to the mother as opposed to the realm of signification (*Portable* 37). Although Kristeva argues that the subject is “always *both* semiotic *and* symbolic, no signifying system he produces can be either ‘exclusively’ semiotic or ‘exclusively’ symbolic” (emphasis original; *Portable* 34), a patriarchal culture tends to suppress the semiotic; and it is for this reason

that we find a strong presence for the semiotic and the abject in Magda's counter discourse. In *Powers of Horror*, Kristeva contends that the abject exists at the borders of the proper body/self. The abject is what is excluded from the symbolic order of social subjectivity, what is suppressed by the subject because of its materiality as unclean and disgusting. Abjection is encountering and excluding what threatens one's bodily borders and identity; it is the experience when the subject is forced to encounter the abject and feels repulsion. Magda dwells on what the ordered discourse of patriarchy would avoid/exclude. Kristeva argues that the abject is "radically excluded" and draws us "toward the place where meaning collapses" (2); and it "does not cease challenging its master" (2). The abject, like the bodily matter Magda writes about, functions at the borders of the body: "Loathing an item of food, a piece of filth, waste, or dung. The spasms and vomiting that protect me" (2). Kristeva writes: "These bodily fluids, this defilement, this shit are what life withstands, hardly and with difficulty, on the part of death. There, I am at the border of my condition as a living being. My body extricates itself, as being a live, from that border" (3). The corpse for Kristeva is a paramount example of this abject as a threat to the subject, "the most sickening of wastes" (3) and "the utmost of abjection. It is death infecting life" (4). The abject Kristeva elaborates is what threatens the dominant; "It is thus not lack of cleanliness or health that causes abjection but what disturbs identity, system, order. What does not respect borders, positions, rules. The in-between, the ambiguous, the composite" (4). It is a state of (non)being between subject and object, before separation from the maternal body or after death. In constructing Magda's body and the bodies she describes, Coetzee draws on a poststructuralist, feminist bodily discourse revolving around Kristeva's abject and

feminist ideas of blurred bodily boundaries to offer a disruptive materiality functioning at the level of the repressed semiotic.

By the end, Magda's father reappears and different versions are given of the reappearance. When the father (who is killed) appears to have simply disappeared (121) and people search for him, the farm further deteriorates and Hendrik and his wife, in a reversal of the colonial situation, begin to appropriate the sheep in return for unpaid wages. The workers ultimately flee the farm and leave Magda alone.<sup>88</sup> She reflects on our implication in language, on language appropriating and mediating the real, and the most real in that, the material body. She elaborates her secluded status and her condition of loneliness in existential terms: "We are the castaways of God as we are the castaways of history" (135). The father reappears, apparently now silent and unable to take care of himself, and Magda feeds him and reminisces with him about their former life (136-7). The desolate colony she inhabits is a fitting setting for the breakdown of moral and sexual codes, for bodily transgressions: "Have I ever explained or even understood what I have been doing here in a district outside the law, where the bar against incest is often down, where we pass our days in savage torpor...? What have I been doing on this barbarous frontier?" (138).<sup>89</sup> The materiality with which she describes her (imagined) rape by the colored servant and her life under her authoritative father attests to a history

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<sup>88</sup> Magda's willing attempts to communicate with the servants on a human level of equality and away from the master-slave dialectic suggestively fail because, as Coetzee point out in an interview with Folke Rhedin, "a mere effort of the will is not enough to overcome centuries of cultural and spiritual deformation" (7). In this sense, Magda is being punished for historical injustices she did not necessarily ask for or initiate but where committed by members of her race. Similarly, Mrs. Curren in *AI* did not ask for the racial policies of apartheid, but they were committed in her name as a member of the white race.

<sup>89</sup> As he was writing the novel, Coetzee was aware that it ran the risk of being banned in South Africa by the censors due to its obscenity/pornographic content and depiction of sex across the color line against the Immorality Act and the Mixed Marriages Act. See Hermann Wittenberg, p. 135. The "barbarous frontier" Magda refers to can be taken as an early allusion to Coetzee's next novel, *Waiting for the Barbarians* which is set in an imperial frontier surrounded by barbarian nomads.

of oppression and exploitation of the female body seen through the construction of such history. In speaking as a deranged spinster, Magda is speaking in a voice expected from an oppressed woman. The French feminists never exclude all male texts from having the subversive attributes of writing the body, and through Magda Coetzee manages to write a semiotic feminist text that writes the body and goes beyond gender boundaries or biological determinism. Magda is cast in the domain of the body, yet it is this very body that promises her a liberating power. Her illness is inscribed on her body in that hysterics in Freudian theory embody their thoughts by converting them to their bodies. Magda's outsider status as a woman oppressed by patriarchy and colonization and complicit in the oppression of others makes her vent the material oppression of the body as it pathologically exists in her mind, figures her situation, and gets constructed in language. The body preoccupies the mind and the mind figures the body's plight.

#### IV. Coda: Feminine Bodies/Texts

Mrs. Curren and Magda write from a feminine position of otherness accounts that foreground the interplay between bodies and texts. Via them, Coetzee underscores feminist and postcolonial themes on systems of domination. The subversive content of their narratives lies in the excessive materiality as attempts at drawing attention to physical suffering, one problematized with relation to language and marked by the narrators' sense of the constructedness of their narratives and the problematic relation between language and historical realism. This subversive feminism is based on the body's potential for disrupting established terms of reference about otherness. Parry writes: "although the various figures of silence in Coetzee's fiction are the dominated, and, hence, intimate disarticulation as an act of discursive power, they are not only

‘victims’ but also ‘victors’ accredited with extraordinary and transgressive psychic energies” (156). Mrs. Curren and Magda are involved in writing history or showing its effects, one in a letter about the crumbling apartheid and her own deteriorating cancerous body and another in diary entries about histories of colonial and sexual oppression. The female body is made the reference point for language and discourse, for rethinking the body in history. The materiality of the oppressed body is subjected to more self-conscious distancing in *HC*. Coetzee’s political relevance can be redeemed by looking at the extent to which the body is material and by thinking of the body’s necessary mediation in language in terms of a postmodern understanding of history as a textual product. Nashef argues: “In spite of her attempts at freedom and salvation through language, the Coetzeean female is mostly unsuccessful” (87). While this sounds true within the novels themselves, the disturbing impact of the novels’ bodily matters on the reader is not insignificant. The postmodern and the postcolonial are intertwined with feminist thrusts not to undermine our belief in the real but to show its problematization as a representation. Problematized representation of a historical materiality of the body is the core of Coetzee’s way of “rivaling” history by making it exist within the discourse of the novel.

**Chapter Three: Leaky Bodies: *Waiting for the Barbarians* and *Life and Times of Michael K***

I. Introduction: “Leaky” Bodies and the Problematic of Postmodern Representation

Against the inherent failure of the modernist model in which each form is bounded and self-complete, the postmodernist claim is that all corporeality is inherently leaky, uncontained, and uncontainable.

Margrit Shildrick, “Beyond the Body of Bioethics”

I have argued in Chapter Two that Coetzee problematizes the subversive materiality of the body with relation to cultural/political inscription and the body’s creation in language. The material bodies depicted in *AI* and *HC* do not escape the representational maneuvers and conscious construction of the female narrators. In this chapter, I pursue nuances of the same theme and argue that Coetzee represents in *Waiting for the Barbarians* and *Life and Times of Michael K*<sup>90</sup> postmodern “leaky” bodies<sup>91</sup> that are simultaneously material and discursive, literal and figural, and individual and institutional. The political thrust of his writing, I argue, stems from its dwelling on the postmodern problematic of the representation of reality. Coetzee deals with this problematic by representing materially suffering bodies which are complicated with relation to language and discourse, which counters the realist grounds on which his apartheid works have been attacked for lack of direct engagement with material oppression. The preoccupation with writing the body we witnessed in Chapter Two

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<sup>90</sup> Hereafter abbreviated as *WB* and *LTMK* respectively.

<sup>91</sup> The broader idea of the postmodern “leaky” body covers an interest in the blurring of bodily boundaries between humans and machines, as in cyborg bodies, or between humans and animals. In this chapter, the term “leaky” is implied whenever I discuss the overlap between material and constructed bodies.

continues here, along with what it feels like to inhabit a body. However, *WB* and *LTMK* offer extreme versions of bodily representation and resistance to such representation.<sup>92</sup> While the material body is resigned to language in *AI* and *HC*, it calls on construction in *WB* and *LTMK* and yet resists it. Conforming to the postmodernist assumption that the real is mediated by language and that reality is essentially a linguistic construct, the “leaky” body ambivalently hovers between the excessively material and the discursively constructed. The body is subjected to the discursive power of disciplinary institutions and coercive structures of representation; it is pitted against the polity. However, it asserts itself despite attempts to contain its materiality by social and political discourses. While the Empire in *WB* and the future South African state in *LTMK* use disciplinary tactics over the body and function through the nexus of power/knowledge by treating the other body as an inscriptive surface to be controlled by hegemonic discourses and myths, the body has a materiality beyond what cannot necessarily escape rendition in discourse.

Coetzee, I argue, is aware that the materially resistant body is also a cultural and historical site inseparable from the discourses that shape it. This “leaky” confluence is characteristically postmodern because of its ambivalent, destabilizing, and inclusive logic. Pain, suffering, and physical deformity are real, but they can also be symptoms and manifestations of historical injustice that we can discursively and allegorically relate to. Indeed, the body is manipulated and constructed by power relations in the very act of insisting on its materiality as a suffering body. Tortured or incarcerated, it is discursively constructed, but such events fail to erase its tenacious materiality. Although the body remains inaccessible for those who try to decode it and assimilate it into their cognitive

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<sup>92</sup> This is why this chapter occupies a pivotal place in this dissertation and is its most elaborate one.

systems,<sup>93</sup> it is continually invested in power dynamics and textualization. As Foucault famously writes, the body is directly impacted by political power relations; “they invest it, mark it, train it, torture it, force it to carry out tasks, to perform ceremonies, to emit signs” (*Discipline* 25). It never escapes attempts at codification and categorization. The broken, disabled bodies of the barbarian girl in *WB* and K in *LTMK* testify to the existence of the oppressed body as an undeniable end. It is, however, difficult to think of a pure body prior to inscription and signification or beyond representational attempts. We end up constructing or trying to come to terms with a stubborn materiality of the body. Even if the interpretive attempts fail to capture the essence of the material body, the body as such has no existence or relevance without attempts to fathom/contain its materiality. The tortured body exists as a body for the person in pain. In its collective, institutional nature it is a constructed one. It is also a trope for the political realities it is implicated in. Since both novels dramatize the failure of attempts at constructing the body despite the body’s relentless investment in what Foucault calls “relations of power and domination” (*Discipline* 26), the body, paradoxically, emerges for readers only symptomatically and allegorically as a resistant materiality. The other body is treated by the polity as an effect of power, as a “docile” body that Foucault defines as what “may be subjected, used, transformed, and improved” (*Discipline* 136). However, the body eludes the discursive power and asserts a materiality beyond yet entangled with discursive construction.

Coetzee grapples with the dilemma of embodiment and the overlap between the body and its mediation in discourse, which paradoxically draws our attention to a

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<sup>93</sup> The postmodern and the postcolonial are conflated here. As During argues, each thought is characterized by an occupation with “otherness,” by a refusal to “turn the Other into the Same” (“Postmodernism” 33).

resistant materiality bound with and created in language. He allows us to read the body's materiality as a trope for the marginalized body. The result is that the obdurate materiality of the disfigured body at the literal level is intertwined with political body rhetoric at the figurative level. Coetzee's narrators wonder how to represent atrocities in words and cannot speak of the body without the mediation of language. The body is also a surface for the inscription of historical events and a metaphor for power relations. This "leaky" body is at once singular and metaphorical, a reality and a fabrication, and a biological given and a regulatory field, but it is never an immaterial construct.

As Bryan Turner points out by way of foregrounding the tension between material and constructed bodies, attempts at culturally representing the body "are historical, but there is also an experience of embodiment that can only be understood by grasping the body as a lived experience. Constructionism does not allow us to analyse the phenomenology of the everyday world, including the body, but by insisting on the textuality of phenomena it does not provide a vocabulary for studying human performance or human experience" (12). Coetzee is not a postmodernist who simply negates the material body in service of a cultural one or who negates the materiality of the body in favor of a discursive one. Rather, he shows their conflictual relation. He does not privilege, like constructionists, meanings/images over the material body. The body is subjected to power relations, produced in discourses, yet its materiality is beyond question. It arouses our hermeneutic interest and we construct it with meanings, yet it has an ontological being in itself. Some postmodern theorists like Arthur Kroker and Marilouise Kroker go to an extreme and argue that the material body is no longer present. They ask, "Why the concern over the body today if not to emphasize the fact that the

(natural) body in the postmodern condition has *already* disappeared, and what we experience as the body is only a fantastic simulacra of body rhetorics?" (emphasis original; qtd. in Gremillion 383). By contrast, Coetzee, I argue, offers a critique and a revision of this postmodern position by showing that the real exists and the material body suffers, but this materiality is entangled with the operations of representational discourse. The result is a politicized version of postmodern representation that refutes the immateriality and incorporeality of postmodern discourse.

## II. *Waiting for the Barbarians*: The Body vs. the Empire

Exploitation, tortures, raids, racism, collective liquidations, rational oppression take turns at different levels in order literally to make of the native an object in the hands of the occupying nation.

Frantz Fanon, *Toward the African Revolution*

In *WB*, Coetzee interrogates the relationship between the material body and the power inscribed on it by an anonymous Empire since it is made inseparable from the body politic and discursive power structures. A typical criticism against the novel asserts that it is not dealing with identifiable political realities of apartheid but rather that it is, in the words of Bernard Levin, "timeless, spaceless, nameless and universal" (qtd. in Barnett 291).<sup>94</sup> However, in this novel with an unspecified setting, barbarian bodies are

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<sup>94</sup> Gordimer's famous review of *LTMK* "The Idea of Gardening" extends its criticism to Coetzee's earlier fiction like *WB* on grounds of its allegorical nature and weak reaction to the daily, tragic events of life in South Africa and Coetzee's projection of the surrounding "horror" into a dislocated time and place (see my Introduction, esp. pp. 15-16). Other critics argued against the novel's generalized atmosphere. For example, Abdul JanMohamed criticizes the novel as a dehistoricized allegory that rejects political responsibility with its unspecified Empire, thus mystifying colonial relations and treating them in "metaphysical" terms (73). JanMohamed contends, "Although the novel is obviously generated by white South Africa's racial paranoia and the guilt of its liberals, [*WB*]...refuses to acknowledge its historical sources or to make any allusions to the specific barbarism of the apartheid regime. The novel thus implies that we are all somehow equally guilty and that fascism is endemic to all societies" (73). Richard Martin

pitted against the Empire. They are punished as material bodies and yet discursively constructed as other bodies. Even the narrator, an imperial magistrate and the Empire's reluctant employee, is treated in a similar way. In line with the ontological concern of the postmodernist novel, I argue that Coetzee interrogates the nature of bodily being. Hence, my goal in reading *WB* is not to focus on torture and the ethical responsibility of the writer on how to deal with torture within a specific South African context.<sup>95</sup> I focus more on bodies and texts, on the body as a lived reality and its construction by an oppressive state. I focus on the problematized representation of the body to show that the political and historical relevance of *WB*, as I will also argue in the next section on *LTMK*, stems from its attempts to engage the real despite Coetzee awareness of its necessary mediation.

i. Manichean Dualisms and the Barbarian Body

In C. P. Cavafy's poem, "Waiting for the Barbarians," the town anxiously waits for the arrival of the barbarians who, in not coming, unsettle the self-justifying colonial and imperial myths. The ending of the poem is particularly indicative: "Now what's going to happen to us without barbarians? / Those people were a kind of solution." In one article echoing Cavafy's poem about colonialist binary myths, JanMohamed discusses colonialist discourse in terms of what he sees as "its central trope, the manichean

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acknowledges the novel's dislocation of the real and concedes that *WB* "is, if at all, only indirectly 'about' the political and social struggles of South Africa" (4). Martin elaborates, "What is being explored is not history in any particular phase, not history in the specificity of its ever-shifting complexity, but History in general, in the abstract, the ideal essence of history rather than the diffuse material practices and structures which constitute real history" (5). Irving Howe laments the loss of "urgency that a specified historical place and time may provide" (qtd. in Gallagher; *A Story* 125). What most of these critics ignore is that Coetzee, a writer in favor of the discourse of the novel as I argued in my Introduction, rejects the easy didacticism of propaganda literature that makes it a tool for historical discourses and may well result in its banning by state censorship within a system like apartheid.

<sup>95</sup> Other critics have already done this in studying this novel. See, for example, Gallagher and Wenzel. Gallagher, for instance, reads *WB* within the specific context of torture employed by the South African Security Police against political detainees and makes numerous references to Steven Biko's death in detention. See in particular pp. 112-135.

allegory” (61). This trope is based on an economy of allegorically transforming “racial difference into moral and even metaphysical difference” (61). Such differences, JanMohamed argues, are given allegorical meanings in terms of oppositions, those of “the putative superiority of the European and the supposed inferiority of the native” (63). Hence, the Manichean allegory is defined in dichotomous logic as “a field of diverse, yet interchangeable oppositions between white and black, good and evil, superiority and inferiority, civilization and savagery, intelligence and emotion, rationality and sensuality, self and Other” (63). *WB* for JanMohamed is an allegory showing “the function of Manichean polarity within the empire” (73), projecting “its own barbarism onto the Other beyond its borders” (73), and representing the relationship between “self and Other in metaphysical terms” (73). Drawing on this Manichean logic, the anonymous Empire in *WB* creates and constructs the barbarian body as its other in reproduced myths and discourses. This self-justifying act is what helps it maintain its separate identity.

Coetzee examines the production of colonial discourses and the colonial representation of the native as a dirty savage, often used as a solution to justify colonial subjugation, as in travelers’ accounts of visits to the African hinterland, anthropological records, and other historiographical documents. Coetzee highlights the discursive thrust of textuality in (post)colonial worlds. “Texts constructed those worlds, ‘reading’ their alterity assimilatively in terms of their own cognitive codes. Explorers’ journals, drama, fiction, historical accounts, ‘mapping’ enabled conquest and colonization and the capture and/or vilification of alterity” (Tiffin; “Post-Colonial Literatures” 22). In *WB*, the barbarian bodies are depicted in stereotypical terms congruent with colonial discourses and racist projections. The tortured barbarian girl left behind, half-blind and with broken

ankles, has the stereotypical features of “black hair,” “broad mouth,” and “black eyes” (25). The trip on a desolate terrain to send her back to her people ends when she and the narrating magistrate cross the borders of the Empire and meet “men mounted on shaggy ponies, twelve and more, dressed in sheepskin coats and caps, brown-faced, weather-beaten, narrow-eyed, the barbarians in the flesh on native soil. I am close enough to smell them where I stand: horse-sweat, smoke, half-cured leather” (69). The barbarian bodies as civilization’s other are clothed “in wool and the hides of animals and nourished from infancy on meat and milk, foreign to the suave touch of cotton, the virtues of the placid grains and fruits” (71).<sup>96</sup> The magistrate leaves the girl with her people and remembers her as “stocky girl with a broad mouth and hair cut in a fringe across her forehead” (71). The fisherfolk who surround the frontier settlement are described in negative physical terms: “They are bony, pigeon-chested people. Their women seem always to be pregnant; their children are stunted; in a few of the young girls there are traces of a fragile, liquid-eyed beauty; for the rest I see only ignorance, cunning, slovenliness” (122). Memmi argues that in the colonized everything “is deficient, and everything contributes to this deficiency—even his body, which is poorly fed, puny and sick. Many lengthy discussions would be saved if, in the beginning, it was agreed that there is this wretchedness—collective, permanent, immense. Simple and plain biological wretchedness, chronic hunger of an entire people, malnutrition and illness” (117). Fanon hints at the physical and psychic “wretchedness” of the colonized in his very title *The Wretched of the Earth*.

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<sup>96</sup> The magistrate’s view on the poverty of the barbarian nomads and their limited resources conforms to what Marshall Sahlins calls in *Stone Age Economics* “the fair average anthropological opinion of hunting and gathering” economies including the view of a mere “subsistence economy” (2). Interestingly, however, Sahlins argues in this book that non-capitalist natives constitute the first “affluent” societies in terms of the distribution of free time rather than that of commodities. The exaggerations and misconceptions involved in viewing the natives that can take more extreme forms, especially when they come from travelers and explorers, will recur in my treatment of Coetzee’s *Dusklands* in the next chapter.

The body's materiality cannot be denied, yet it has to be represented and created in discourse, including racist and stereotypical myths. The physical traits attributed to or imposed on the natives are, however, less serious than the materiality of pain and suffering and thus more immersed/distanced in the discursive construction of the body.

The novel treats the term "barbarian" as "an effect of imperial discourse" (Poyner; *Paradox* 53). The barbarians are represented as unsettling the rules of discipline followed by the Empire. The magistrate, like Jacobus Coetzee in *Dusklands* and his disgust for the native Hottentots, is annoyed by their lack of cleanliness, sexual mores, and eating habits. In a way reminiscent of the discourse of the Cape, native ways are described in terms of sloth, excess, and defilement. The barbarian prisoners defecate in public, eat voraciously and with dirty hands, and refuse to give up dead bodies. Their native bodies are unsanitary and beyond easy control. Their bodies are linked to filth and disorder, and thus are abject bodies in their excremental and excessive functions. The magistrate orders the place where they were kept to be cleaned with soap and water. Their bodies challenge the firm and completed boundaries of the colonizing bodies. The asserted physicality of these "other" bodies contrasts with mind/intellect of the magistrate and the Empire he represents. Such bodies are rooted in materiality and resist the Empire's manipulation. They are paradoxically familiar bodies in colonial discourses. Days after his departure to capture barbarian prisoners, Colonel Joll sends not armed nomads but a dozen of "dusty, exhausted" prisoners (16). The magistrate objects they are helpless aboriginal "fishing people" rather than "thieves, bandits, invaders" (17), but the men have orders from Joll to hold the prisoners until he comes from the desert (17). The magistrate, in an act of ethical responsibility for the other, has his men offer them bread that they eat ritually: "The old

man accepts the bread reverentially in both hands, sniffs it, breaks it, passes the lumps around. They stuff their mouths with this manna, chewing fast, not raising their eyes. A woman spits masticated bread into her palm and feeds her baby. I motion for more bread. We stand watching them as though they are strange animals” (18). The dehumanization of the colonized that is part of this Manichean, divided colonial order is clear in Fanon’s assertion that the colonized “is reduced to the state of an animal. And consequently, when the colonist speaks of the colonized he uses zoological terms” (*Wretched* 7). Herded into the barracks yard and publicly displayed as a primitive spectacle, the prisoners are treated like animals or even assume this animal status forced on them.

The magistrate calls the prisoners “savages” as they enjoy the ease of life on the frontier and the free food, “doze and wake” in the shade, and grow “excited as mealtimes approach” (18). This realistic representation of the other’s body as uncivilized is fused with the constitution of such “slothful” bodies in colonial discourses and is more than an objective reality the magistrate describes, “Their habits are frank and filthy. One corner of the yard has become a latrine where men and women squat openly and where a cloud of flies buzzes all day” (18). They do not use the spade he offers them (18), which highlights the magistrate’s impression about their shamelessness and idleness. The magistrate closely observes their “dirty” habits and diseased bodies: “I watch the women picking lice, combing and plaiting each other’s long black hair. Some of them have fits of harsh dry coughing” (18). They become “a diversion, with their strange gabbling, their vast appetites, their animal shamelessness, their volatile tempers” (19).<sup>97</sup> They embody

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<sup>97</sup> The nomadic, fishing people described in *WB* have affinities with the nomads who populate a weakening Empire in Kafka’s short piece “An Old Manuscript.” In fact, Kafka goes further in detailing the animalistic savagery of the invading nomads. The people in Kafka’s story are troubled by the mess the

the irrational other par excellence. Initially excitedly, people watch and make comments about the barbarian prisoners. However, things change afterwards,

Then, all together, we lose sympathy with them. The filth, the smell, the noise of their quarrelling and coughing became too much. There is an ugly incident when a soldier tries to drag one of their women indoors, perhaps only in play, who knows, and is pelted with stones. A rumor begins to go the rounds that they are diseased, that they will bring an epidemic to the town. Though I make them dig a pit in the corner of the yard and have the nightsoil removed, the kitchen staff refuse them utensils and begin to toss them their food from the doorway as if they were indeed animals. (19)

The apparent “filth” of the soldier’s attempted rape is mentioned briefly within a context that highlights more the filth of the barbarians. The description of the other as a pathological body is compatible with colonial discourses denigrating the native as lacking in civilized habits, as civilization’s other. Hence, the described materiality of the other body is also discursive. Fanon argues that the “colonial world is a Manichaeian world” (*Wretched* 6) in that the native is made to represent “not only the absence of values” but also their “negation” (*Wretched* 6). Boehmer writes that colonial representation of the

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nomads create in the square located near the Emperor’s palace and are unable to drive them out. The narrator, a cobbler, describes how these northern nomads arrive at the capital’s center and foul it: “This peaceful square, which was always kept so scrupulously clean, they have made literally into a stable. We do try every now and then to run out of our shops and clear away at least the worst of the filth, but this happens less and less often, for the labor is in vain...” (145-46). While the nomads in Kafka’s story are soldiers with horses, swords, and arrows, they, like Coetzee’s nomads, gabble and it is impossible to understand them (146). The narrator articulates their otherness: “Our way of living and our institutions they neither understand nor care to understand” (146). The climax of the story is a Dionysian spectacle, a description of how, in their voracious appetites for meat, they and their horses alike, devour a live ox the butcher brings and then when satiated, “they were lying overcome round the remains of the carcass like drunkards round a wine cask” (147). The fictional and thematic parallels with Kafka’s text indicate, if not only an intertextual debt to Kafka the writer whose work Coetzee knows well, the creative and imaginative role of fiction in the discursive construction of the other body.

other body casts it “as corporeal, carnal, untamed, instinctual, raw, and therefore also open to mastery, available for use, for husbandry, for numbering, branding, cataloguing, description or possession. . . . The body of the Other can represent only its own physicality, its own strangeness” (“Transfiguring” 269-70). This shows the body’s implication in representational discourses and the difficulty of capturing the unmediated real. Colonial discourses on pathology make the native diseased. The native body, going against the Empire’s attempts at order and cleanliness, becomes an abject body challenging boundaries and threatening to contaminate the Empire’s constructed racial barriers. A child cries and coughs and is later found “under its mother’s clothes” who refuses to give it up for burial and is then shunned by her people when the child is taken (19). The nomads who come to trade their leather, wool, and skin for food get cheated. It is racism and stereotypes that establish their bodily being as the Manichean other. The magistrate complains about seeing the native nomads “fall victim to the guile of shopkeepers, exchanging their goods for trinkets, lying drunk in the gutter, and confirming thereby the settlers’ litany of prejudice: that barbarians are lazy, immoral, filthy, stupid. Where civilization entailed the corruption of barbarian virtues and the creation of a dependent people, I decided, I was opposed to civilization” (37-38). The stereotypes that the magistrate opposes are necessary for the construction of the Empire’s identity against that of the barbarian.

The transgressive function of the “excremental trope” examined in Esty’s “Excremental Postcolonialism,” in line with *WB*, shows how other bodies are read as a threat to health and the restraint of civilization. The magistrate insists on having the prisoners held in a room next to the granary cleaned before interrogation by Joll. Two

prisoners “lie bound on the floor. The smell comes from them, a smell of old urine. I call the guard in: ‘Get these men to clean themselves, and please hurry’” (2). The boy and the old man picked after a stock-raid are tortured. Their bodies are already read by the Empire as foreign bodies through skin and hair color, language, eye shape, and body size, and smell only adds to the list. Although the body is the site for the inscription of a cultural identity on the other, the materiality of the colonized body challenges its construction as a text and gives it some political import. The magistrate exposes the Empire’s presumed cleanliness as a petty, constructed distinction from the filth it imposes on the other body, and he becomes obsessed with understanding the mentality of the “filthy” torturers and their abnormal lifestyle and feelings through his exposure to Joll. He finds himself “wondering too whether he has a private ritual of purification, carried out behind closed doors, to enable him to return and break bread with other men. Does he wash his hands very carefully, perhaps, or change all his clothes; or has the Bureau created new men who can pass without disquiet between the unclean and the clean?” (12). Similarly, the magistrate confronts Officer Mandel and asks about how he purifies himself and breaks bread with people after his filthy torture. He is befuddled by the mentality of the torturer and how a torturer like Joll validates his life: “I am only trying to understand the zone in which you live. I am trying to imagine how you breathe and eat and live from day to day. But I cannot!” (124). The magistrate cannot fathom the torturer. He struggles to relate in words the world of the torturer just as he struggles to find the words to describe the pain of the tortured other.<sup>98</sup> He not only notes his difference from

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<sup>98</sup> For Eleni Coundouriotis, “How to represent victimization is the key aesthetic, moral, and political problem of apartheid era literature” (843). Coetzee shows the difficulty of representing victimization not only by confronting the magistrate with the inarticulate victim of the torture chamber but also by extending the same difficulty to the representation of the torturer. The magistrate can come to terms

the Empire's policies but also shifts the binary of the clean/unclean and applies it to the Empire's men as the filthy torturers. He deconstructs an already constructed distinction.

The magistrate is aware that it is the Empire that creates prejudiced cultural stereotypes about the barbarians and constructs their bodies in the role of the other. What he refers to as being lost in "slothful native ways" (49) with reference to how a young officer from the Empire imagines the magistrate to be living on this frontier confirms the cultural associations ascribed to the native body. The magistrate asks this young officer, "How do you eradicate contempt, especially when that contempt is founded on nothing more substantial than differences in table manners, variations in the structure of the eyelid?" (50). The magistrate vents his frustration for the way the barbarians are made the Empire's cultural other and the way they are denigrated and cheated in their dealings with the settlers, but he thinks, "Do I really look forward to the triumph of the barbarian way: intellectual torpor, slovenliness, tolerance of disease and death? If we were to disappear would the barbarians spend their afternoons excavating our ruins? Would they preserve our census rolls and our grain-merchants' ledgers in glass cases, or devote themselves to deciphering the script of our love letters?" (51). He is part of the system that perpetuates differences and benefits from racism. Despite his resentment toward the Empire's policies, he is complicit in its Manichean ideologies, including, as we get from the above quote, the binary distinction between a lettered Empire and illiterate barbarians. While a singular body like that of the barbarian girl suffers and exists as a material body for the magistrate, he constructs the collective barbarian body in terms of racist associations, and thus creates this same body in discourse and pits it against the "civilized" Empire.

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with neither the victim nor the victimizer. This comes close to the scene in which Mrs. Curren in *AI* is incapable of speaking of the atrocities of apartheid in terms of perpetrator and victimized. See p. 117.

Memmi elaborates the racist image the colonizer promotes regarding the colonized to justify its status and how such an image “becomes a myth precisely because it suits them too well” (79). He further says, “Nothing could better justify the colonizer’s privileged position than his industry, and nothing could better justify the colonized’s destitution than his indolence. The mythical portrait of the colonized therefore includes an unbelievable laziness and that of the colonizer, a virtuous taste for action” (79). The negative representation of the other body is a Manichean myth that perpetuates its inferiority.

Joll returns with a group of prisoners, more fisherfolk, and the magistrate sees them from his apartment in the yard below “roped together neck to neck, shapeless figures in their sheepskin coats” (20). The natives are treated like animals by the Empire that negatively constructs their bodies. The magistrate tries not to pay attention to the new prisoners in the yard. He sits “with the windows shut, in the stifling warmth of a windless evening, trying to read, straining my ears to hear or not to hear sounds of violence” (21). He consciously misses the bodily event of torture and sees its effects. The material body becomes estranged in its own suffering, which cannot but be mediated for the magistrate as the traces of what already took place. He ends up constructing a story from these broken bodies after the event of torture. Upon Joll’s departure, he visits the prisoners in the barracks, his senses “revolting at the sickly smell of sweat and ordure” (23). He wants the room cleaned; he shouts, “I want everything cleaned up! Soap and water! I want everything as it was before!” (23). What comes to his mind, yet, is a prejudiced thought that momentarily/mentally links him with the torturer (Penner 84),

It would be best if this obscure chapter in the history of the world were terminated at once, if these *ugly* people were *obliterated* from the face of the earth and we

swore to make a new start, to run an empire in which there would be no more injustice, no more pain. It would cost little to march them out into the desert (having put a meal in them first, perhaps, to make the march possible), to have them dig, with their last strength, a pit large enough for all of them to lie in (or even to dig it for them!), and, leaving them *buried* there forever and forever, to come back to the walled town full of new intentions, new resolutions. (my emphasis; 24)

The magistrate is confronted with wretched bodies that have endured much pain. His thoughts of a massive grave for these bodies indicate the contradictions inherent in his liberal humanist position, the undeniable materiality of the other body that cannot be easily erased, and torture as an event that marks the tortured body. In their dogged silence, the tortured bodies are nothing but bodies, but since the magistrate cannot represent their suffering or get an accurate account of what happened inside the torture chamber, he thinks about deleting the event of torture from the history of the Empire via a massive collective grave that contains the victims of imperial history.

Colonial textual production aids in colonizing the other as knowing is the first step in domesticating the other. A discursive textual enterprise in the form of traveler's accounts, imaginative literature, translations, historical documents, among many others, aid the colonial enterprise. Edward Said's *Orientalism* argues that the native body is exoticized, sexualized, and misrepresented as the inferior other, as a body opposed to the mind, as a body that has to be known to be dominated. The dichotomy of Occident vs. its imagined Orient Said examines is similar to that of Empire vs. barbarian. Just as the Empire objectifies the other body, the magistrate wants to know this body and its history

to appropriate it and render it in his language. The cultural other is constructed as a contrasting idea and employed in the self-definition of the self even at the extent of the body. Said, drawing on Foucault, makes it clear that the Orient has been created by the West and that Orientalism is a discourse, a certain pattern of thought consisting of images, stereotypes, and representations with its own “supporting institutions, vocabulary, scholarship, imagery, doctrines, even colonial bureaucracies and colonial styles” (72). Orientalism for Said is a discursive field of institutionalized/specialized knowledge covering what is written about the Orient, “the corporate institution for dealing with the Orient—dealing with it by making statements about it, authorizing views of it, describing it, by teaching it, settling it, ruling over it: in short, Orientalism as a Western style for dominating, restructuring, and having authority over the Orient” (73). The other is produced in discourses and a body of literature that gains credence from the power wielded over the Orient in the form of scholarly or imaginative writings. Orientalism, Said argues, “is after all a system for citing works and authors” (89). While Said’s assertions are not meant to deny a historical materiality of the body, they just complicate it and show its entanglement with discourse.

What is communicated by discourse, according to Said, “is not ‘truth’ but representations” (87). For him, Orientalism is a hegemonic discourse of power relations, a discourse that is by no means in direct, corresponding relationship with political power in the raw, but rather is produced and exists in an uneven exchange with various kinds of power, shaped to a degree by the exchange with power political (as with a colonial or imperial establishment), power intellectual (as with reigning sciences), power cultural (as with orthodoxies and canons of taste, texts, values),

power moral (as with ideas about what ‘we’ do and what they ‘cannot’ do or understand as ‘we’ do). Indeed, my real argument is that Orientalism is—and does not simply represent—a considerable dimension of modern political-intellectual culture, and as such has less to do with the Orient than it does with ‘our’ world.

(80)

Said implies that gathering, selecting and organizing knowledge into a discourse about the other is as important as or even more important for the West than the objective reality of the Orient. Discourses, colonial or Oriental, thought or imagined, are linked with power and the maintenance of hegemonic systems, for as an intertextual body of knowledge they manipulate representation, thus muting the other or representing it in a negative light. Said is aware of the power of a textual politics of representation whereby power operates by means of discourse. For Said, colonial discourse is a matter of representing the Oriental other who cannot represent itself and needs to be represented. Colonial encounters involving natives and colonizers are not free from stereotypes, illusions, exaggeration, and prejudiced myths, and the material body is also a discursive.

Fanon, like Said, discusses the mythical/discursive associations ascribed to the black body: “To have a phobia about black men is to be afraid of the biological, for the black man is nothing but biological. Black men are animals. They live naked. And God only knows what else” (*Black* 143). The magistrate articulates the paranoid, stereotypical thinking dominating the Empire’s conception of the barbarians as thieves and rapists,

In private I observed that once in every generation, without fail, there is an episode of hysteria about the barbarians. There is no woman living along the

frontier who has not dreamed of a dark barbarian hand coming from under the bed to grip her ankle, no man who has not frightened himself with visions of the barbarians carousing his home, breaking his plates, setting fire to the curtains, raping his daughters. These dreams are the consequence of too much ease. Show me a barbarian army and I will believe. (8)

For the magistrate, those barbarians “are mainly destitute tribespeople with tiny flocks of their own living along the river” (4). The magistrate hints at and yet erases their bodily presence as a hysterical obsession and a residue of colonial thinking. Fanon writes,

Allusion is made to the slithery movements of the yellow race, the odors from the ‘native’ quarters, to the hordes, the stink, the swarming, the seething, and the gesticulations. In his endeavors at description and finding the right word, the colonist refers constantly to bestiary. The European seldom has a problem with figures of speech. But the colonized, who immediately grasp the intention of the colonist and the exact case being made against them, know instantly what he is thinking. This explosive population growth, those hysterical masses, those blank faces, those shapeless, obese bodies, this headless, tailless cohort, these children who seem not to belong to anyone, this insolence sprawling under the sun, this vegetating existence, all this is part of the colonial vocabulary. (*Wretched* 7)

Like Said and Fanon, Coetzee treats the native body as a discursive product entangled with historiography and racial, anthropological, and Manichean discourses of the Cape of the early colonial period. In this sense, the body’s materiality acts counter-discursively because it is subject to conscious construction, inaccuracies, and distortions.

In *White Writing*, Coetzee reiterates themes similar to his representation of barbarian bodies in *WB*. In a piece entitled “Idleness in South Africa,” he explores the trope of idleness. He records some observations on the native Hottentots of the Cape by European travel writers, early 17<sup>th</sup> century records repeatedly about “their eating of unwashed intestines, their use of animal fat to smear their bodies, their habit of wrapping dried entrails around their necks, peculiarities of the pudenda of their women, their inability to conceive of God, their incorrigible indolence” (13). Coetzee writes, “condemning the Hottentot for his idleness, the early discourse of the Cape effectively excludes him from Eden by deciding that, though he is human, he is not in the line of descent that leads from Adam via a life of toil to civilized man” (25). Many accounts by travel writers associated the African natives with indecency, bad stench, voracious eating, uncleanliness, idleness, and disease as opposed to European opposites. Due to a failure to classify the natives or subject them to European taxonomy, such writers resorted to these easy tropes. Images produced and reproduced become fictionalized. In another piece entitled “Blood, Taint, Degeneration: The Novels of Sarah Gertrude Millin,” Coetzee presents Millin’s argument against miscegenation in South Africa. Her racist poetics of blood that Coetzee discusses focuses on bodily fluids like milk, semen, and black blood as defilement or shame bringers. Exposing this myth of racial purity, Coetzee shows how for Millin black blood brings taint and chaos; how natives/blacks are dirty, smelly, defiled; how they anoint themselves with fats; how they are not ashamed of faeces and urine; how flies buzz around them; how they bring contagion and germs; and how their bodies betray histories of secret shame. The material bodies of the barbarians in *WB* are apparently “leaky,” created in similar colonial discourses, including those of the Cape.

They are literally and figuratively leaky, traversing the materiality/discourse divide. Coetzee is writing back to and challenging colonial discourses that create the other body and establish its excessive materiality. Discourse as an extended and connected body of writing, on the other body in this case, is what consolidates Manichean dualisms.

ii. “Real” Bodies: Beyond and Back to Discourse

Aside from the discursive representation of native bodies, and to complicate the representation of bodily materiality, Coetzee also represents real, suffering bodies seen through the mediating consciousness of the narrating magistrate. The magistrate observes the outcome of torture on one barbarian body and acts as the medium for narrating the pain of the other: “The boy’s face is puffy and bruised, one eye is swollen shut” (3). An older man claims that he and the boy are not thieves but came seeking medical help for the boy who has a sore arm, and the magistrate tends to believe this story; but Joll tortures for the “truth” and questions these men. The magistrate tries to ignore the event of physical suffering taking place: “Of the screaming which people afterwards claim to have heard from the granary, I hear nothing” (4). He is aware that undeniable human pain is taking place somewhere, but he tends to ignore it. He then tries to get an accurate representation of the bodily event of torture.<sup>99</sup> For Joll, “Pain is truth; all else is subject to doubt” (5).<sup>100</sup> Joll believes in continued torture to get the truth from the inherently guilty

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<sup>99</sup> In *Elizabeth Costello*, Costello, lecturing on “The Problem of Evil,” argues against treading into the realm whereby, as she plans to suggest, “in representing the workings of evil, the writer may *unwittingly* make evil seem attractive, and thereby do more harm than good” (164). Costello is responding to an author she read, Paul West, whose elaborate representation of the execution of the would-be assassins of Hitler she finds offensive. She struggles as she revises her paper to make her thesis soft enough, for the writer is sitting among the audience. In representing torture in *WB* “off stage,” Coetzee avoids the moral debasement inherent in representing what goes on inside the torture chamber.

<sup>100</sup> See my Introduction, pp. 53-54, for Coetzee’s assertion on the ontological proof of the body in pain as what is beyond doubt. For Joll, pain is real, more real than any sign the body emits when it is not in pain.

barbarian and answers the magistrate's ethical question about how to know when the prisoner is telling the truth: "First, I get lies, you see—this is what happens—first lies, then pressure, then more lies, then more pressure, then the break, then more pressure, then the truth. That is how you get the truth" (5). The Empire seeks self-assuring certainties in its formation of knowledge and attempts to abolish "the foreignness in signification" (Saunders 226). In its attempts to "know" the other, the Empire inflicts pain on the other body until it hears what it wants, the assurance that the other is guilty.

Scarry makes a distinction between the viscosity of pain for the tortured as opposed to the torturer's doubt and argues that for those in pain, "so incontestably and unnegotiably present is it that 'having pain' may come to be thought of as the most vibrant example of what it is to 'have certainty,' while for the other person it is so elusive that that 'hearing about pain' may exist as the primary model of what it is 'to have doubt.' Thus pain comes unsharably into our midst as at once that which cannot be denied and that which cannot be confirmed" (4). This explains Joll's act of exerting extreme forms of pressure and torture on the prisoners since he wants to ascertain their pain. Scarry adds, "In compelling confession, the torturers compel the prisoner to record and objectify the fact that intense pain is world-destroying. It is for this reason that while the content of the prisoner's answer is only sometimes important to the regime, the form of the answer, the fact of his answering, is always crucial" (29). Seeking a confession of guilt, Joll closely and relentlessly tortures the prisoners in his interrogation sessions. The magistrate sees the shrouded corpse of the old man who died during Joll's interrogation. He finds this material body that underwent the event of torture, "The grey beard is caked with blood. The lips are crushed and drawn back, the teeth are broken. One eye is rolled

back, the other eye-socket is a bloody hole” (7). The boy was tortured too, stabbed multiple times with a knife. The magistrate observes, “His belly and both groins are pocked with little scabs and bruises and cuts, some marked by trickles of blood” (10). The magistrate orders food for the boy and orders the dead shrouded body out in the yard away from the room the boy is in but feels complicit in the disturbing events. For a humanist like the magistrate, the body in pain is a visceral one, a material reality of suffering, but for the torturer this body is suspected and constructed. Joll acts as a “doctor” of pain who examines the body not to relieve its suffering but to construct a story about its opposition to the Empire, i.e. to bring it back to Manichean discourse. While the magistrate does not doubt the reality of pain, he doubts how it happened.

The barbarian girl is another material body tortured by the Empire. Her tortured feet are “swaddled, shapeless” (27). Her broken ankles are “large, puffy, shapeless, the skin scarred purple” (29). The girl’s old father died in torture. She was apparently tortured in front of him and with a heated fork that touched her eyes, “a kind of fork with only two teeth” (40). After her torture she would see through the periphery of her eyes with “a blur in the middle of everything I looked at” (40). She is made a grotesque body that is lame and almost blind. “Even in cases in which the deformity is the result of injury or disease rather than a birth defect, the impression can be grotesque when the degree of mutilation seems to alter human identity or to suggest gross violation of the body’s physical integrity” (Mc Elroy 10). She is a tortured disabled body and simultaneously more than that material body. In the words of Quayson, the barbarian girl’s disability is a postcolonial trope that “exceeds its frame of reference to envelop him [the magistrate] in an embrace of complicity and guilt” (“Looking Awry” 223). Quayson adds, “For

colonialism may be said to have been a major force of disabling the colonized from taking their place in the flow of history other than in a position of stigmatized underprivilege” (“Looking Awry” 228). The girl is a body in pain, a body that is viscerally material and real, before she is a discursive trope for the disabled colonized. Coetzee thus returns the material body to discourse.

While hers is a body in pain, it is also more than that for the magistrate who textualizes it. The magistrate cannot fathom the girl’s body. He treats it as an enigmatic text to be deciphered. He views it, in a postmodern fashion, as a compilation of single, disintegrating parts and inscribed surfaces. Yet, her body resists his nets of signification, and he fails in reading the signs of torture on her body. Her body is a mere surface lacking depth or interiority and yet a closed obdurate body. He cannot live her experience of pain, the event of torture, and thus he attempts to decode her silent body that is inscribed with torture. Her (hi)story remains alien to him, and her body signifies nothing much beyond its embodiment. If anything, her scarred body signifies that torture already took place somewhere and that she is marked for life as a victim of the Empire, but he cannot construct a coherent story from her regarding her experience. She is “a stocky little body” he has no desire to enter (30). Even sex does not bring her closer to him as she remains silent about the details of her torture. While the magistrate is engaged in a hermeneutical quest of encoding her body, this material body that does not open itself to him is read and constructed by the Empire as an enemy and by the reader as an alterity figure. She is tortured and inscribed by the power of this Empire, as her broken ankles

and scarred eyes testify, and treated as a docile body despite the body's materiality for the girl herself and whoever identifies with her.<sup>101</sup>

The girl could not resist the Empire's torture tactics and attempts to construct her as the Empire's enemy. She is even a docile body for the aging magistrate in that she "yields to everything" (30). She yields to his rubbing and washing as well as other intimacies. He tries to read her marked eyes, one with "a greyish puckering" under the eyelid where the torture tool touched her eye (30). His frustration is apparent, however, when he says, "It has been growing more and more clear to me that until the marks on this girl's body are deciphered and understood I cannot let go of her" (31). In the words of one reviewer, "She yields to everything without yielding herself" (qtd. in Penner 79). And in the words of another critic, *WB* traces the magistrate's abortive "attempts to posit a meaning for both the script and the girl's suffering; it traces, in other words, a crisis of interpretation" (Dovey; "Allegory of Allegories" 141). The Empire has marked her body in torture, and he treats her body as an inscriptive surface, as a text that if read properly can reveal her story. Her body, as an object of his interpretations and reading, is a text. The body remains entangled with attempts at construction and textualization. The magistrate remarks, "So I continue to swoop and circle around the irreducible figure of the girl, casting one net of meaning after another over her" (79). Her body confounds him through its apparent proximity and accessibility yet refusal to yield its story of torture. It is "irreducible" as a silent, material body and an adamant text. It is also "irreducible" for the reading magistrate as an unknowable other body. Jennifer Wenzel writes, "Out of history and language, the magistrate is suddenly more poststructural literary critic than

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<sup>101</sup> The objectification of the other body in torture that allows dehumanization to proceed would be impeded by the recognition of that body as a fellow person.

fictional political figure” (65). He wants to textualize her body, know her experience and story of torture, but he is presented with the problem of how to know and act toward the other. In representing brute, undecipherable materiality, Coetzee allegorizes the oppressed body in the very act of dwelling on “real” materiality and thus returns us to the discursive construction of material bodies. The materiality of the experience of torture is constructed as that which is beyond construction.

The girl’s recalcitrant body yields to the magistrate in being accessible to his observation and touch, yet it is her story that he fails to get. Since he cannot experience her bodily pain, the materiality of her body remains hers alone and he fails to read her tortured body. In her silence, her body has to be constructed and mediated in the story he wants to put together about the event of torture and her own status as a colonized subject and a trope for the violated body of the other. Debra Castillo, emphasizing the event of torture as what constitutes the history of the girl’s body, argues that the only visible history the magistrate can read on her body “are the traces of a history burned into her flesh by the scars of her torture, an Empire’s record, not a barbarian admission of significance” (82). He lies next to her, strokes her body, but cannot consummate the affair: “So I lie beside this healthy young body while it knits itself in sleep into ever sturdier health, working in silence even at the points of irremediable damage, the eyes, the feet, to be whole again” (33). He has no memory of her as a whole being before torture marked her body, “On that day she was still unmarked” (33). All he remembers is seeing her as a beggar woman in the street one day. He strains to capture her “old free state” (33), but he cannot. He does not desire her tortured, unfathomable body, yet he does not know how to get rid of her. The idea of sex with her makes him think of “acid in

milk, ashes in honey, chalk in bread. ... These bodies of hers and mine are diffuse, gaseous, centreless, at one moment spinning about a vortex here, at another curdling, thickening elsewhere; but often also flat, blank. I know what to do with her no more than one cloud in the sky knows what to do with another” (33). Her irreducible body is not free from his appropriation/exploitation, and he transforms his and her body into a discourse about the otherness of old and maimed bodies. And because she is a real, suffering body beyond his comprehension, he returns her to discourse as an alien body.

This “docile” body in his rooms is not simply docile after all. He is free to rub it with oil, ritually wash its feet, punish it if he wants, but since he cannot capture the reality of its suffering, the material body remains open to whatever account he imposes on it. Coetzee takes us back to the problematic of representation since bodily suffering cannot be reproduced easily. He enacts the postmodern dilemma of representation by articulating the materiality of bodily suffering but the difficulty of capturing this pure materiality beyond constructive attempts and despite the limitations involved. Lyotard argues that the postmodern is “that which, in the modern, puts forward the unrepresentable in presentation itself; that which denies itself the solace of good forms, the consensus of a taste which would make it possible to share collectively the nostalgia for the unattainable; that which searches for new presentations, not in order to enjoy them but in order to impart a stronger sense of the unrepresentable” (“Answering” 46). The magistrate fails to read the girl’s story of torture as he fails to find the signs he looks for in the torture chamber. In his dreams he repeatedly sees a hooded figure with a blank face, another version of the resistant, indecipherable body: “The face I see is blank, featureless; it is the face of an embryo or a tiny whale; it is not a face at all but another part of the human body that

bulges under the skin; it is white; it is the snow itself" (37). As he fails to render the girl's story of torture, he returns the body to discursive construction and makes her an allegorical figure for the tortured body that eludes yet cannot evade representation.

The magistrate is aware of the girl's adamant corporeality as a tortured body and vents his exasperation at his helplessness before this "obstinate, phlegmatic body" (41). Her "alien body" is "closed, ponderous," "incomplete," and "beyond comprehension" (41). Even in his evocations of her brute materiality and in his failure to read her body, he is constructing her for the reader as what cannot be easily grasped. The Empire forces this tortured body into a docile status by subjugating it, and he similarly manipulates it. However, the body itself remains beyond capture and consequently irrelevant without attempts to relate to it and construe its materiality. It is this abstruse logic that allows us to give attention to what cannot be articulated in words. Compared with the resistant girl, the prostitute the magistrate frequents, the "little-bird woman" (42), responds to his desires and achieves climax. In contrast, the barbarian girl is blank and impenetrable. His conflicting desires for her are problematic, not easy fulfillment,

But with this woman it is as if there is no interior, only a surface across which I hunt back and forth seeking entry. Is this how her torturers felt hunting their secret, whatever they thought it was? For the first time I feel a dry pity for them: how natural a mistake to believe that you can burn or tear or hack your way into the secret body of the other! The girl lies in my bed, but there is no good reason why it should be a bed. I behave in some ways like a lover—I undress her, I bathe her, I stroke her, I sleep beside her—but I might equally well tie her to a chair and beat her, it would be no less intimate. (42)

He is a different kind of torturer who, unlike Joll who imprints torture marks on the body, tries to force a meaning on this body, thus subjecting it to his discourse. “On the other hand, who am I to assert my distance from him?” (5). Like Joll, he essentially fails to get the truth about this body although he partakes in marking it. As he talks to the tortured boy early in the novel, he realizes his complicity in imperial oppression: “It has not escaped me that an interrogator can wear two masks, speak with two voices, one harsh, one seductive” (7). He later recognizes his association with Joll as “Two sides of imperial rule, no more, no less” (133). While bodily suffering cannot be easily denied, it cannot be fully reproduced. And since the magistrate has to deal with the event of torture that left this woman a tortured body, he realizes that this apparently docile body in its passivity and easy subjection to pain is equally resistant to the interpretive demands he makes on it. Joll makes the other body a tortured one bearing its scars and a secret history of violation, and the magistrate then makes it an alien body beyond imperial comprehension.

There is actually an ethical aspect to the magistrate’s interest in the other body as a body. As Attridge points out, in (post)colonial studies, the other “tends to stand for the colonized culture or people as viewed by the dominant power. Whatever its precise complexion, the other in these accounts is primarily an impingement from outside that challenges assumptions, habits, and values and that demands a response” (“Innovation” 23). The magistrate, even in his failure to fully absorb the suffering body close to him, feels a Levinasian ethical responsibility toward the other body he cannot dispose of: “...something has fallen in upon me from the sky, at random, from nowhere: this body in my bed, for which I am responsible, or so it seems, otherwise why do I keep it? For the time being, perhaps forever, I am simply bewildered” (43). In her silence, the barbarian

girl enhances her status as a tortured body that cannot but be represented in the magistrate's account as a tortured body. She does not grant him the assurance of a reciprocal relation, and he reflects, "with a shift of horror I behold the answer that has been waiting all the time offer itself to me in the image of a face masked by two black glassy insect eyes from which there comes no reciprocal gaze but only my doubled image cast back at me" (43). The magistrate realizes that torture does not erase the materiality of the other body. On the contrary, it affirms its otherness and even denies the magistrate a reciprocal recognition. And because he does not speak her language, he finds himself far removed from this alien body on cultural terms. Fanon argues, "To speak a language is to appropriate its world and culture" (*Black* 21). Her physical proximity makes him realize his responsibility for her and his equal complicity in her wretchedness, "I must assert my distance from Colonel Joll! I will not suffer for his crimes!" (44). Ashcroft argues that "Though the magistrate's position in relation to the girl may be ironic, her pain represents an unequivocal 'reality' from which he cannot distance himself" ("Irony" 105). A torturer like Joll thinks that he can produce a pliant body that confesses what he wants to hear, but the magistrate finds out that this tortured body is far from easy subjection or dismissal.

The magistrate's frustration with the girl's body becomes, paradoxically, a discourse on embodied being. In insisting on her incompleteness and his ethical confrontation with her, he highlights her status as a material body standing for histories of oppression but whose story cannot be fully recovered. "What this woman beside me is doing in my life I cannot comprehend. The thought of the strange ecstasies I have approached through the medium of her incomplete body fills me with a dry revulsion, as if I had spent nights copulating with a dummy of straw and leather. What could I ever

have seen in her?” (46). The magistrate cannot recall the image of the whole girl before torture (46) and neither can he produce a representation of what exactly took place inside the torture chamber. He can summon up the image of her father and other prisoners but not hers: “In silence I try to re-create the heat, the dust, the smell of all those tired bodies. In the shade of the barracks wall I seat the prisoners one by one, all that I can remember” (46). The space to the right of her father, where she sat, “remains blank” (47). The tortured body is viscerally material and real, but it cannot escape the magistrate’s constructions and attempts at understanding or the Empire’s attempts at erasure in which torture operations are often held in secret or tortured bodies are then dismissed.<sup>102</sup>

While critics like Marais argue that Coetzee’s fiction “should not be understood in purely political terms as an attempt to ‘give voice’ to the other, but rather in *ethical* terms as a refusal to do so” and discuss the political in terms of the ethical (emphasis original; “Writing” 45), Coetzee is rather depicting an inability to adequately represent the suffering of the other, be it diegetic or extra-diegetic—i.e. within fiction or on Coetzee’s part. Faced with the problematic of representation, he opts for facing his characters with silent otherness to make them attempt to come to terms with it. In the act of failing to capture the other body, the magistrate, like the medic in *LTMK* and Susan Barton in *Foe* when confronted with silent bodies, is constructing or allegorizing this body as the violated, undeniable body and articulating the difficulty of speaking for it or through it. The magistrate is aware of the girl’s being as a substantial body beyond his comprehension, but he is aware that she is for him what he makes of her, “While I have not ceased to see her as a body maimed, scarred, harmed, she has perhaps by now grown

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<sup>102</sup> The barbarian girl is an exception in staying in the frontier settlement after her torture. The other prisoners who came with her seem to have left, but she remained because of her crippled condition.

into and become that new deficient body, feeling no more deformed than a cat feels deformed for having claws instead of fingers. I would do well to take these thoughts seriously. More ordinary than I like to think, she may have ways of finding me ordinary too” (55). Contemplating the body as a historical text, he distinguishes between the body and the marks of history that construct/textualize it into a marginalized position,

Except that it has not escaped me that in bed in the dark the marks her torturers have left upon her, the twisted feet, the half-blind eyes, are easily forgotten. Is it then the case that it is the whole woman I want, that my pleasure in her is spoiled until these marks on her are erased and she is restored to herself; or is it the case ... that it is the marks on her which drew me to her but which, to my disappointment, I find, do not go deep enough? Too much or too little: is it she I want or the traces of a history her body bears? (63)

He makes it clear that her body is treated by the Empire as an inscriptive surface on which her history as a subjugated other is engraved and that his failure to comprehend her otherness does not mean that he too is not textualizing her body as a closed text that does not yield its story of torture. The body testifies to the historical real, but its relation to historical injustices has to be mediated via attempts to construe the unspeakable, indescribable atrocities perpetrated on it. He finds it difficult to capture in words his feelings for her. Her body is accessible to him in sex, and he makes love to her during their journey, but he says “I seem to lose touch with her, and the act peters out vacantly” (65). Blank and incomplete as it is, the other body paradoxically signifies resistance to representation and what cannot be fully and realistically represented in words.

While the magistrate fails to find an entry into the body of the barbarian woman in his ritualistic oiling and rubbing, Joll as the Empire's representative rids himself of the whole process and writes on the barbarian bodies what he wants to see and read. In a pivotal torture scene, Coetzee enacts the overlap between the materiality of the body and the body as an inscriptive surface, between real bodies and the body as an effect of construction, and between the body as a living matter and a discursive product socio-politically constructed. Some barbarian prisoners are brought to a public square and tortured by first having the word "Enemy," the law of the Empire as far as the other is concerned, inscribed on their backs with charcoal and then by flogging them until the word is erased by their blood and sweat.<sup>103</sup> The Empire employs flogging, an enactment of material violence on other bodies, as a corporeal technique to consolidate Manichean racial differences and perpetuate its imperial myths. This scene dramatizes the construction of the other linguistically and via the body. The postmodern body functions within a constructionist scheme as a cultural text interpreted and inscribed with meaning.

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<sup>103</sup> This scene is reminiscent of another torture scene in Kafka's story "In the Penal Colony" whereby guilt is inscribed via a torture machine on the body of the transgressor. The execution machine that an officer is showing off to an explorer on a remote island has numerous needles on its harrow. These inscribe the guilt, the law of the colony, on the body of the condemned prisoner, splashing water on the body in the process and moving it so that more clean flesh is visible for inscription. Since guilt cannot be doubted on this colony and public executions were popular before the new commandant, the officer is eager to show the reluctant explorer how the machine tattoos the body of the prisoner with a statement fitting his guilt. There is, however, a significant contrast between Coetzee's scene and Kafka's. Whereas the flogging erases the word "ENEMY" in *WB*, the harrow in Kafka's story inscribes the commandment that has been broken ever deeper into the condemned man's flesh until he succumbs to his wounds. In Kafka and Coetzee, within the representational scheme of fiction, it is the real body that undergoes inscription in torture and that attains the status of a corporeal text. Interestingly, in Coetzee's Nobel lecture "He and His Man," one of the England reports Defoe writes and Crusoe reads concerns an execution engine with a sharp, heavy blade that beheads the condemned (548). Political anthropologist Pierre Clastres argues the confluence between writing and the law: "For, in its severity, the law is at the same time writing. Writing is on the side of the law; the law lives in writing; and knowing the one means that unfamiliarity with the other is no longer possible. Hence all law is written; all writing is an index of law" (177). Clastres also discusses "the triple alliance" (179) between writing, the law, and the body with reference to Kafka's story "In the Penal Colony" (178-9).

Being an “enemy,” we will see, is one of the free-floating labels the Empire uses against its victims and used by the magistrate himself against the Empire when he is tortured.

The mute barbarians are herded to the public square and presented as a proof of the existence of the barbarian who speaks another language and exists in the flesh. What follows is the enactment of this foreignness on their bodies by marking them as the enemy. The prisoners’ public torture directly touches their bodies and “is revealed as the erasure of the humanity of the tortured” (Durrant; *Postcolonial* 47). The general outline of torture Scarry gives works here as the pain inflicted on the prisoners visibly demonstrates the political power of the Empire: “First, pain is inflicted on a person in ever-intensifying ways. Second, the pain, continually amplified within the person’s body, is also amplified in the sense that it is objectified, made visible to those outside the person’s body. Third, the objectified pain is denied as pain and read as power, a translation made possible by the obsessive mediation of agency” (*Body* 28). The mediating space between the signifier and the signified is erased when the prisoners are made the “Enemy” in the flesh and displayed as a living example of the Empire’s will-to-power. The represented is made the medium of representation, and the material body is fused with the discursive one. The textualization of the body turns the visceral body into a body of knowledge about the other, using the barbarian body to know the other for real. The prisoners’ chained, docile bodies are the texts that bear their otherness, the sites where foreignness is located. Their bodies are constructed, via the power of the Empire, as the enemy. The inscribed bodies are texts where the space between representation and the represented is erased; the body becomes a text and the text becomes a body.

Foucault elaborates on this theme of forced bodily inscription that leaves the docile body an open text for the state. The tortured body is a space inscribed with meaning or a surface on which the Empire enacts its fears and obsessions. It is a site for the interplay of power relations. Violence is discursively shifted from the barbarians to the audience who learn by fear from the punishment. Foucault writes that “power produces knowledge...; that power and knowledge directly imply one another; that there is no power relation without the correlative constitution of a field of knowledge, nor any knowledge that does not presuppose and constitute at the same time power relations” (*Discipline* 27). Foucault speaks of torture as “a public spectacle” that disappeared gradually in modern Europe when the body “as the major target of penal repression disappeared” (*Discipline* 7) and “the theatrical representation of pain was excluded from punishment” (*Discipline* 14). The publicly tortured body invites yet challenges discursive power by asserting its materiality. Nevertheless, it is a textualized spectacle that loses its materiality or ontological status behind the meanings attributed to or constructed on it. In the scene of public torture the Empire perpetrates on the barbarian bodies, we witness a dramatization of the conflictual relationship between bodies and inscriptive power.

Torture and the pain associated with it are difficult to articulate in words, and they make the body in pain a material text that cannot articulate itself and yet remains rooted in physicality. Although the Empire constructs the bodies it tortures, disciplines them, and makes of them what it wants, such bodies challenge their construction and assert their materiality, at least for some sympathetic viewers who, in turn, relate the pain of the other in language. The magistrate unlocks himself and leaves his cell when the noise

outside indicates the arrival of the expeditionary force at the public square. He sees twelve “barbarian” prisoners tied in a rope,

The standard-bearer’s horse is led by a man who brandishes a heavy stick to clear his way, behind him comes another trooper trailing a heavy rope; and at the end of the rope, tied neck to neck, comes a file of men, barbarians, stark naked, holding their hands up to their faces in an odd way as though one and all are suffering from toothache. For a moment I am puzzled by this posture, by the tiptoeing eagerness with which they follow their leader, till I catch a glint of metal and at once comprehend. A simple loop of wire runs through the flesh of each man’s hands and through holes pierced in his cheeks. (101)

Trying to reduce the pain is what keeps the prisoners’ docile bodies in a specific posture. People gather to see the prisoners and prove to themselves that “the barbarians are real” (101). A spectacle of torture is about to take place whereby the body is directly targeted and where the power of the Empire is enacted on the other body. Torture here is not the “interrogational” one the girl was subjected to for a confession but is more “spectacular” and “terroristic” in that it is meant to be witnessed and to induce fear in the public and assert the power of the Empire (Lenta 74, 76). The magistrate wants to distance himself from the atrocity to be committed once he knows that the guards want to make the prisoners kneel down. “I cannot save the prisoners, therefore let me save myself. Let it at the very least be said, if it ever comes to be said, if there is ever anyone in some remote future interested to know the way we lived, that in this farthest outpost of the Empire of light there existed one man who in his heart was not a barbarian” (102). He is in his heart not a “barbaric” colonizer. In the words of Memmi, he is a colonizer who “refuses” and

not a “colonialist” who “agrees to be a colonizer” (45). He refuses the Empire’s corporeal imposition on the other body. Memmi writes, “Since he has discovered the colonized and their existential character, since the colonized have suddenly become living and suffering humanity, the colonizer refuses to participate in their suppression and decides to come to their assistance” (24). In rejecting the position of the colonizer, the magistrate accepts that of the colonized, that of victimization and torture. But the ambiguous position between the colonizer and the colonized is still difficult to solve for the colonizer who refuses. Memmi argues, “everything confirms his solitude, bewilderment and ineffectiveness. He will slowly realize that the only thing for him to do is to remain silent” (43). However, the magistrate—as a refusing or reluctant colonizer—does not exactly remain silent before the unfolding spectacle of torture, as we will see shortly.

The soldiers hold staves and “keep an arena clear for the exemplary spectacle” (102). This scene of public torture reminds us of the spectacular torture in the opening pages of *Discipline and Punish*. Foucault argues that modern penal systems are characterized by the disappearance of spectacular torture and “a slackening of the hold on the body” (10). The Empire, however, enacts a reversion to a “barbarity” of its own in its return to public torture and what Foucault calls the “theatrical elements” (9) that accompany it. Four kneeling prisoners are forced down, and the unfolding spectacle of torture, in the words of Robert Spencer, graphically clarifies the causal link between “the derogatory and dehumanizing definition of others and the infliction of pain” (174). A guard pulls the cord tighter, and the docile prisoners “bend further till finally they are kneeling with their faces through touching the pole. One of them writhes his shoulders in

pain and moans. The others are silent, their thoughts wholly concentrated on moving smoothly with the cord, not giving the wire a chance to tear their flesh” (103).

Joll then prepares the scene for more pain. He rubs the backs of the kneeling prisoners with dust and writes “a word with a stick of charcoal” (103) which the magistrate reads from a distance and upside down as “ENEMY” (103), which exposes the Empire’s practice of “fixing” and “stabilizing” meaning (Saunders 228-9). The body of the colonized is inscribed and made “a critical locus through which ideologies of racial and cultural difference were enacted” (Rao and Pierce 5). Joll enacts the construction of the barbarian as the Empire’s other on their flesh. The barbarian other as enemy and thus as guilty is beyond question for him. Michael Moses plausibly writes that “the barbarian *Other* generally appears in the novel as a blank slip onto which the Empire engraves itself; that is, the Empire gives itself form by writing on its subjects” (120). As Foucault points out, “The tortured body is first inscribed in the legal ceremonial that must produce, open for all to see, the truth of the crime” (*Discipline* 35). The Empire visibly textualizes the barbarian body and confirms its assumed guilt by inscribing its (unjust) law publicly on this body. The body is textualized in both being read and written on. The tattooed barbarian body blurs the boundary between the body and the text. This self-conscious creation of the other through the medium of writing shows that the Empire forcibly constructs the other through an erasure of their humanity.<sup>104</sup>

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<sup>104</sup> In a recent book entitled *Frames of War*, Butler argues that the torture to which the prisoners of Abu Ghraib and Guantanamo were subjected “was not merely an effort to find ways to shame and humiliate the prisoners... on the basis of their presumptive cultural formation. The torture was also a way to coercively produce the Arab subject and the Arab mind” (126). In other words, the prisoners, Butler explains, “were compelled to embody the cultural reduction” used by the anthropological material adopted by the US as its torture protocol. In *WB*, the Empire similarly forces the barbarian prisoners into the position of the “enemy” and seeks to make this status materialize, in writing, on the captured bodies.

The prisoners are then beaten with staves until, the magistrate realizes, the “black charcoal and ochre dust begin to run with sweat and blood. The game . . . is to beat them till their backs are washed clean” (103). Rosemary Jolly writes, “The last frontier upon which the Empire undertakes to impress itself upon the manichean other is the skin of the ‘barbarian’ captives of the tale, and at one point also that of the magistrate who sympathizes with them” (*Colonization* 124-125). Via corporeal punishment, the Empire seeks to retain a clear line of demarcation between itself and its other. The barbarian bodies are yet bodies in pain and simultaneously allegorical tropes for foreignness constructed by the Empire in its attempts to justify itself. The Empire has to find an “enemy” in the flesh and allegorize its status as a counter to everything it stands for. The bodies of the barbarian prisoners are the medium through which their otherness is constructed. Joll and his henchmen are “Manichean reader[s] of a colonial allegory” that reads and interprets the barbarian body as an enemy and takes this allegorical code for granted (Chantot 29). As the Empire’s “enemy,” the barbarians are the adversary in a dualism whose other part is the Empire or the Self with supreme power.

By way of confirming its regulatory power over the other body, the Empire as represented by its officers and guards invites the public to participate in flogging the prisoners. Canes are offered to the spectators, and a girl is invited to flog the prisoners. “Shouts, jokes, obscene advice are hurled at her. She lifts the cane, brings it down smartly on the prisoner’s buttocks, drops it, and scuttles to safety to a roar of applause” (104). There is, as the magistrate describes the scene, “a scramble for canes, the soldiers can barely keep order, I lose sight of the prisoners on the ground as people press forward

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In each case, torture is used to capture or subvert something “essential” about the other: the sexual reserve of an Arab and the barbarism of the other.

to take a turn or simply watch the beating from nearer” (104). Foucault writes, “Not only must people know, they must see with their own eyes. Because they must be made to be afraid; but also because they must be the witnesses, the guarantors, of the punishment, and because they must to a certain extent take part in it” (*Discipline* 58). The Empire seeks to ascertain bodily otherness by displaying the barbarian body before its subjects, yet it also seeks to contain this otherness by punishing it, and hence the symbolic act of erasing the word “ENEMY” on the backs of the prisoners with their own blood and sweat. The body in pain, however, can remain an inscrutable text. It is an ontological end and not simply a matter of construction. Even so, it remains entangled in power relations that manipulate and construct it. The barbarian bodies feel the pain of flogging and the wire running through their flesh. It is the magistrate who communicates the pain of the other body, and it is the Empire that constructs the otherness of such bodies. I argue next that the magistrate who shows some sympathy for the barbarians is also corporeally and discursively punished and treated as an “enemy,” though in a different way.

### iii. Imperial Bodies: Personal Pain vs. the Institutionalized Body

Part of the Empire’s inscriptive power exercised on the body is a disciplinary control that mediates pain and institutionalizes the body, which becomes apparent in the Empire’s treatment of its magistrate as a traitor. He, to put aside the discursively manipulated body he is reduced to in torture and incarceration, feels he is dehumanized in torture, like the barbarian prisoners who are reduced to a bodily experience of pain. He is made to experience what it means to live in a body and as a body. He cannot doubt what he experiences in the flesh. He is faced with the ontological question of how bodies can be, a postmodernist question according to a critic like McHale who highlights the

ontological concerns of postmodernism.<sup>105</sup> Bodily instincts and degradations of being a body heighten his consciousness of his body. For him, the degraded body is an animal's body that feels its processes and drives. It has a raw existence beyond the meanings and attributes we give to it. It knows its limits of endurance and the damage done to it. By contrast, the constructed body of institutionalization does not negate the ontological one but mediates its suffering. The Empire tortures the magistrate and imprisons him to construct his body as that of a traitor in need of reform/punishment. No wonder, it conducts itself as an Empire with state institutions.<sup>106</sup> The disciplinary tactics meant to institutionalize the body, however, make the magistrate only more aware of his own bodily existence. And the magistrate's own speculation about his material suffering paradoxically makes him construct this body in a first-person, self-conscious narrative preoccupied with pain and suffering. Just like Magda and Mrs. Curren in *HC* and *AI*, the magistrate consciously mediates his own suffering in language and body discourses.

The magistrate is made to feel the nature of bodily being and aging and experience his body away from the Empire's torture and other disciplinary tactics. He is already a man with "thin shanks," "slack genitals," and "flabby old man's breasts" (30). His relation with the young barbarian girl makes him more conscious of his aging body: "The older a man the more grotesque people find his couplings, like the spasms of a

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<sup>105</sup> See his *Postmodernist Fiction*, e.g. xii and 11.

<sup>106</sup> For example, Colonel Joll arrives from the imperial capital to the frontier settlement "under the emergency powers" (1) to investigate reports about frontier trouble with the barbarians after rumors about a barbarian uprising. Joll, the magistrate tells his men, "is from the Third Bureau" which is "the most important division of the Civil Guard nowadays" (2). The officials of the Third Bureau are "guardians of the State" (8) and many of them are young graduates of "the War College" (49) and wear military insignia on their uniforms (75). The Empire keeps records and documents the death of prisoners in reports (6). The magistrate himself is a book keeper who collects taxes, conducts official correspondence, and administers the law. He is identified by his state authority rather than by a name. It is apparent that the Empire has at least rudimentary institutions and more elaborate military ones.

dying animal” (32). During a difficult trip to send her back to her people<sup>107</sup> he says, “My occasional hunting and hawking, my desultory womanizing, exercises of manhood, have concealed from me how soft my body has grown. After long marches my bones ache, by nightfall I am so tired that I have no appetite” (58-59). He is weak with diarrhea and shivering in the cold weather and dusty wind when he is away from the comforts of his imperial post. This personal pain and the experience of embodiment contrast, as we will see, with the political nature of pain the magistrate will suffer at the hands of the Empire he is thought to have betrayed in his dealings with the barbarian “enemy.”

Upon his return, his interest in the experience of embodiment takes a new turn as he finds some imperial officers, representatives of the Empire’s military institutions, at the post. For the magistrate, these men stand for the Empire’s policy of torture and bodily control. He describes one of them who informs him about his presumed guilt: “His insignia say that he is a warrant officer. Warrant Officer in the Third Bureau: what does that mean? At a guess, five years of kicking and beating people; contempt for the regular police and for due process of law; a detestation of smooth patrician talk like mine. . . . ‘You have been treasonously consorting with the enemy,’ he says” (74). The magistrate is accused of treason for sending the girl back. He is now to be tortured and punished. In the process, the interplay between pain and institutionalized bodies is manifested.

The magistrate’s bodily consciousness now dominates the narrative, and he describes the disciplinary control he is subjected to once he is arrested, “There is a spring in my walk as I am marched away to confinement between my two guards. ‘I hope you

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<sup>107</sup> According to Post, this is the magistrate’s “one concrete action” which makes him “Coetzee’s first hero” (72). He is a man of action here as opposed to K in *LTMK* who prefers to stay out of the war and all state-run camps.

will allow me to wash,' I say, but they ignore me" (76). He is confined in the same torture room previously used by Joll for interrogations, "The soot-marks are still on the wall where the brazier used to stand. The door closes and darkness falls" (77). The Empire employs disciplinary tactics revolving around the body in the form of deprivation, physical restrictions, solitary confinement, and corporeal punishment, which indicates a shift from punishments that directly target the body to those directed more at the soul, "I am fed the same rations as the common soldiers. Every second day the barracks gate is locked for an hour and I am let out to wash and exercise" (77-78). In incarceration, he is a docile body institutionalized via training, regulated, and humiliated:

I look forward with craving to exercise times, when I can feel the wind on my face and the earth under my soles, see other faces and hear human speech. After two days of solitude my lips feel slack and useless, my own speech seems strange to me. Truly, man was not made to live alone! I build my day unreasonably around the hours when I am fed. I guzzle my food like a dog. A bestial life is turning me into a beast. (78)

The magistrate experiences the discursive nature of the Empire's power. The body, however, still gets its share from these degrading punishments because they revolve around the body's needs and remain somewhat corporeal in the deprivations they impose on it. The discursive punishments actually intensify the magistrate's private bodily anxieties: "At night when everything is still the cockroaches come out to explore. I hear, or perhaps imagine, the horny clicking of their wings, the scurry of their feet across the paved floor. They are lured by the smell of the bucket in the corner, the morsels of food on the floor; no doubt too by this mountain of flesh giving off its multifarious odours of

life and decay” (78). This personal body, what he sees as his “heavy slack foul-smelling old body” (95), belongs with “the gross and decaying” (95). The body written into the narrative becomes a construct, a self/subjectivity preoccupied with the body. The ontological existence of the body as a lived reality begins to haunt his account. The body as the main concern in the magistrate’s narrative is a discourse constructed in the very act of writing. The material body asserts itself, but the magistrate mediates this suffering body to us, just as he does with the other’s pain, via language and discourse.

Held incommunicado, the magistrate begins to identify with the torture victims of the Empire whose torture he did not attend and thus cannot relate to except in his own terms. He thinks of the girl’s father, the man who died in torture and was unable to protect his daughter, thus failing the ethics of parental care:

I close my eyes for hours on end, sitting in the middle of the floor in the faint light of day, and try to evoke the image of that man so ill-remembered. All I see is a figure named *father* that could be the figure of any father who knows a child is being beaten whom he cannot protect. To someone he loves he cannot fulfil his duty. For this he knows he is never forgiven. This knowledge of fathers, this knowledge of condemnation, is more than he can bear. No wonder he wanted to die. (emphasis original; 79)

He realizes the dehumanizing, material oppression perpetrated on the powerless body and expresses this in ethically resounding terms: “They exposed her father to her naked and made him gibber with pain; they hurt her and he could not stop them (on a day I spent occupied with the ledgers in my office). Thereafter she was no longer fully human, sister

to all of us. Certain sympathies died, certain movements of the heart became no longer possible to her” (79). The magistrate was confronted with the aftermath of the event of the “intimate” torture when he saw the prisoners’ corpses or scarred bodies. Because such an atrocity is difficult to represent, Coetzee represents it as a past event, as what already took place, and describes its impact on the magistrate, the man who rejects the practices of the system he is complicit with. The suffering body is real, but a pure materiality is beyond easy capture. Hence, Coetzee represents what took place inside Joll’s torture chamber not negatively as an absence but ethically as an event with present impact.

In addition to the humiliation of imprisonment, the magistrate is subjected to other forms of carceral control in the form of privations and limitations imposed on what he wears, how much he moves, and what he eats, all of which manipulate his body directly (because they touch the body) and discursively (as they are not direct torture),

There are other humiliations too. My requests for clean clothes are ignored. I have nothing to wear but what I brought with me. Each exercise day, under the eye of the guard, I wash one item, a shirt or a pair of drawers, with ash and cold water, and take it back to my cell to dry (the shirt I left to dry in the yard was gone two days later). In my nostrils there is always the mouldy smell of clothing that does not see the sun. And worse. Under the monotonous regimen of soup and porridge and tea, it has become an agony for me to move my bowels. I hesitate for days feeling stiff and bloated before I can bring myself to squat over the pail and endure the stabs of pain, the tearing of tissues that accompany these evacuations. No one beats me, no one starves me, no one spits on me. How can I regard myself

as a victim of persecution when my sufferings are so petty? Yet they are all the more degrading for their pettiness. (83)

His incarceration is made absurd by his neglect by the warders of the Empire. He is made to feel a petty offender, especially when he secures a duplicate key for his cellar. The “freedom” he has becomes to leave or stay, to eat or refuse to eat, and to wear his dirty clothes or stay naked—decisions that do not alleviate his physical misery. The body that claims his consciousness has often been silent, and now in times of neglect it asserts itself as an “unhappy” corporeal presence within the magistrate’s self-objectifying thoughts: “But now I begin to comprehend how rudimentary freedom is. What freedom has been left to me? The freedom to eat or go hungry; to keep my silence or gabble to myself or beat on the door or scream. If I was the object of an injustice, a minor injustice, when they locked me in here, I am now no more than a pile of blood, bone and meat that is unhappy” (84). In a relevant line of thought, Scarry writes that the body is carefully used against itself in subtle forms of torture,

The political prisoner is, of course, reminded of this at every moment. Each source of strength and delight, each means of moving out into the world or moving the world in to oneself, becomes a means of turning the body back in on itself, forcing the body to feed on the body; the eyes are only access points for scorching light, the ears for brutal noises; eating, the act at once so incredible and so simple in which the world is literally taken into the body, is replaced by rituals of starvation involving either no food or food that nauseates; taste and smell ...; normal needs like excretion and special wants like sexuality are made ongoing sources of outrage and repulsion. (48)

The magistrate points out the interplay between a body that privately suffers, and whose pain is personal, and one that is discursively produced in power relations or discourse. While the former exists for the sufferer as a body beyond doubt and appropriates one's being, the latter is treated by the Empire as an institutional, docile body whose materiality can be erased and manipulated. The discursive hold on the body can yield a more subjective response to pain at the personal level. Incarcerated and under a regimen, the body becomes paradoxically preoccupied with its ontological being,

The flow of events in the outside world, the moral dimension of my plight, if that is what it is, a plight, even the prospect of defending myself in court, have lost all interest under the pressure of appetite and physical functions and the boredom of living one hour after another. I have caught a cold; my whole being is preoccupied in sniffing and sneezing, in the misery of being simply a body that feels itself sick and wants to be well. (86)

The magistrate consciously reflects on his ailing body and what it undergoes. Sartre writes, "for the unreflective consciousness pain was the body; for the reflective consciousness the illness is distinct from the body, it has its own form, it comes and goes" (337). Scarry writes that torture is basically "the inversion of trial, a reversal of cause and effect" (41) in that punishment is used to reach the evidence. It is ironic, yet normal, that the magistrate as a representative of the law loses his faith in legal procedure when he is in the grip of pain and humiliation. As Shildrick observes, "In disability and disease, in dreams, in reproduction and pregnancy, in growing old, in sexual practice ... the body transgresses its normative boundaries and draws attention to its own

constructionist dynamic” (“Beyond” 7). The magistrate is consciously writing his old, sick body into his narrative, and the body in pain begins to construct itself in discourse.

In the magistrate’s case, the ontological existence of the body as a reality that lives and dies, eats and eliminates, is conflated with the consciousness it dominates: “It is mid-morning and I have had no breakfast. I pace my room, my stomach rumbling like a hungry cow’s. At the thought of salty porridge and black tea my saliva runs, I cannot help it” (87). He entreats one of his warders to empty his bucket, “It stinks in here, I want to wash the floor. I want to wash my clothes too. I can’t appear in front of the Colonel in clothes that smell like this. It will only bring disgrace on my warders. I need hot water and soap and a rag. Let me quickly empty my bucket and fetch hot water from the kitchen” (87). The man who formerly stood for order, legal discipline, and civilized behavior is now reduced to a dirty prisoner in pain: “All I can think of is the pain, all that I desire is to be left to lie in the easiest position I can find, on my side with my knees raised toward my chin” (90). Because of the food regimen he is subjected to, he is forced to yield to painful bodily needs: “Groaning I inch my way out and squat over the chamberpot. Again the pain, the tearing. I dab myself with a filched white handkerchief, which comes away bloody. The room stinks: even I, who have been living for weeks with a slop pail in the corner, am disgusted. I open the door and hobble down the passageway” (91). He feels the shame of bodily humiliation and the possibility of ending his life in this way. This disgrace of being a dejected prisoner dominates his waking consciousness. The more time he spends in his solitary confinement the more disgraced he is and the less sure he is of his cause in opposing the Empire’s policies, for after months among insects with “nothing to see but four walls and an enigmatic soot-mark, nothing to smell but the

stench of my own body, no one to talk to but a ghost in a dream whose lips seem to be sealed, I am much less sure of myself. The craving to touch and be touched by another human body sometimes comes over me with such force that I groan” (94). The magistrate is subjected to a new system of institutional punishment based on privations and loss of rights—what Foucault enumerates as “rationing of food, sexual deprivation, corporeal punishment, solitary confinement” (*Discipline* 16)—that makes his pain more personal and more immediately present to us within this narrative than the pain of the other he tries to relate. The pain of the self is more intensely related than that of the other.

While Joll attempts to obliterate the otherness of the prisoners’ bodies to efface the “challenge” they impose to the Empire, it is the magistrate who answers the other’s demand for a response and pleads on their behalf. He responsibly responds in Attridge’s terms to “the singular otherness of the other person” (“Innovation” 24). Joll’s attempt to erase the irreducible other on its body is a futile one, a pathetic act motivated by sheer power rather than any ethical or moral grounds. The magistrate objects to punishing the prisoners with a hammer to be used against their feet by saying “no” to Joll. He is beaten in turn and has his hand broken and sustains a blow on the face that almost blinds him while other prisoners “lie docilely on the earth, their lips to the pole, their hands clasped to their faces like monkey’s paws, oblivious of the hammer” (105). He objects that the body has a miraculous power for self-repair but not from such a depravity of beating one’s feet with a hammer (105). His objections are promptly answered: “My nose is broken, I know, and perhaps also the cheekbone where the flesh was laid open by the blow of the stick. My left eye is swelling shut” (106). For Clastres, “coercive” power, as a form of political power, is manifested in “the relation of command-obedience” (22).

Just as the Empire does not accept “no” for an answer to its interrogation of the barbarian prisoners, it does not tolerate an objection from its subjects to its political tactics. Hence, the punished magistrate feels pain, “in spasms a minute or two apart so intense that I can no longer lie still” and whines “like a dog” (106). Pain becomes his new state of being and consciousness, “Though the throbbing is still there I find I can endure it if I remain still. Indeed, it has lost its strangeness. Soon, perhaps, it will be as much part of me as breathing” (107).<sup>108</sup> For the person in pain, the body is viscerally material and real; it is a personal mode of being. For the Empire, a prisoner’s body is a threat and a sign of otherness that has to be subjugated and that is treated impersonally.

Subjected to this more direct form of corporeal punishment, the magistrate sleeps in his pain and sees the girl in his dream building a clay oven and she offers him bread (107). Now that he has been through what she experienced in immediate torture, he can physically and mentally relate to her. Even his body’s facial bruises are similar to hers: “The wound on my cheek, never washed or dressed, is swollen and inflamed. A crust like a caterpillar has formed on it. My left eye is a mere slit, my nose a shapeless throbbing lump. I must breathe through my mouth” (112). He is a dejected body since in his suffering “there is nothing ennobling” (112). Pain adds to his already mortified state: “What I am made to undergo is subjection to the most rudimentary needs of my body: to

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<sup>108</sup> Interestingly, it is pain that destroys the magistrate’s language and silences him like the tortured barbarian girl. His objection to Joll’s depraving torture of the barbarian prisoners is encountered by the blows he receives that interrupt his public protest. At another level, it is the magistrate’s attempt to capture and relate this experience of pain via language that we are confronted with here. In this sense, pain as Negri explicates in his discussion of Wittgenstein’s philosophy in the *Philosophical Investigation*, is equally a “mental state,” i. e. a concept, that can be mastered via “the advent of a collective subject who is constituted through language” (“Wittgenstein” 354). The inseparability of pain and language as a site for “collective expression” (“Wittgenstein” 355) is evident in the assertion that “It is only within language that one apprehends the object, and therefore it is within language that one recognizes it and exhibits it” (“Wittgenstein” 355). The magistrate identifies with the barbarian girl because of their shared experience of pain and the problematic relation between pain and language they are both faced with.

drink, to relieve itself, to find the posture in which it is least sore” (112). Old, tattered, and bruised, he is a humiliated body. Nashef argues, “Unjust political systems, be they apartheid, colonialism, or dictatorship can only contribute to a stripping away of dignity” (177). In his utter humiliation, he is even a grotesque body, “The central figure of the modern grotesque, then, is not alienated man but *humiliated* man” (emphasis original; McElroy 22). He is made to acknowledge the undeniable authority of the suffering body:

But my torturers were not interested in degrees of pain. They were interested only in demonstrating to me what it meant to live in a body, as a body, a body which can entertain notions of justice only as long as it is whole and well, which very soon forgets them when its head is gripped and a pipe is pushed down its gullet and pints of salt water are poured into it till it coughs and retches and flails and voids itself. (113)

As a tortured body confined in a cell, the magistrate intensely feels what his body goes through. Scarry writes that pain destroys language, “unmakes” the world, and appropriates consciousness: “It is the intense pain that destroys a person’s self and world, a destruction experienced spatially as either the contraction of the universe down to the immediate vicinity of the body or as the body swelling to fill the entire universe” (35). Ironically, the tortured magistrate thinks that Joll and Mandel come to his cell to show him “the meaning of humanity” (113). Formerly a “happily corpulent man” (May 405) indulgent in the frontier post’s delights and at ease with his body, he becomes trapped in

a damaged body he cannot silence.<sup>109</sup> Hence, the “ineluctability of the body” (May 407), imperial or native, continues to be a pivotal, and problematized, theme in *WB*.

The speculations of the tortured magistrate on pain and the experience of embodiment show the overlap between the body and discourse. The body in pain is constructed in the act of being written into a narrative of pain. It is also constructed in being institutionalized. In penal systems, and when punishment is not direct torture, according to Foucault, “it is always the body that is at issue—the body and its forces, their utility and their docility, their distribution and their submission” (*Discipline* 25). The magistrate’s torturers seek degrading him as a body and intensifying his abject bodily being. The magistrate, as Rich argues, “is not entirely a disembodied idealism” but rather “a fuller individual character” (“Apartheid” 386). Although it is his uneasy consciousness that haunts the novel, he dwells on the viscerality of his private punishment. According to Richard Barney, *WB* is an instance of “a storyline that exposes the visceral abuses of colonial rule while it also records the ambiguous turns of a man caught in near Prufrockian uncertainty” (17). The magistrate’s torturers erratically deprive him of, or just forget to offer him, food and water, and sometimes they skip exercise days, which makes him aware of the abject status of his body. They make him run naked in the yard, jump, and do tricks (114). And the institutional hold on the body in the form of privations continues: “I smell of shit. I am not permitted to wash. The flies follow me everywhere, circling around the appetizing sore on my cheek, alighting if I stand still for a moment” (114). He is made to experience the body at the bare level of

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<sup>109</sup> Part of the contradictory position of the liberal magistrate is that, as Coetzee points out in a 1982 interview with Rhedin, “he wants the ease of the life that he has had,” but this life is “an imperial life,” one that “has been based on conquest” (6). This is why the magistrate has to face the harsh realities of imperialism in the form of interrogation and torture.

animalistic existence, “There is no way of dying allowed to me, it seems, except like a dog” (115).<sup>110</sup> They perform a mock execution with the magistrate hung on a mulberry tree in a woman’s smock (115).<sup>111</sup> As Nashef argues, the degradation and exclusion associated with “becoming-animal” are compounded now by the humiliation of another becoming, “becoming-woman” (“Becomings” 27). In torture, he is repeatedly made to identify with the tortured girl.<sup>112</sup> His hands are tied, and he is asked to climb a ladder. He floats swinging in the air with his head covered in a hood. Then he is pulled through his tied hands upwards. His hands are behind him, and as he is lifted his shoulders tear and he bellows like an animal from pain: “From my throat comes the first mournful dry bellow, like the pouring of gravel. ... I bellow again and again, there is nothing I can do to stop it, the noise comes out of a body that knows itself damaged perhaps beyond repair and roars its fright” (119). Scarry writes, “physical pain always mimes death and the infliction of physical pain is always a mock execution” (31). In its symbolic role as humanity’s martyr, the magistrate’s body speaks for its own suffering and “bellows” on its own. It cannot stop the pain inflicted on it, but it assumes an agency in expressing it.

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<sup>110</sup> Interestingly, K’s final verdict on his own execution in Kafka’s *The Trial* is: “Like a dog!”

<sup>111</sup> This form of sexual degradation and as part of physical torture is reminiscent of a real-life counterpart whereby some tortured Iraqi prisoners of Abu Ghraib were forced to be naked or wear women’s clothes. The breaking of sexual codes as a form of debasement in torture is the common link.

<sup>112</sup> Yeoh warns us that the magistrate’s narrative can be “unreliable” and more consolatory for the magistrate rather than “a genuine narrative of empathy” (“Coetzee and Beckett” 340). Yeoh writes: “As opposed to truth-telling and genuine empathy, the magistrate’s narrative is a self-serving self deception” (“Coetzee and Beckett” 341). Yeoh argues that the magistrate manipulates language to evoke his empathy toward the barbarian girl and her father. If the magistrate is concerned with telling his story rather than with telling the truth, as Yeoh contends, we have to concede that suffering and torture make of the magistrate a victim of oppression just like the girl and that just as he struggles to articulate his own suffering in language we cannot expect him to produce an authentic account of the suffering of others. The barbarian girl herself, silent about her experiences, does not help the magistrate in his attempts to fathom her story.

The magistrate is aware that his punishment, no matter how physical and spectacular it is, aims at breaking his will and degrading him through the medium of his body. He says of Mandel, “He deals with my soul: every day he folds the flesh aside and exposes my soul to the light; he has probably seen many souls in the course of his working life, but the care of souls seems to have left no more mark on him than the care of hearts leaves on the surgeon” (116). Foucault writes that when penalty targets the body less directly, it is more directed to the soul, on “the heart, the thoughts, the will, the inclinations” (16). The Empire uses disciplinary regimens that regulate the body through diet, exercise, and other deprivations—which produces the institutionalized body—and yet resorts to a more direct hold on the body. When the magistrate is hoisted on the tree and he screams with pain, ““He is calling his barbarian friends,” someone observes. ‘That’s barbarian language you hear’” (119). Scarry argues, “Physical pain does not simply resist language but actively destroys it, bringing about an immediate reversion to a state anterior to language, to the sounds and cries a human being makes before language is learned” (4). Scarry adds, “Intense pain is world-destroying” (29). In intense personal pain, the body is faced with the problem of articulation. It may not find the adequate language to capture its suffering and becomes an inarticulate body, or language loses its communicative potential.

After this spectacle of suffering and humiliation, the magistrate is deserted and torture relents. His body continues to assert its material presence; he begs his food (127) and his “sex begins to reassert itself” (145). He views his body as having an existence of its own: “There is no heap of response. It is like touching my own wrist: part of myself, but hard, dull, a limb with no life of its own” (146). The magistrate, highly affected by

his experience with the girl, drifts into an ontological discourse about his own aging body and sexual drives. He returns to the story of personal pain and the whims of an aging body: “Sometimes my sex seemed to me another being entirely, a stupid animal living parasitically upon me, swelling and dwindling according to autonomous appetites, anchored to my flesh with claws I could not detach” (45). However, he finds consolation neither in the girl’s tortured body nor in his own. And to show the constructed nature of history, like the body, as discourse, he reflects on imperial history as well. Mandel stays in the post for a while and Joll goes again on an expedition to terminate the barbarians. As a harsh winter approaches, the magistrate reflects,

What has made it impossible for us to live in time like fish in water, like birds in air, like children? It is the fault of Empire! Empire has created the time of history. Empire has located its existence not in the smooth recurrent spinning time of the cycle of the seasons but in the jagged time of fall of rise and fall, of beginning and end, of catastrophe. Empire dooms itself to live in history and plot against history. One thought alone preoccupies the submerged mind of Empire: how not to end, how not to die, how to prolong its era. (131)<sup>113</sup>

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<sup>113</sup> Interestingly, the anonymous, generic Empire the magistrate describes without the definite article “the” brings to mind the way the term is used by Hardt and Negri in their book *Empire*. There is a crucial difference, though. Empire for Hardt and Negri contrasts with imperialism because the globalized, inclusionary Empire of postmodernity erases boundaries; it “establishes no territorial center of power and does not rely on fixed boundaries or barriers” (xii). Moreover, Empire is not “a historical regime originating in conquest” but “an order that effectively suspends history” (xiv). By contrast, the Empire of which the magistrate is a servant is based on perpetuating Manichean differences and essential divisions between itself and its supposed enemies. It is a colonial Empire whose Capital, the center, is trying to secure its borders, the periphery, by eliminating barbarian threats. Coetzee’s Empire seeks to appropriate barbarian land and then establish its territorial hold on it by cultivating it and building settlements on it, which counters the de-territorial, decentered nature of the global Empire. Moreover, it is an Empire that manipulates history yet is doomed to fall with time. The concept of “Empire” is undergoing mutations and becoming a globalized, contemporary condition beyond political units.

History as a material reality of oppression enacted on the body reemerges as a self-conscious discourse. This history is to be erased by another phase, “After which the barbarians will wipe their backsides on the town archives” (140). The literate Empire is to be overcome by people who do not have institutionalized knowledge, for the barbarians are “men with arrows and rusty old guns who live in tents and never wash and cannot read or write” (140).<sup>114</sup> He wants history to redeem him (112), but for the Empire border troubles, like the one he is tortured for, are “too trivial” to be history (112). The novel, hence, comments on the status of history as a discourse in the same way it establishes the body as a discourse.

Before he sends the girl to her people, the magistrate feels he wants to write two documents, a letter to the provincial governor explaining his journey as an attempt to repair the damage done by Joll and his men to the relations with the barbarians (57), which he writes and seals. The other document he is not sure about: “A testament? A memoir? A confession? A history of thirty years on the frontier? All that day I sit in a trance at my desk staring at the empty white paper waiting for words to come. .... It seems appropriate that a man who does not know what to do with the woman in his bed should not know what to write” (56-57). The magistrate makes a metafictional analogy between his abortive attempts to fathom the essential embodiment of the girl and his inability to write, thus articulating the difficulty of representing bodily materiality without the limited mediation of language. He fails, and history in his final thoughts emerges as a reflexive construct, a discourse rather than a particular reality. The magistrate wants to write a history of the last days of the settlement and leave a record of

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<sup>114</sup> As Moses argues, “the fundamental distinction between civilization and barbarism is that between the lettered and the unlettered” (117). Writing traditionally entails knowledge, learning, and culture.

the settlement for posterity. What he ends up attempting to write seems, however, more like short diary entries of the last days of the settlement. His “devious” imperial language, what he calls “the locutions of a civil servant” (151), cannot truthfully or adequately articulate the brutal colonial history of the Empire.

In the ruins in the desert, the magistrate digs out wooden slips with unknown script that he experiments with reading in different arrangements. He uses his archeological interests to reflect on the mutable nature of history: “Perhaps in my digging I have only scratched the surface. Perhaps ten feet below the floor lie the ruins of another fort, razed by the barbarians, peopled with the bones of folk who thought they would find safety behind high walls” (15). The wooden slips he is asked to interpret and taken to be secret messages with the barbarians are ironically read by the magistrate to Joll and Mandel as an allegorized history, as an allegory of imperial oppression, “as a history of the last years of the Empire—the old Empire, I mean” (110), as messages from a bereaved father to a daughter (108), or of tortured bodies with broken feet and stitched eyes (109). One character on a slip is read as the barbarian word for “war,” “justice,” or “vengeance.” “They form an allegory” in that they “can be read in many orders” and “each slip can be read in many ways” (109). He allegorizes the materially oppressed body into a story that can be freely constructed and that is applicable to many situations. Historical injustices perpetrated on the body are constructed discursively and mediated via language, and history becomes a postmodern discourse that is allegorized. Bodily suffering happens and is real, but there is no way of capturing or representing it without the mediation of language, without discursive allegorization.

### III. *Life and Times of Michael K*: The Body vs. the State

The visceral, embodied experiences of domination and control—the immediate manifestation of colonial corporeality—were an integral part of governmental practices of codifying, categorizing, and racializing difference.

#### A. Rao and S. Pierce, “Discipline and the Other Body”

In a famous review entitled “The Idea of Gardening,” Gordimer objects to Coetzee’s allegorical approach in *LTMK* and his hero’s lack of revolutionary potential. Gordimer accuses the novel of “revulsion” from history and radical politics. She discredits the novel for an apparent lack of affinity between the private and the public. *LTMK* is for her at fault because of its allegorical, ahistorical universalism, like the earlier Coetzee novels that project political horrors into different times and planes.<sup>115</sup> She is frustrated that at a moment when K can join the guerillas, he decides not to be engaged in the war. His refusal to actively resist oppression, he reasons, is because “enough men had gone off to war saying the time for gardening was when the war was over; whereas there must be men to stay behind and keep gardening alive, or at least the idea of gardening” (109). One reviewer dismisses the novel’s relevance and sees its protagonist as an “amoeba, from whose life we can draw neither example nor warning because it is too far removed from the norm, unnatural, almost inhuman. Certainly those interested in understanding or transforming South African society can learn little from the life and

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<sup>115</sup> See my Introduction, esp. pp. 15-16. What applies to *LTMK* as an allegory also applies to *WB*, though *LTMK* is more specifically South African in its setting than *WB*.

times of Michael K” (qtd. in Attwell; *South* 92).<sup>116</sup> Stephan Helgesson summarizes much of the critical reaction to the novel by saying that “Coetzee was praised for ‘finally’, after three dire experiments in allegory and derealisation, depicting a recognizable South Africa – but at the same time censured for his lack of political affect” (183). However, K, as Watson argues, is “intent on eluding colonization whether it be the colonization of the body (through labor camps) or the colonization of the mind (through charity)” (“Colonialism” 370). K’s body signals withdrawal from civil war yet a tacit rejection of oppression and the manipulation of bodies by the polity, a future South African state in this case. His body, like those of the barbarian girl and the magistrate in *WB*, is not totally pliant; it asserts its own materiality and ontological being. Pitted against the discursive construction by a state in civil war, K’s body, I argue, resists institutionalization and asserts a politically and ethically significant materiality.

In a 1983 interview, Coetzee defends himself and his choice of a protagonist by arguing that *LTMK* “didn’t turn out to be a book about *becoming*... but a book about *being*, which merely entailed that K go on being himself, despite everything” (emphasis original; Morphet 455). As such, the novel is about a resistant bodily being, which, in turn, can be allegorized and read as the material bodily being of the oppressed in history. For Jameson, third-world texts—“even those which are seemingly private and invested with a properly libidinal dynamic—necessarily project a political dimension in the form of national allegory: *the story of the private individual destiny is always an allegory of the embattled situation of the public third-world culture and society*” (emphasis original;

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<sup>116</sup> Watson similarly notes K’s escape from camps and history. Watson asks, “What sort of model does he provide for we, readers, who have to live *in* history and could not survive elsewhere? ... Is Michael K’s achievement (for the time being) really enough?” (emphasis original; “Colonialism” 389-90).

“Third-World” 69).<sup>117</sup> This assertion problematizes the negative criticism the novel received and serves my goal of examining its representation of the body. Coetzee’s retreat from revolutionary history within a specific South Africa can be an assertion of another universalized, discursive history of oppression enacted on the other body.

In *LTMK*,<sup>118</sup> Coetzee articulates a distinction between material bodies living as such and discursive/disciplined bodies subjected to state inscriptions. The authoritarian Empire in *WB* becomes in *LTMK* a hegemonic future South African state in civil war. As in *WB*, the “leaky” body is implicated in political power relations and wavers between a material body with irreducible physicality and a docile, submissive one. The body is subjected to the discursive impact of disciplinary institutions and resists the construction of its materiality. As in *WB*, the body dominates the narrative as a discourse and becomes in its physical affliction a trope for political injustices that cannot be easily represented.

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<sup>117</sup> I am aware of Aijaz Ahmad’s critique of Jameson’s argument and his exposition of this argument as exaggerated and inaccurate. However, and despite Ahmad’s valid rebuttal of Jameson’s generalizations and totalizing division of the world, I am implying that Jameson’s comment is relevant here because Coetzee has been criticized for this lack of affinity between the private destiny of his protagonists and their sociopolitical milieu. The novel, I argue, invites an allegorical interpretation of the relationship between K’s life and those of countless marginalized others in South Africa. Although Ahmad is not happy with Jameson’s polemical contention that the third world can be defined in terms of its “experience of colonialism and imperialism” (“Third-World” 67), Coetzee himself suggests in an interview the primacy of the colonial experience in establishing a historical relationship between apartheid and colonization in South Africa and suggests that the South African situation is part of a larger situation that has to do with different manifestations of colonialism (See my Introduction, esp. pp. 24-25). In another interview with Penner, Coetzee distinguishes between two audiences for his fiction represented by the United States and South Africa. The latter, he states, read his books “in a particular way” determined by “Marxism, by general Third World thinking” (*Countries* 75). This notion of the “Third World” is a contested term for Ahmad and Jameson just as it is a problematic one in Coetzee’s own writings. It can be found in texts in different degrees and based on the perspective of the critic. For Ahmad’s article, see Works Cited.

<sup>118</sup> Coetzee has denied in an interview with Morphet a debt to Kafka for the name of his titular protagonist K. He said “I don’t believe that Kafka has an exclusive right to the letter K. Nor is Prague the center of the universe” (457). Although this might serve to exclude Kafka’s protagonists Joseph K and K in *The Trial* and *The Castle* respectively from an affinity with Coetzee’s protagonists at the level of names, a thematic affinity between Coetzee’s K and Kafka’s protagonists can be detected in correspondences between K and Kafka’s hunger artist in a short story of that title. Moreover, Coetzee is not writing in a vacuum hermetically sealed from other literary influences.

Even in its refusal to signify much beyond its own deformed physicality, the body constructs and allegorizes itself as the other body, which endows it with political and ethical import as the deformed body figures its marginalized situation. The disfigured, emaciated body of K is a trope for political unrest in South Africa—which shows how bodies can be constructed and inscribed in political discourse—and a text to be read by the officials in the rehabilitation/labor camps and schools K frequents. While in *WB* we looked at clear cases of bodily pain and torture within an Empire that claims to be a superior state with institutions, in *LTMK* we find more emphasis on the institutional and structural violence of unjust systems or state organs against individuals.

i. Institutional and Discursive Bodies

K's body as a material reality is subjected to sociopolitical and medical constructions employed by the state, to institutions of control like military camps and hospitals. K is institutionalized as mentally slow when he is a child. The state boarding school Huis Norenius, where K's mother sends him as a child, takes over the role of the absent father and enforces silence on him via its regulations. K becomes a nuisance to his mother because of his minor yet symbolic disabilities. "Because of his disfigurement and because his mind was not quick, Michael was taken out of school after a short trial and committed to the protection of Huis Norenius ... in the company of other variously afflicted and unfortunate children ..." (4). K thinks of this mental institution for the handicapped and homeless as his authoritative father:

My father was the list of rules on the door of the dormitory, the twenty-one rules of which the first was 'There will be silence in dormitories at all times,' and the

woodwork teacher with the missing fingers who twisted my ear when the line was not straight, and the Sunday mornings when we put on our khaki shirts and our khaki shorts and our black socks and our black shoes and marched two abreast to the church on Papegaai Street to be forgiven. They were my father, and my mother is buried and not yet risen. (105)

The Huis Norenius enforces rules of social behavior and uniform dress on him and his mates. His body is subjected to institutional control and normalization techniques and treated as part of a collective social body of “docile” individuals. These Foucauldian institutions are a means of discursive control. K leaves this state-run institution to do physical tasks and becomes a gardener for another disciplinary system, the municipality of Cape Town. Foucault writes, “Power is everywhere; not because it embraces everything, but because it comes from everywhere” (*History* 93).<sup>119</sup> Clastres also argues that “the political is at the very heart of the social” (23), meaning that there is no society without power and that “political power” is “*universal*, immanent to social reality” (emphasis original; 22). K lives the life of a marginalized body in a politically turbulent country where men exploit him, just as he is exploited by the system, and women do not befriend him because of his face disfigurement (4). Because his life is intertwined with the pervasive state power, K is subjected to what Foucault would call “bio-power.”

K and his sick mother, a domestic servant for a white family who is sick with dropsy, seek to live a peaceful life away from the political turmoil of Cape Town. His

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<sup>119</sup> This Foucauldian conception of power as all-pervasive should not mean that it has no specific locus or that power itself becomes meaningless. Nor should the inclusiveness of power render resistance futile. Understanding the social dynamics of power is as essential as attempting to subvert them. In fact, if the dispersed, discursive power of institutions is at a disadvantage, the material body as such gets dominant.

mother, as a materially sick body, is hospitalized for breathing problems, itchy skin, and a worsening dropsy: “gross swellings of the legs and arms; later her belly had begun to swell too” (5). K is bothered by the physical intimacy of having to spend time with his sick mother in her room in Sea Point and see her “swollen legs” when he helps her out of bed (7). They want to withdraw from all forms of militant strife and dehumanization. However, their weak bodies are forced into a docile status as they are manipulated by structures of control like curfews, military convoys, internment camps, fences, railways, check points, and other disciplinary tactics which attempt to limit their movements and observe their activities. The state wields discursive control over the body via its bureaucracies restricting movements/communication and its social institutions. As Foucault would argue, the new models of penalty, other than those of public display of corporeal punishment, consisted of techniques for controlling the body by coercing and managing movement in space, observation, examination, and exercise. The power exercised over the body constructs it out of and in relation to the social body and makes it conform to norms. K and his mother are suffering bodies and manipulated subjects. They use buses for transportation and are bound by timetables, curfews, food queues, and sirens. At a bus stop, they find “a long queue” and although the “timetable” posted promises a bus “every fifteen minutes,” they wait “for an hour;” and when the bus comes it has no available seats, which makes K embrace his mother to support her (5-6). When they decide to go to Prince Albert and leave the Cape area, they have to make reservations and get travel permits to use the train. K’s desire to be alone and avoid war is confronted with the state’s imposition of discipline via permits, patrols, convoys, and fences. At the railway station waiting for travel permits, “K pleaded for an earlier

departure, but in vain: the state of his mother's health did not constitute special grounds, the clerk told him; on the contrary, he would advise him not to mention her condition at all" (9).<sup>120</sup> Just as the state institutions regulate health and illness, they also regulate the body in space and time by way of containing the threat of otherness it poses.

K's mother, who lived ignored in a small room belonging to her white employers, is also unattended in a crowded hospital described as a "purgatory" and full of uncaring nurses and "scores of victims of stabbings and beatings and gunshot wounds" (5). Her marginalization is the reason why she insists on leaving the city and begins to dream of "escaping from the careless violence, the packed buses, the food queues, arrogant shopkeepers, thieves and beggars, sirens in the night, the curfew, the cold and wet, and returning to a countryside where, if she was going to die, she would at least die under blue skies" (8). When she dies in a hospital en route to her birthplace farm in Prince Albert, K continues with his mother's ashes. Picked up by the police for not having a travel permit, K is arrested and assigned to a labor gang working on the track. His movements and actions are observed and controlled. The docile body is normalized and disciplined to produce maximum results: "K could not finish the lukewarm slab of mealie-porridge. The guards and the two overseers were going among them now, clapping their hands and prodding them to stand up" (43). The docile body for Foucault is an efficacious social property, "the object of a collective and useful appropriation"

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<sup>120</sup> In the apartheid South Africa, blacks were controlled via a system of passes and employment permits. Those whose papers were not signed or stamped by the state authorities were often arrested. The idea was to control the flow of blacks into urban centers. Coetzee may well be alluding to this bureaucratic aspect of life under apartheid that restricted movement. James Barber makes a distinction between "'petty apartheid', which was concerned with people's daily lives—the buses and trains in which they could travel, the doors they could use to enter public buildings, the seats they could sit on in public parks, and so on—and 'grand apartheid' which was designed to divide South Africans, and the geographical area of the state, on racial lines" (141). Apartheid, we should remember, was an extensive system of segregation with racial, economic, political, and social aspects.

(*Discipline* 109). While the state has an all-oppressive system of disciplinary control over the body, K remains elusive and resistant to all attempts at discursive construction. He escapes his first assignment at the labor gang. Fleeing the Visagie Prince Albert farm, he is picked up for vagrancy by the police in a shivering, delirious state. At the station, he is offered food that his body rejects, “K accepted a thick slab of mealie-porridge but, even before the first spoonful had reached his mouth, had begun his retching” (70).

He is taken by the police to another disciplinary institution of discursive power, a hospital. There he feels hungry again in a place where bodies want to be whole even if this entails being dependent on the food the state provides to keep bodies under control: “An orderly came in with a trolley. Everyone got a tray except K. Smelling the food, he felt the saliva seep in his mouth. It was the first hunger he had known for a long time. He was not sure that he wanted to become a servant of hunger again; but a hospital, it seemed, was a place for bodies, where bodies asserted their rights” (71). The same body that the state tries to contain and manipulate at the collective level as a social body asserts its materiality at the individual level. The police report misnames him “Michael Visagie” and includes the classification codes “CM” and “NFA” on his paperwork (70).<sup>121</sup> The state assumes it can code and decode other bodies as it wants. The doctor who examines him at the hospital notices his mouth and tells him it is correctable (72) but does not offer to do so. The police take him out of the hospital to a labor camp, Jakkalsdrif, fenced and guarded. Foucault writes, “The carceral network, in its compact or disseminated forms, with its systems of insertion, distribution, surveillance, observation, has been the greatest support, in modern society, of the normalizing power” (*Discipline* 304). This camp, K

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<sup>121</sup> These are often understood within apartheid politics as standing for “Colored Male” and “No Fixed Abode.” See for example Poyner (*Paradox* 69).

thinks in line with Foucault, is another Huis Norenius (74), another institution in a “carceral network.” The labor camp exploits the workers as a source of cheap labor. In this disciplinary institution, bath times are specified for men and women (75), children’s food is distributed in rations to people in line (76), and people are expected to do tasks to get their food (77).<sup>122</sup> K wants to leave the camp and feels he does not fit into this disciplinary system: “I am like an ant that does not know where its hole is, he thought” (83). The camp is a place for docile bodies, bodies taken to work every morning in trucks, bodies that eat camp food, get sick, and die. But K, although his resistance is not militant, is not exactly a docile body, and thus he flees this labor camp and returns to the farm in the Karoo country.

When K is again captured for presumably assisting local guerillas, he draws the attention of others as a material body. A soldier picks and dangles his arm, which felt like “something alien, a stick protruding from his body” (121). The soldiers take him back to Prince Albert, and when he collapses during physical training, he is sent this time to a rehabilitation camp. K is brought like a skeleton, weighing less than 40 pounds (129). He refuses food and is kept on a drip. The medical officer examines his open mouth to check his oral deformity and sees “A simple incomplete cleft, with some displacement of the septum. The palate intact.” (130). The medic explains to K (who explains how he did not like the music that played day and night at Huis Norenius) that the music he used to hear at his childhood institution was meant to discipline and keep the inmates calm, ““to

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<sup>122</sup> In *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life*, Giorgio Agamben argues that camps, especially concentration camps, are “exemplary places of modern biopolitics” (4) whereby “power confronts nothing but pure life” (171). The labor camp in the novel is similarly an instance of direct political power exerted on the lives of its inhabitants, most of them vagrants or homeless people but used to aid the state in its war effort against the revolutionaries. It might be worth mentioning that there is a historical connection between concentration camps and South Africa. The British invented them during the Anglo-Boer Wars.

soothe your savage beast”” (132). However, the discursive power of such disciplinary institutions, as I argue in the next section, fails to contain the resistant materiality of K’s body, a failure that only highlights the body’s materiality. The medic muses if rehabilitation pursued by the state turns recalcitrant corporeality into docile bodies that aid the state in its war effort against the insurgents:

We are given an old racetrack and a quantity of barbed wire and told to effect a change in men’s souls. Not being experts on the soul but assuming cautiously that it has some connection with the body, we set our captives to doing pushups and marching back and forth. We also ply them with items from the brass band repertoire and show them films of young men in neat uniforms demonstrating to grizzled village elders how to eradicate mosquitoes and plough along the contour. At the end of the process we certify them cleansed and pack them off to the labour battalions to carry water and dig latrines. (134)

The camp is a general disciplinary institution meant to rehabilitate people, regulate/unify their behavior, and make them do menial tasks like cleaning, digging, or repairing. It functions discursively through surveillance to normalize the body. Unlike the Empire in *WB* that often uses public torture and inflicts pain, the state in *LTMK* conforms to Foucault’s assertion that “Physical pain, the pain of the body itself, is no longer the constituent element of the penalty” (*Discipline* 11). However, the institutions of disciplinary control do not always succeed in bringing about normalized behavior and conforming bodies. As Helgesson argues, the attempts of the state, “the main agent of war, to contain difference through incarceration, roadblocks, camps, surveillance and ‘rehabilitation’ simply propagate difference. The war produces the parasitical other that

eludes it, and the larger and more intense the war becomes, the more parasites it will (presumably) produce” (225). The docile body inscribed and discursively constructed by the state is not everything in *LTMK*. The material body itself is an end and, I argue next, it can resist attempts to construct and contain its aberrant materiality.

ii. “Real” Resistant Bodies

In their book *Empire*, Hardt and Negri briefly hint at K’s resistance to discursive construction when they describe him as “a figure of absolute refusal” (203). Their description of Melville’s Bartleby as another figure of “pure passivity” and refusal, as “a figure of generic being, being as such, being and nothing more” stripped down to “naked humanity, naked life, naked being” (203) also applies to K who is simply a body concerned with its being. As such, Hardt and Negri describe K in his sheer refusal as situated on the realm of globalized being, “on a level of ontological purity” and “naked universality” (204). Hardt and Negri acknowledge the political power of refusal and associate this refusal with just “the beginning of liberatory politics” in need of further collective action (204). The regimental control of state institutions makes K’s will but not his body yield. Timothy Strode writes that K’s body refuses “to embody or be embodied by an alienating environment. K’s resistance signifies a refusal to be domesticated, as if his body has acquired a nature constitutionally unfit for the conditions in which it finds itself” (185). K resists conformity as a material body that is both anorexic and grotesque. His resistance, in turn, allegorizes the real body as a trope for material oppression.

*LTMK* begins as K is being born into the world and as the midwife first observes his harelip, “The lip curled like a snail’s foot, the left nostril gaped” (3). This physical

deformity objectifies/degrades him and dominates much of his life dealings. His mouth does not close as he grows and reveals the flesh of the mouth, and nor does the nose straighten with time (3). His mother “shivered to think of what had been growing in her all these months. The child could not suck from the breast and cried with hunger. She tried a bottle; when it could not suck from the bottle she fed it with a teaspoon, fretting with impatience when it coughed and spluttered and cried” (3). Post rightly observes that K’s “harelip gets more attention than his color” (73). K as a grotesque body demands more attention than K as a black or colored one. The army deserter, the Visagie’s grandson, upon first meeting K in the farm, “did not shift his gaze from K’s bad mouth” (60). Oral deformity is not just the loss of voice or privilege but a trope for hunger, exploitation, poverty, and oppression in history as well. It is what viscerally figures the minimal living conditions of K and his mother as the downtrodden. The disabled/deformed body is K’s material status in history as one of the dispossessed, the inarticulate.<sup>123</sup> In this sense, the material body is ultimately a discursive one despite its resistance. Within our interpretive schemes, it is a material body and then a figurative one. However, most critics usually highlight the latter at the expense of the former.<sup>124</sup>

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<sup>123</sup> As Cindy LaCom argues, disabled characters in literary texts can “serve critical political and ideological purposes during a particular postcolonial moment in their respective nations” (138).

<sup>124</sup> For example, Head sees in K’s silence “a sign of disenfranchisement as well as resistance” (*Coetzee* 98). Kossew sees in K’s harelip a “metaphor for the impediment to his voice imposed on him by being ‘coloured’ in a white apartheid society” (*Pen* 128). Richard Wright associates the harelip with K’s blackness as blacks were not allowed to speak freely (*New* 93). Dovey sees in K, and in the context of white South African writing, a representation of the figure of “the oppressed, handicapped, illiterate, if not inarticulate, victims of the system” that allows Coetzee to tell their stories and experiences that “would otherwise remain untold” (*Novels* 265). For Dovey, K’s face, open mouth and gaping nose, “is a sign of the handicapped being, a visible sign of the inarticulate condition” (*Novels* 274). Quayson argues that the “inarticulate racial others also represent the convergence of disabling physical and social conditions, even if Coetzee is careful to foreground only the physical ones” (149). K for Quayson “has a harelip but is inarticulate also because he is an underclass colored person in apartheid South Africa” (149). Gallagher writes, “As a physically handicapped, coloured, apparently simple-minded gardener who works

Indeed, the deformed body is also a trope for the political injustices inscribed on it since a physical condition is made to represent a cultural one. By virtue of his racial status, K's inarticulate position becomes enforced on him, and his body carries the marks of oppression. However, these inarticulate victims can be viewed as material bodies before this materiality is viewed discursively. The emaciated, disfigured body of K allegorically speaks for itself and other subjugated bodies even in its refusal to tell a story. And Coetzee allows us to read this body as a material suffering that cannot be easily accounted for. Actually, critics and characters within the novel try to impose meaning on K and force him to signify within their systems. Nevertheless, we need to pay more attention in our interpretations to the peculiarities of this body as a material body before it is a discursive outlet for power relations with which it is entangled. The material body exists as a body in itself and is an ultimate physical reality, object in itself (being-in-itself) to be contrasted with consciousness (being-for-itself) in existential thought. K can be read, in a sense, as a disabled body before he is a political trope and even as a material body before he is a conscious mind. Quayson studies the representations of what he calls "the autistic spectrum in literary writing" and reads K's silence as a manifestation of a "cognitive disorder" like autism (147). Silence and social withdrawal are for Quayson some of the main aspects of such an autistic spectrum or disability (155). Indeed, K has a problem articulating himself: "Always, when he tried to explain himself to himself, there remained a gap, a hole, a darkness before which his

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for the Council and lives in a hostel, Michael epitomizes those at the margins of power and authority who have been repeatedly silenced in South Africa" (*Story* 162-3). All such accounts focus on what K represents rather than on how he does so via the materiality of his body. They ignore the literal body and its specific nature in their concern with the body's figurative potential.

understanding balked, into which it was useless to pour words. The words were eaten up, the gap remained. His was always a story with a hole in it: a wrong story, always wrong” (110). A man who works with him on a railway track is surprised that K does not talk and thinks K “must be sick” (43). K’s lack of communication with others calls him back to the autistic realm of the withdrawn body. K exists as a body for himself and for the other who observes K’s harelip and inarticulateness. Because Coetzee is careful not to speak for the other and aware of his own inability to render the materiality of histories of oppression in realistic, straightforward terms, he creates characters who have oral deformities like the hare-lipped K and the tongueless Friday in *Foe*.

K lives a minimal, a raw existence devoid of meaning, yet his consciousness that constitutes being-for-itself is one haunted by the body. His body haunts his conscious being. K refuses to eat mechanically, associates the food he grows himself with an experience of transcendence, and thanks God for the sweet pumpkin he eats. He exercises control over his body by making it go for long spans of time without food. His body, the in-itself, is conflated with his ongoing bodily consciousness, what constitutes for Sartre “being-for-itself.” Coetzee asserts the materiality of the body as a body and makes consciousness what endows the body with its human nature. For Sartre unconscious being is being-in-itself. Bodies have their own inherent existence, and their being is not a being-for-itself but rather a solid, inert one. Hence, the body is a material reality before the consciousness constructs it and endows it with meanings. It is a constant reminder for the active consciousness about being a body. In Sartre, the ontological proof of the existence of the body as a body/object is its being/thingness, one that is external to consciousness yet haunts it. The body occupies the realm of lived, concrete being, Being-

in-itself (the object of consciousness) as opposed to conscious being (being-for-itself). It is a nagging body subjecting us to its drives and desires even when we try to negate them.

K's is a body that is elementary. It is prior to attempts to make it conform to codes or perform functions. Even when K tries to denigrate the visceral materiality of this body and starve/transcend it, instincts and desires assert themselves every now and then, and he finds himself eating from the earth and even hunting birds, insects, and lizards. He is forced to live like an animal and to recede to the earth where his consciousness is preoccupied with the body and its processes. His daily drama of bodily being consists of feeding his body, sleeping, tolerating illness and the cold, and walking long distances. K retains his appetite early in the novel, eating and buying food whenever there is a chance. He even drinks and eats the tea and biscuits offered to his sick mother in the hospital, "He stole his mother's tea and that of the old woman in the next bed, gulping it down like a guilty dog while the orderly's back was turned" (30). He eats a pie and finds it "so delicious that tears came to his eyes" (30). Even after his mother's death in a hospital he drinks the tea brought to him and eats a tray of hospital food. He begins to feel weaker, grows more silent, and sleeps more after her death, "He ate once a day, buying doughnuts or pies with money from his mother's purse" (34). On his way to Prince Albert, "He had not eaten for two days; however, there seemed to be no limits to his endurance" (35). Anorexia, like torture and disease, forces the body into the material realm and a corresponding introspection about body limits and the relation between body and self. Like obesity, it heightens one's consciousness about one's body. The body is the blank canvas on which K creates his being in health and illness. On the way to the Karoo farm, K eats birds and raw food like fruits and roots. If food fills us with a certain mode of

being, K is happy to be ontologically dependent on the land: “From a feeding trough beside a dam he scooped half a tinful of crushed mealies and bonemeal, boiled it in water, and ate the gritty mush. He filled his beret with more of the feed, thinking: At last I am living off the land” (46). For Head, K’s association with the earth is a “deliberate gesture of materiality” and an attempt to “resuscitate a kind of realism” (110). By attaching himself to the earth, K is redeeming his body from the manipulation of the state. Anorexia itself may be an unconscious reaction against being at the mercy of the oppressive state for food and shelter.

Duncan Chesney argues that K’s “experience on the mountain and the farm reduces him to sheer body, outside of human commerce and time, but if K is a figure of barely human existence, it is not in some mystical, presocial connection to the earth or in any equally mystical transcendence” (310). That is, K’s raw bodily existence is a product of the society he is in and power relations and yet something that exists before or away from them. K is for Chesney an irreducible materiality, “an aporetic figure that will not be simplified” (316). K’s bodily being dominates his mode of life on the farm. He becomes preoccupied with an ontological body that asserts its needs. As he reaches the farm, he rests and discovers some goats. It comes to his mind that such creatures must be “caught, killed, cut up and eaten if he hoped to live” (52). As the nagging body annoys with its desires and instincts, he plunges after the goats with his penknife. He straddles one and presses its head under the water of the dam, “I must be hard, the thought came to him, I must press through to the end, I must not relent. He could feel the goat’s hindquarters heaving beneath him; it bleated again and again in terror; its body jerked in spasms” (53). When he looks at the corpse again and tries to haul it out of the water, “The

urgency of the hunger that had possessed yesterday was gone. The thought of cutting up and devouring this ugly thing with its wet, matted hair repelled him” (55). He cuts off and roasts a haunch and eats it “without pleasure, thinking only: What will I do when the goat is consumed?” (56). He grows feverish with a cold, coughs, and is physically weak. His skin “felt hot and dry, his head ached, he swallowed with difficulty” (56). He is delirious on this farm and sickness, like hunger and nausea, becomes another mode of bodily being: “There was a pleasure in abandoning himself to sickness” (57). As he recovers, he learns a lesson from the stinking goat which “seemed to be not to kill such large animals” (57). He buries the remains of the goat and decides to hunt birds. He is torn between attempts to transcend the body and the body’s instinctive demands.

Like the magistrate before him, K lives in a body and as a body preoccupied with itself. There is so much emphasis on the experience of embodiment in politically turbulent times that the material body equally becomes the politicized discourse of the novel and a counter to evasive politics. As K returns to the farmhouse, he thinks, “What a pity that to live in times like these a man must be ready to live like a beast. A man who wants to live cannot live in a house with lights in the windows. He must live in a hole and hide by day. A man must live so that he leaves no trace of his living. That is what it has come to” (99). His times dehumanize him and impose his minimal existence just as the magistrate is dehumanized by the hard times the Empire undergoes. In this sense, the private is intertwined with the public in that political oppression materializes over individual bodies and dehumanizes them. And even when the body evades direct resistance against oppression, it is still touched by the dehumanizing political climate.

K abandons the farm when an army deserter arrives and treats him like a servant. He stays in the mountains sleeping in a cave, and the drama of the nagging body continues. “He felt hungry but did nothing about it. Instead of listening to the crying of his body he tried to listen to the great silence about him” (66). Sartre highlights the subsumption of consciousness in the body: “And yet the body is what this consciousness *is*; it is not even anything except body” (emphasis original; 330). In K’s case, bodily consciousness dominates his waking life and underscores the primacy of the material body. K thinks of himself “as a termite boring its way through a rock. There seemed nothing to do but live” (66). His time in the mountains makes him conscious of the sheer, full being around him mediated by his consciousness, “but even on the stillest of days no sound reached him save the scurrying of insects across the ground, and the buzz of flies that had not forgotten him, and the pulse of blood on his ears” (66-67). Although the body seems to exist on a realm of its own, it is consciousness that makes K aware of his body as a body. Sartre argues that all consciousness “is consciousness of something” (1i). Consciousness, Sartre writes, “is born *supported by* a being which is not itself. This is what we call the ontological proof” (emphasis original; 1xi). The naturalistic images and processes that dominate K’s new life in the mountains indicate the primacy of the material body. He thinks, “I am becoming smaller and harder and drier every day” (67). Penner argues that “the nature of being preoccupies Michael” (96). K constantly reflects on life, death, sickness, body /mind, and physical/spiritual being. In the mountains, he sleeps more and eats less: “In his first days in the mountains he went for walks, turned over stones, nibbled at roots and bulbs. Once he broke open an ant-nest and ate grubs one by one” (68). His gums bleed, and he drinks the blood; he eats flowers, “and his stomach

hurt” (68). The body exists on a realm not much different from that of the animals K identifies with like earthworms and moles. It occupies an ontological realm and becomes the constant consciousness in its deformity and incompleteness. K’s is a body ontologically preoccupied with itself and how it can be.

K was hungry as a child like other children. When he grew older, the conforming body “stopped wanting. Whatever the nature of the beast that had howled inside him, it was starved into stillness” (68). The will tries to silence the resistant body, but the body, in health or illness, resurfaces and reasserts its being. In the mountains, K feels dizzy and weak with a headache; he shivers and sleeps too much in his cave. For a while, anything he eats makes him sick: “Then he could keep nothing down; even water made him retch” (69). Later on, the nauseous K feels “a hammering inside his skull and a taste of bile in his mouth” (120). Nausea is what is caused by the contingency of existence, when consciousness is confronted by the material body and its processes. Sartre defines it as the “perpetual apprehension on the part of my for-itself of an *insipid* taste which I cannot place, which accompanies me even in my efforts to get away from it, and which is my taste... A dull and inescapable nausea perpetually reveals my body to my consciousness” (emphasis original; 338). Faced with solid being, the consciousness realizes its nothingness. For K, the consciousness is almost inseparable from the body it is preoccupied with: “It came home to him that he might die, he or his body, it was the same thing, that he might lie here till the moss on the roof grew dark before his eyes, that his story might end with his bones growing white in this far off place” (69). Sartre gives ontological reality to the being of the world as opposed to that of men, to objects rather than historically and socially made consciousness. K’s body is made distinct from yet

what permeates/engulfs his consciousness. The interplay is between a natural body as an object in itself and how we live and give meaning to it. Suffering, oppressed bodies can be represented, and interpreted, as existing on their own right and then as further constructed or disciplined bodies.

As his secluded stay in the mountains goes on, K has no energy to rise, and then he sleeps less and wakes more, “He began to have headaches; he gritted his teeth, wincing with every pulse of blood in his skull” (119). It is the body that rules over his being: “The shivering would not stop. He had no strength in his limbs.... He suspected that he ought to eat to stop the swimming in front of his eyes, but his stomach was not ready. He forced himself to imagine tea, a cup of hot tea thick with sugar; on hands and knees he drank from a puddle” (120). K’s fasting begins as he spends days without food. Working on his shelter by the farm dam, “All day he did not eat or feel any need to eat; but he noticed that he was working more slowly, and that there were spells when he simply stood or knelt before his handiwork, his mind elsewhere” (100). He waits for food from the earth he plants and loses his appetite in the process, becoming more of a Kafka “hunger artist”<sup>125</sup> who can fast on end: “Hunger was a sensation he did not feel and barely remembered. If he ate, eating what he could find, it was because he had not yet shaken off the belief that bodies that do not eat die. What food he ate meant nothing to him. It had no taste, or tasted like dust” (101).<sup>126</sup> The consciousness futilely attempts to

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<sup>125</sup> The crucial distinction, though, is that Coetzee’s faster has no audience, and the theatrical element we find in Kafka’s story is thus lost in Coetzee’s novel.

<sup>126</sup> K’s anorexia can be understood as a form of “self-harm.” It can be viewed as a form of violence done to an already deformed and inarticulate body. Sharon Farber, in a clinical study discussing self-harm, argues that “Physical violence is the language of those who, lacking the ability to use metaphor or symbol to express emotion or unspeakable pain, use the body to speak for them. In those who tend toward self-harm, these acts serve to narrate that which their words cannot say or their minds cannot remember” (xxx). K’s problem articulating himself because of an oral disfigurement and mental limitations I indicated

annihilate/transcend the material body. Sartre writes, “The body is what I nihilate. It is the in-itself which is surpassed by the nihilating for-itself and which reapprehends the for-itself in this very surpassing” (309). The body is made subservient to the will sometimes. K’s days in the camp and the mountains leave him “nothing but bone and muscle on his body” (101), like the pallid figure of the hunger artist in Kafka’s story with his “skeleton thinness” (*Stories* 246) and “ribs sticking out so prominently” (*Stories* 244). However, in this state, K reconciles mind and resistant body; he “felt a deep joy in his physical being” and found it possible “to be both body and spirit” (102).

At other times, though, K’s body demands its own food and is preoccupied with its own being. K cannot hold down the food he is forced to eat by the state. By contrast, eating his first grown pumpkin is a pleasure for him. It fills him with gratitude to the mother earth for providing him with food that tastes good to him: “For the first time since he had arrived in the country he found pleasure in eating. The aftertaste of the first slice left his mouth aching with sensual delight” (113-14). The freedom associated with planting and eating what he grows makes K a master of his own body, this body which was dispossessed in histories of injustice. Time passes in the midst of this raw being in the mountains, and he has no record of time, sleeping and becoming a creature of the night for fear of being discovered. Intermittently, the instinctive body reasserts itself and the will becomes subservient to it. K thinks of himself in terms of animals and fears being discovered as a mole or a fearful mouse (105). His animal instincts become stronger as he learns to rely on smell rather than sight and avoids daylight. He becomes “so much a creature of twilight and night that daylight hurt his eyes” (115). Although he knows no

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earlier and his self-starvation reduce him to a body, but it is the body that speaks its plight for us in this case and when language fails. In this light, K’s story is “written” on his body, and the body tells its history.

names, he would “tell one bush from another by the smell of their leaves. He could smell rain-weather in the air” (115). K remains attached to the material body even when he mortifies it. Penner argues that Coetzee highlights naturalistic, animalistic images (104) and makes K “a creature of the earth” (105). On the other hand, Wright describes K as seeming “more wraith than man—more a spirit of ecological endurance” (*New* 88). One critic privileges the material body while the other supplements it. However, the realist dimension of the novel continues to revolve around K’s undeniable body, its illnesses, appetites, and processes. The material body in its frailty, dizziness, shivering, and sleeping bouts is the center of an unfolding drama and the object of K’s consciousness,

There was a continual taste of blood in his mouth. His bowels ran and there were moments of giddiness when he stood up. Sometimes his stomach felt like a fist clenched in the centre of his body. He forced himself to eat more of the pumpkin than he had appetite for; it relieved the tightness in his stomach but did not make him better. He tried to shoot birds but had lost his skill with the catapult as well as his old patience. He killed and ate a lizard. (117)

He eats his melons praying that “they would make him well. He thought he felt better afterwards, though he was still weak” (118). He sleeps more, eats less, and feels “the processes of his body slowing down. You are forgetting to breathe, he would say to himself, and yet lie without breathing. He raised a hand heavy as lead and put it over his heart: far away, as if in another country, he felt a languid stretching and closing” (118). K’s body is distanced as a far away dimming materiality, yet it never disappears. In his anorexic loss of appetite, “eating, picking up things and forcing them down his gullet into his body, seemed a strange activity” (119). He feels he has to eat to make his body

function, but “then he would relax again, and stretch his legs and yawn in sensual pleasure...” (119). He thinks of himself as an insubstantial body, “not as something heavy” that leaves a trace but as “a speck upon the surface of an earth” (133).<sup>127</sup> However, this body retains its adamant materiality as it minimally survives.

K is finally captured for presumably aiding the mountain revolutionaries.<sup>128</sup> The medic in the camp he is taken to pays special attention to K’s body and tries to fathom it. He wants K to tell his story and cooperate with the camp Major who wants the truth. The medic induces K to talk and cooperate with Noël to write a report about the case. In fact, the camp commanders are expected to contribute to the discursive institutional power of the state by writing a report about K’s case to the higher authorities. By way of gathering expert medical knowledge about him, the camp staff diagnoses K’s condition as bad, with diarrhea and intestinal degeneration. The staff want to feed him and he refuses. K rejects food and medicine given by the camp’s medics. What follows becomes a dramatization of the body’s resistance in the face of discursive power.

This silent body is treated as an enigmatic text by the medic who tries in vain to have K answer his questions or eat. His silence, like his harelip, enhances K’s status as a body, an essential materiality beyond comprehension, effacement or assimilation into the political system. K is made an object of knowledge to be narrated, understood, and constructed, but he does not yield easily. Attempts are made to textualize the body, and yet it asserts its materiality. Despite the body’s resistance, interpretations and stories are

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<sup>127</sup> In Kafka’s story “A Hunger Artist” the professional faster also diminishes in his cage and is found among the straw before he is replaced with a healthy panther (*Stories* 254). In both cases, the body diminishes but never disappears or disintegrates.

<sup>128</sup> The mountain revolutionaries do not have a strong presence in the novel. However, their existence, especially when they visit K’s farm and he has thoughts of joining them, is significant within the civil war context of the novel as a reminder of the grass roots level movements that sought to dismantle apartheid.

woven around it, regardless of their accuracy. K asks the medic, ““Why do you want to make me fat? Why fuss over me, why am I so important”” (135). Because the state seeks to contain difference and normalize the other body, it seeks to make it conform to its expectations in terms of shape and size. However, the resistant body does not yield. K refuses the food given to him, and his emaciated body signifies his refusal to conform. They fail to get anything out of him, and to the medic he is “a simpleton”, “a poor helpless soul” (141). He is discharged only to come back unconscious after physical work in the camp. The doctor gives him “glucose and milk through a tube” (144) after collapsing for “refusing to participate in prescribed activities. As a punishment he was made to do exercises: squats and star-jumps” (144). When the medic complains about making K do physical exercise in his wretched state, one sergeant replies that “It’s in the book” (145). K was asked to jump, and he would try, but his emaciated body would collapse in exhaustion.<sup>129</sup> For Foucault, it is “discipline” that “produces subjected and

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<sup>129</sup> K’s camp experiences resemble those of real life prisoners in Nazi camps. Agamben cites testimonies and writes of the *Muselmann* prisoners at the Auschwitz camp who, like K, were suffering from malnutrition and shivering because of weight loss and decreased bodily temperature (42-3). These emaciated figures known as *Muselmänner*, Agamben explains, were “defined by a loss of all will and consciousness” (45) and inhabited a liminal zone between “life and death, the human and the inhuman” (47). The bare life conditions of the prisoners reduced them to non-entities and the *Muselmann* became “the true cipher of Auschwitz” (81). (It might be worth mentioning that the *Muselmann* originally means Muslim and is based on the Orientalist, stereotypical notion of the Muslim as apathetic, passive and fatalistic.) K is viewed by camp officials in similar terms as a simpleton and a rudimentary man. In line with Foucauldian reasoning, Agamben describes the camp as a biopolitical site: “It is then possible to understand the decisive function of the camps in the system of Nazi biopolitics. They are not merely the place of death and extermination; they are also, and above all, the site of the production of the *Muselmann*, the final biopolitical substance to be isolated in the biological continuum. Beyond the *Muselmann* lies only the gas chamber” (85). In the various camps K is held at, the state’s policy is similarly a biopolitical one of controlling life, death, and health. The state determines which camps bodies go to and what they do there. For sovereign power’s control over life and death and for the tactics of bio-power, see Foucault’s “Right of Death and Power Over Life.” Foucault writes: “The old power of death that symbolized sovereign power was now carefully supplanted by the administration of bodies and the calculated management of life” (“Right” 81).

practiced bodies, ‘docile’ bodies” (*Discipline* 138). K’s body apparently resists a docile status prescribed by the polity. Non-compliance is K’s rejection of the coercive measures of military camps that quench political resistance.

The medic reasons to himself, trying to understand K’s bodily resistance and echoing a split between the body and the will,

Your will remained pliant but your body was crying to be fed its own food, and only that. Now I had been taught that the body contains no ambivalence. The body, I had been taught, wants only to live. Suicide, I had understood, is an act not of the body against itself but of the will against the body. Yet here I beheld a body that was going to die rather than change its nature. (163-164)

The medic invests K’s resistance to camp food with allegorical significance. Unlike his will, K’s thin body resists a docile status of subjection to state power. Military training/exercise, Foucault argues, is a way of constructing the body, “mastering it, making it pliable, ready at all times” (*Discipline* 135). The docile body is obedient, “the body that is manipulated, shaped, trained, which obeys, responds, becomes skilful and increases its forces” (*Discipline* 136). Elsewhere, Foucault stresses that the disciplined body whose capabilities are optimized and whose forces are extorted to increase its usefulness is a docile body (*History* 139). However, the body has an ontological being of its own. A docile body can be pliant from the inside, but the body as a living organism has limitations and still has to claim its due. Just like Kafka’s hunger artist in the story of that title who confesses to his overseer before he is dumped that he has been fasting ““because I couldn’t find the food I liked”” (*Stories* 255), K rejects camp food as ““not

my kind of food” (145), as what his body cannot take in. Moreover, the body as a resistant materiality demands ethical responsibility and recognition from the other because of its undeniable presence. The medic says, “You have never asked for anything, yet you have become an albatross around my neck. Your bony arms are knotted behind my head, I walk bowed under the weight of you” (146). K exerts an ethical power on the medic and makes the latter feel responsible for him. His concern with the silent K is justified, in a letter he imagines he sends to K, as follows: “Because I want to know your story. I want to know how it happened that you of all people have joined in a war, a war in which you have no place” (149).<sup>130</sup> And later, “You are like a stick insect, Michaels, whose sole defence against a universe of predators is its bizarre shape” (149). K arrests others as a grotesque, inassimilable, and nonconforming body. His refusal to communicate his story to the medic only confirms the unrepresentable history of injustice and oppression this body testifies to in its resistant nature. The medic asks K, “Give yourself some substance, man, otherwise you are going to slide through life absolutely unnoticed” (140). Just as K rejects camp food that will make him a “substantial” body on the state’s terms, he also rejects the textual substance he will be reduced to if he breaks his silence. K thinks that everywhere people expect him to tell his story of marginalization and subordination, to tell them “the story of a life lived in cages. They want to hear about all the cages I have lived in, as if I were a budgie or a white mouse or

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<sup>130</sup> The reticent K is like the reticent barbarian girl in *WB*. Their refusal to share their stories is, in a sense, a refusal to translate their experiences into the co-optable language of the oppressive authority. While critics of Coetzee may not see this dissent as a radical one, being passive and inarticulate as it is, it is still the same logic that can be used to defend Coetzee. In refusing to express their dissent in a language that can be grasped by their oppressors—in what Ashis Nandy calls “a secularized version of the language of liberation” in the modern world (475) or the rational “idiom of modernity” (479)—K and the barbarian girl equally reject the oppressor’s dominant language and seek empowerment by refusing to verbalize their dissent. After all, “What is dissent if it has no place for the unknown, the childlike, and the non-rational?” (Nandy 480). Even if it is unacknowledged, such a dissent cannot be subsumed under the conventional, which makes it particularly significant.

a monkey” (181).<sup>131</sup> Even in its refusal to tell its history and in its stubborn materiality, the body hints at what cannot be spoken. The oppressed body constructs and allegorizes itself without apparently doing so.

The medic ineffectively tries to know what K lives on and how he survived in the Karoo farm. K’s silence and his refusal to eat camp food continue as an instance of his resistance to inscriptive power. K escapes rehabilitation at the Kenilworth camp hospital in a wretched, minimal bodily state. The medic says, “With Michaels it always seemed to me that someone had scuffled together a handful of dust, spat on it, and patted it into the shape of a rudimentary man, making one or two mistakes (the mouth, and without a doubt the contents of the head), omitting one or two details (the sex), but coming up nevertheless in the end with a genuine little man of earth...” (161). K’s refusal to speak his (hi)story to the medic and the medic’s mistaking his first name as Michaels instead of Michael signify the body’s resistance to construction and the necessary impossibility of representing this material body without some allegorizing. And if for During “[t]he post-colonial desire is the desire of decolonized communities for an identity” (“Postmodernism” 43), the linguistic manipulation of K’s name testifies to the appropriation his identity is subject to. What we have in K is the bare humanity of bones and blood, deformity and continued bodily denial. The medic tries yet fails to interpret K’s body. He ponders about how such a body can stand for an unjust system of oppression while remaining distant. Actually, the very title of the novel hints at the

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<sup>131</sup> The hunger artist in Kafka’s story of that title literally lives in cages. At the end of the story, the fine circus cage he is forgotten in is taken for a healthy panther. In K’s case, cages signify the stunted potential of life under oppression. In Kafka, the cage is the arena for a desperate attempt to throw a show that counters the philistinism of the audience with respect to the art of fasting.

relation between the body of K (his private life) and the historical (public) time in which such a body exists and is constructed.

The medic is drawn into an allegorical reading of K despite his awareness, like the magistrate in *WB*, of the abortive nature of fetishizing and allegorizing the other body.<sup>132</sup> The other body, in its rejection of technologies of power like those of medical therapy in K's case, invites yet resists allegorical interpretations. Significantly, the medic concludes and wishes to tell K, "Your stay in the camp was merely an allegory, if you know that word. It was an allegory—speaking at the highest level—of how scandalously, how outrageously a meaning can take up residence in a system without becoming a term in it. Did you notice how, whenever I tried to pin you down, you slipped away?" (166). The material body speaks for its oppression in a system that it refuses to be a part of. Its resistance to interpretation paradoxically shows another way of allegorically reading it as the aberrant body that resists dominant power discourses and Foucauldian biopolitical normalization, hegemonic paradigms that constitute discursive history.<sup>133</sup> Attwell rightly argues that the novel "does inscribe interpretation as a *contest* and an exercise in power" (emphasis original; *South* 92). The medic, like some other Coetzee narrators, fails to fully

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<sup>132</sup> In a sense, K remains the "hole" in the medic's narrative. This theme will recur in the next chapter in my discussion of Coetzee's *Foe* as Susan Barton also sees the mute slave, Friday, as the hole in her narrative. K and Friday may stand for the other selves of cultures and communities, selves not defined by the dominant global consciousness. Their resistance is non-co-optable, a resistance or a style of negation that is not in the form of socialized articulation. Such resistance can be attacked as an "infantile" form of dissent not articulated in the language of modernity, one not based on the values of freedom and creativity or a belief in future. However, one may respond that Coetzee is nihilistically critical of the language of reason used to perpetuate oppression and subsume difference. One may also ask: What is dissent if it has no place for the irrational, the unpredictable, or the unknown? Moreover, the incommunicative nature of K and Friday is actually what allows them to challenge the system from within and refuse assimilation into normative discourses.

<sup>133</sup> In a correspondence with Philip R. Wood, Coetzee asserts a point he had already made in *Doubling the Point* and I cited in my Introduction (pp. 53-54); namely, that "What resists 'death-dealing modernity' is the body and its undeniable life" (186). K's resistance against the social system is a case in point.

grasp the brute materiality he is faced with, and thus fails to control it. Indeed, he is helpless before this alterity to the extent of imagining an escape with K and suggesting a seduction by K's inassimilable alterity. K, "like the term 'barbarian,' becomes a floating signifier, present within the text but devoid of any fixed meaning" (Wright; *Writing* 86). Already unidentified in race or color for us, and unpinned by the medic, he is sheer alterity. The body resists easy assimilation into oppressive structures. May's argument that the barbarian girl in *WB* leaves the novel "just as she enters it, devoid of discernible history" (391) also applies to K who escapes all camps and remains until the end a body beyond discursive control. It existentially remains a body refusing not to be on its own.<sup>134</sup>

K constantly escapes and eludes what Rita Barnard calls "a grid of camps, which defines, regulates, and confines its citizens" by adhering to "a way of living off the land without leaving a trace and without eating anything but the food of freedom" (388).<sup>135</sup> Foucault writes, "The success of disciplinary power derives no doubt from the use of simple instruments; hierarchical observation, normalizing judgement and their combination in a procedure that is specific to it, the examination" (*Discipline* 170). The medic is an examiner who gathers knowledge about the other body and aids in its constitution in discourse. His failure to grasp K is an instance of the body's resistance to the hegemony of discursive formation despite the impossibility of the existence of a material body without some mediation, which highlights the materiality of the body when pitted against discursive construction. Foucault writes, "The examination introduced a whole mechanism that linked to a certain type of the formation of knowledge a certain

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<sup>134</sup> See my Introduction, pp. 53-54, for Coetzee's assertion on the ontological proof of the material body.

<sup>135</sup> K's attempts to evade state control and camp life remind us that the apartheid state in South Africa controlled people's lives, including where to live, what to do, and what kind of education to receive.

form of the exercise of power” (*Discipline* 187). Hospitals, like schools and the military, are institutions Foucault cites as contributing to the discursive power in society and the discipline of individuals through the nexus of knowledge/power. The will to truth is inseparable from the will to power. Foucault writes, “The examination leaves behind it a whole meticulous archive constituted in terms of bodies and days. The examination that places individuals in a field of surveillance also situates them in a network of writing; it engages them in a whole mass of documents that capture and fix them” (*Discipline* 189). K eludes the state’s administrative trappings and remains, for the medic, “a human soul above and beneath classification” (151).<sup>136</sup> However, this does not mean that, as the medic thinks, a non-conformist K is “untouched by history” (151), by the state’s discursive power. He is touched but not digested by authoritative political systems.

K exists on his own terms as a body produced yet not appropriated by history. The body refuses to communicate with the medic and to be contained in the oppressive system of the ongoing civil war. For the medic, K “is a space that he craves to fill with meaning” (Wright; *New* 90). K resists the state’s discursive authority and control on his body, and thus the colonization of this body since the “need to document and classify, irrespective of the information noted, forms the essence of authoritarian/colonialist regimes” (Nashef 33). Attridge legitimately observes that we find in Coetzee’s fiction

figures of otherness, individuals or groups who, because they belong to a different, and always subordinate class, cannot be fathomed by the dominant

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<sup>136</sup> Gert Buelens and Dominiek Hoens take as their title cue this same notion of K being “above and beneath classification” and discuss K and Bartleby as thematically similar figures of refusal. See Works Cited. Rejecting being grouped into a class or a category can indicate a resistance against collectivity and an assertion of the unique status of he whoever refuses.

consciousness of the novel (whether a first-person narrator or third-person focalizer), and often the literary techniques deployed by the novelist contribute to the sense of estrangement experienced by this consciousness by being themselves estranging for the reader. (“Ethical Modernism” 655)

The silent body escapes discursive forms of power and authority seeking to codify/master it to assert its materiality. K’s silence “enables him to resist linguistic reification by denying the camp commander and medical officer their position of mastery. In the absence of an object, the subject position of mastery cannot exist” (Marais; “Languages” 35). The body challenges the power of the state’s coercive control, including language as a hegemonic force. Paradoxically, it is only in language that we can capture and allegorize such resistance as we endow the body’s silence with meaning.

K as a resistant materiality is produced by the politics he refuses to take part in. We can better understand the troubled relationship between the medic and K if we consider how Fanon describes the encounter between the colonized Algerian and the colonizing doctor as one characterized by irresponsibility in following orders and lack of trust on the patient’s part: “The doctor has no hold on the patient. He finds that in spite of promises and pledges, an attitude of flight, of disengagement persists. All the efforts exerted by the doctor, by his team of nurses, to modify this state of things encounter, not a systematic opposition, but a ‘vanishing’ on the part of the patient” (*Dying* 129). Fanon adds that encounters between colonizing doctor and colonized patient are often characterized by a certain diffidence and short answers on the part of the patient, which results in the doctor’s exasperation and impatience:

The doctor rather quickly gave up the hope of obtaining information from the colonized patient and fell back on the clinical examination, thinking that the body would be more eloquent. But the body proved to be equally rigid. The muscles were contracted. There was no relaxing. Here was the entire man, here was the colonized, facing both a technician and a colonizer. (*Dying* 126-127)<sup>137</sup>

It is no wonder that the colonized has a pathological relation with the colonizer and poses as an enigma to the colonizing doctor. The colonizing doctor fails to recover a story from the other body. He is made to experience the essential materiality of the other body, one beyond easy capture in words. However, this resistant materiality is in itself a trope for the unspeakable, unrepresentable atrocities perpetrated on the other body.

The harelip of K, his gaping nose, and his anorexic body all underscore the grotesquely real body he is meant to represent; K is passive and withdrawn from political struggle. However, K remains a material, deformed body that has an undeniable power. The Bakhtinian “grotesque body” is unfinished or deformed. It is excessive and concerned more with lower body functions. The canonization of the body, Bakhtin argues, was a process of closing its orifices and containing it and its processes, making it more private and psychological. The grotesque body, instead, draws attention to itself as a body first before we think about its construction/meaning. Bakhtin highlights a literary mode he calls “grotesque realism,” defying forms of authority and hierarchies by stressing the lower strata of life and celebrating the material body. It refers to an

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<sup>137</sup> It should be mentioned that Fanon, as in similar discussions in *The Wretched of the Earth*, is primarily referring to the psychiatric doctor. Although the medic in *LTMK* is not treating K as a psychiatrist, the analogy still holds because in K the medic finds a puzzling case in terms of behavior and mental state. Since K refuses to eat and retains his silence about his motivation, the medic’s interrogation of this case is directed toward understanding K’s mental or emotional condition in the same way it is an attempt to heal K’s emaciated body.

emphasis on bodily matters and sex. A gaping mouth and nose are grotesque because they make the body open and incomplete. The materiality of the body in Bakhtin is excessive, disruptive, and integral to “grotesque realism” (*Rabelais* 19). The grotesque body is not finished; it is in the process of becoming or creating itself anew,

It is not a closed, completed unit; it is unfinished, outgrows itself, transgresses its own limits. The stress is laid on those parts of the body that are open to the outside world, that is, the parts through which the world enters the body or emerges from it, or through which the body itself goes out to meet the world. This means that the emphasis is on the apertures or the convexities, or on various ramifications and offshoots: the open mouth, the genital organs, the breasts, the phallus, the potbelly, the nose. The body discloses its essence as a principle of growth which exceeds its own limits only in copulation, pregnancy, childbirth, the throes of death, eating, drinking, or defecation. (*Rabelais* 26)

This grotesque body for Bakhtin is “not separated from the world by clearly defined boundaries; it is blended with the world, with animals, with objects” (*Rabelais* 27).

Bakhtin also identifies exaggeration/excess as an important feature of the grotesque body (*Rabelais* 303).<sup>138</sup> The improbability of grotesque imagery results in “a strong feeling of vexation” (*Rabelais* 305). The gaping mouth for him is a paramount sign of the grotesque body (*Rabelais* 308). Reiterating his point, Bakhtin also writes that “the most important of all human features for the grotesque is the mouth. It dominates all else. The grotesque

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<sup>138</sup> For Bakhtin, the grotesque body is also associated with, among others, laughter, joy, sensual being, and rebellion, and not necessarily with suffering or oppressed abjection as represented in K’s case. However, Bakhtin finds in modern attempts to contain bodies and present their completed, rational nature, while at the same time hiding their orifices and protrusions, an enforcement of institutional values. This is why Bakhtin is still relevant. K, we should remember, resists state institutionalization through the con-conforming materiality of his body.

face is actually reduced to the gaping mouth; the other features are only a frame encasing this wide-open bodily abyss” (*Rabelais* 317). Likewise, K emerges as a “grotesque” body in Bakhtin’s sense of the term, an excessively material body with a clear harelip, a gaping nose, and an open mouth. This material body draws our attention and refuses erasure. It is a material body before it is discursively viewed as a trope for the oppressed body.

K’s labor camp friend Robert tells him, justifying some services and sanitary measures like soap and latrines provided by the state, “They prefer it that we live because we look terrible when we get sick and die. If we just grew thin and turned into a paper and then into ash and floated away, they wouldn’t give a stuff for us” (88). The state wants to restrain and keep under control the other body because its materiality is transgressively excessive. But this body that the state as a polity tries to construct discursively and via power outlets insists on its materiality. Like Robert, K memorably reflects on the camp life and its visceral misery:

When people died they left bodies behind. Even people who died of starvation left bodies behind. Dead bodies could be as offensive as living bodies. If these people really wanted to be rid of us, he thought (curiously he watched the thought begin to unfold itself in his head, like a plant growing), if they really wanted to forget us forever, they would have to give us picks and spades and command us to dig; then, when we had exhausted ourselves digging, and had dug a great hole in the middle of the camp, they would have to order us to climb in and lay ourselves down; and when we were lying there, all of us, they would have to break the huts and tents and tear down the fence and throw the huts and the fence and the tents as well as every last thing we had owned upon us, and cover us with earth, and

flatten the earth. *Then*, perhaps, they might begin to forget about us. (emphasis original; 94)

The same idea recurs in *WB* when the magistrate thinks about a massive grave for the tortured barbarian prisoners as the best way of putting this black page in the history of the Empire behind them and starting over. However, just as the magistrate realizes the impossibility of erasing the materiality of the other body, K also knows that the other body is out there and difficult to eradicate, digest, or codify. The body refuses to disappear; it refuses to be annihilated and forgotten. In the same line of thought, Coetzee in an interview analyzes the apartheid mentality and states,

The response of South Africa's legislators to what disturbs them is usually to order it out of sight. If people are starving, let them starve far away in the bush, where their thin bodies will not be a reproach. If they have no work, if they migrate to the cities, let there be roadblocks, let there be curfews, let there be laws against vagrancy, begging and squatting, and let offenders be locked away so that no one has to see or hear them. If the black townships are in flames, let cameras be banned from them. (*Doubling* 361)

While the whole idea behind the segregationist policies of political oppression was limiting the space of the other body and containing its "offensive" materiality, Coetzee draws our attention to the demands posed by this materiality by representing it as a resistant, grotesque one. Apartheid policies manipulated the body, but they never erased

it from the surface of the earth.<sup>139</sup> K, in a dizzy state, escapes the rehabilitation camp to a beach at Sea Point. He returns to the room where his mother used to live and dreams about his garden in the Karoo farm. He has a dream about an old man he offers water from the earth with a teaspoon. Emaciated as he is, K is still alive. He neither disappears nor dies by the end. This metaphysical, ontological concern with the material body testifies to an awareness of the status of the body under oppression. Political oppression touches, humiliates, exploits, and makes the body suffer or simply turns the will against the body, deforming it and making it reject food. And yet the body abides and resists.

#### IV. Conclusion: Complicating Bodily Materiality

Coetzee's apartheid novels make us ponder how bodies under oppression refuse not to be. It is Coetzee's assertion of the authority of the suffering body under oppression that gives his postmodern treatment of the body in a peculiar, yet global, political relevance. The material body paradoxically resists the unavoidable discursive formation of power relations and hegemonic discourses it is implicated in. It resists an unavoidable construction in language. It is for this reason that the body in *WB* and *LTMK* is "leaky," trapped between essential materiality and the dynamics of representation and construction. I carry this same theme of ambivalent bodily representation I have pursued so far further with special emphasis on the interplay between colonial violence, colonial discourse, and the writing of history as a form of postmodern metafiction. By way of complicating bodily materiality, Coetzee frames the violated, suffering body within fictional layers and underscores the historiographic nature of writing the historical real.

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<sup>139</sup> One is reminded here of Mrs. Curren's thoughts about black corpses buried yet resurfacing and thoughts about walking on the faces of South Africa's dead blacks. In both cases, the materiality of the oppressed body is intensely evoked. For the relevant discussion in Chapter Two, see p. 121-122.

## Chapter Four: Estranging and Framing the Body: *Dusklands* and *Foe*

### I. Introduction: Complicating Material History

Coetzee's writing questions whether humans can have authority over ontic reality. He examines this through the prominent appearance of diaries, travel writing, letters and archive material in his work. The human being is cast as *homo faber*: a producer of 'worlds' which always refer to an existing author, initiator, cause or index.

Anne Haeming, "Authenticity"

My epigraph from Haeming is a postmodern assertion of Coetzee's problematization of the representation of history, an issue I have grappled with so far in this dissertation in different guises and continue to trace in this chapter. In fact, the epigraph captures the postmodern premises of critics like Hutcheon famous for their defense of postmodernism's "politics" of representation. For Hutcheon, the past/the real can exist, but we know it today as a construct "through its traces" ("Pastime" 68), through the representations we produce of it.<sup>140</sup> Hutcheon, like Haeming, argues that this is "the paradox of postmodernism. The past really did exist, but we can only know it today through its textual traces, its often complex and indirect representations in the present: documents, archives, but also photographs, paintings, architecture, films, and literature" (*Politics* 75). To reiterate, Hutcheon foregrounds the textuality of all representation without denying the existence of the historical real, and hence the dual logic of her postmodern politics of representation. Highlighting them as discourses,

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<sup>140</sup> See my Introduction for a more detailed sampling of Hutcheon's views on postmodernism's ambivalent stance on history as essentially mediated in discourse. See specifically pp. 33-38.

Hutcheon acknowledges that both history and fiction are “human constructs” (*Poetics* 5) and that history did exist but that “its accessibility to us now is entirely conditioned by textuality” (*Poetics* 16). She problematizes reference in postmodern fiction and argues that it “shows fiction to be historically conditioned and history to be discursively structured” (*Poetics* 120). Therefore, Hutcheon speaks of “the political ambivalence of postmodernism” (*Poetics* 201) for being complicit in what it critiques, for an ideological awareness mixed with self-reflexive, ironic play. I attempt to apply this postmodern logic to Coetzee’s novels *Dusklands* and *Foe*<sup>141</sup> to redeem the novels’ political and historical value within the context of the apartheid politics the novels apparently estrange.

I have already argued that a postmodern novel reworks history and challenges notions of verisimilitude and traditional historical representation in its unreliable narrators, magic realism, and variety of frames and transformative techniques. It is preoccupied with representation and, thus, the relationship between language and the world. Bran Nicol observes that a postmodern interest in “fictionality involves a concern with the relationship between the language and represented world of fiction with the real world outside” (xvii). Nicol writes that postmodernism reconceptualizes the real and complicates the referential, for to adopt Lyotard’s claim we can “define postmodern fiction as writing which is shaped in some way by an incredulity towards realism—a state of mind which does not necessarily conclude that representing the postmodern world accurately, *realistically*, is no longer desirable, but is convinced that the act of representation cannot be performed as unself-consciously and wholeheartedly as it was in the nineteenth century” (emphasis original; 19). On the other hand, Hutcheon defines

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<sup>141</sup> Hereafter abbreviated as *D* and *F* respectively.

“historiographic metafiction” as “perhaps the most obvious of the postmodern paradoxical forms that were both self-consciously fictive (‘metafiction’) and yet directly addressing historical issues, events and personages” (“Postmodernism” 122). Unlike detractors of postmodernism who argue for a disappearing real, Hutcheon asserts that the real/the past exists but our access to it is different: “Historiographic metafiction acknowledges the paradox of the *reality* of the past but its (only) *textualized* accessibility to us today” (emphasis original; “Pastime” 64). Historiographic metafiction interrogates our understanding of historical knowledge. This boils down to postmodernism’s complication of material history. So, I trace this theme as far as the body is concerned in *D* and *F*. I explore Coetzee’s fictional engagement with colonialism and historical injustices perpetrated on the other body (historical events and issues in Hutcheon’s sense of historiography) and the self-conscious frames and techniques he uses to show the constructedness of history (metafictional devices in Hutcheon’s sense of the term).

I have argued elsewhere that Coetzee rejects a realist role easily applied by other writers during the apartheid years to document political atrocities. To reiterate a point I made in the Introduction and highlighted by other critics, Coetzee was problematic because his works tend “towards the metafictional and the non-specific” (Easton 587). Coetzee highlights the need to reconsider our relationship to historical reality, which is, Hutcheon contends, an ideological position necessary as an initial step for “reworking” our relation to life’s realities (*Narcissistic* 5). Despite its artifice, metafiction, as Hutcheon contends, makes intellectual and emotional demands on us and has to do with life (*Narcissistic* 5). Hutcheon argues: “In this light metafiction is less a departure from the mimetic novelistic tradition than a reworking of it” (*Narcissistic* 5). Coetzee deals

with the difficult position of directly communicating/speaking of the real. This postmodern dilemma of representation is further examined here to argue that Coetzee estranges the real but does not necessarily efface it. We will see that Coetzee's postmodern representation of the colonized body revolves around this body's unavoidable materiality and rootedness in politics and yet troubled relation to language. In *D* and *F*, Coetzee carries his postmodern treatment of the body a step further by continuing similar themes about the interplay of material and constructed bodies, but at a more intensified level this time. Coetzee comes to terms with the historical real by metafictionally estranging it in multi-layered, reflexive, and intertextual narratives which interrogate different levels of reality. The body continues to fluctuate between the material given, what cannot be doubted, and the made up, the constructed that can be doubted. Both novels meditate on authorship and fictionality and make us question the established status of history as a master discourse.

Moreover, and in addition to the complicated structure of the novels discussed here, we find that Coetzee frames the material body within conscious representational frameworks like first-person accounts with certain genre expectations or captured photographs. The materially oppressed body in history is represented in a way that shows how Coetzee, rather than abandoning the real, simply tries to find an alternative way of expressing it. The bodies Coetzee depicts in *D* and *F* are stubbornly material, yet we cannot speak of pure materiality as this very materiality is "contaminated" or problematized by efforts to speak of it/construct it in discourse, which, in a postmodern fashion, puts this very materiality in question and reduces it to the textual level. In both novels, the other body is estranged and disappears behind some sort of framing. The

body, however, does not disappear; it is just estranged within the folds of language and thus defamiliarized for us. As I argue throughout this dissertation, it is the problematic of representation that we are faced with here and that, once examined closely, allows us to redeem the political relevance of Coetzee's apartheid writings.

Postmodernists emphasize self-conscious narration that problematizes reality and the world outside the text via antirealist techniques. Similarly, Coetzee problematizes realism and historical materiality in both novels. In fact, he takes his dislocation of South African realities and break with narrative realism to an extreme in *D* and *F*. Bodily violence against the racial other is filtered/mediated, and hence estranged, behind the elaborate fictional layers that the novels consist of and a self-conscious play on the name "Coetzee" in *D* and an author figure, (De)Foe, in *F*. Apparently, *D* and *F* are "more" formally postmodern than Coetzee's other apartheid novels. Numerous narrators and narratives within narratives in these novels complicate our understanding of history as a mediated construct with a mythic status. Coetzee in *D* and *F* continues his postmodern project of revising our understanding of history. Historiography is narrating history and questioning a fixed notion of reality; it is making history open to interpretation and reading. History for the postmodernist is metafictional and discursive, a matter of constructing, selecting, and arranging narratives—which is what we find in *D* and *F*.

## II. *Dusklands*: Metafictionality and Historiography

Detractors of *D* complained that Coetzee abandons a contemporary South African reality of the apartheid years in the 1970s for another colonial setting in Vietnam and America or a past South African one about his ancestors. *D* was criticized for

underplaying the economics and politics of history and being lost in Western metaphysical and psychopathic concerns.<sup>142</sup> In a sense, the novel was criticized for its postmodern approach to history. *D* has two juxtaposed narratives in different time frames and different colonial settings narrated in the first person and self-reflexively aware of their own rootedness in textuality and challenge to the realist tradition. However, both narratives are thematically similar in that they “explore the common psychology of colonialism and oppression” (Gallagher; *Story* 51). “*Dusklands* shows how the obsessive drive to explore and the inevitable acceptance of violence of both the propagandist and the elephant hunter are common elements of the master myth of colonialism” (Gallagher; *Story* 60). In the words of one reviewer, with “*Dusklands* the modern novel in English arrives in South Africa for the first time” (qtd. in Penner; *Countries* 31). I would rather say that *D* is a rare postmodern accomplishment in the South African fiction of its times. In it, Coetzee makes clear the historiographic nature of history, the constructedness of history and its overlap with the discourse of fiction. McDonald speaks of Coetzee’s resort to “the self-delusions of Dutch colonial writing and Afrikaner nationalist historiography” in *D*’s second narrative (*Literature* 307). Coetzee even verges on the playful and ironic. According to Attwell, Coetzee parodies in one text studies by “military bureaucrats and planners in corporation allied to the Defense Department” and in the other text parodies “the archives of colonial expansion published by the Van Riebeeck Society in South Africa” (“Labyrinth” 8). And for Dovey, *D* “may be read as a critique of the historiographical project” (“Coetzee and His Critics” 16), i.e. of history and narrativity.

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<sup>142</sup> See my Introduction, p. 13. Since *D* was Coetzee’s first published work of fiction, and since it was written early in the 1970s and published in 1974, its reception was particularly hostile because Coetzee was emerging as a new voice in the South African literary scene. It was not what critics expected to come out of the grip of apartheid in South African history.

Both narratives, however, are still serious enough thematically as “forceful indictments of the brutal inhumanity that marked two historical events” in Vietnam and South Africa (Attridge; *Ethics* 14). Both are self-conscious, framed comments about a well-known colonial situation, the exploitation of the African interior centuries ago and the more recent American imperialism.<sup>143</sup> Kossew argues that both protagonists in *D* are “types of colonizers, establishing ownership and control over foreign territories” (“Border” 62). While the two settings in *D* might be two centuries apart, this might be Coetzee’s implicit point on the strong historical links between all colonial endeavors old or new. McDonald finds both Dawn and Jacobus variations on the violent colonizer and reads them as “pathological rationalists who attempt, without success, to redeem their solipsistic selves through horrifyingly savage acts of violence” (*Literature* 307). “The Vietnam Project” is about the American involvement in Vietnam and “The Narrative of Jacobus Coetzee” is about the Dutch exploration of the South African interior in the 18<sup>th</sup> century. The theme of colonialism that Watson traces in Coetzee’s fiction is strong in *D* as it is the unifying theme between the two narratives. One deals with the “colonization” of Vietnam and the other presents in the figure of one Jacobus Coetzee one of colonialism’s “most avid, twisted servants” (Watson; “Colonialism” 370).

The violence against the colonized is mediated within various means of representation. This violence (the historical real) is represented in estranged/framed bodies that exist within historical accounts and scholarly documents and other discursive means. The metafictional, documentary pretense in both parts, with their documents and reports within the narratives, shows the postmodern constructedness of history and its

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<sup>143</sup> See for example my Introduction, pp. 24-25, for Coetzee’s assertion that the South African situation is part of a larger colonial experience.

essential mediation in language. Castillo comments on the metafictionally distanced violence in *D*: “In both parts, then, the narrative voice is given over to the pseudoautobiographical celebration of atrocities committed against this silent other, who exists in the tale principally as a background on which force is exerted” (1111). Indeed, colonial violence against the other is metafictionally framed at different levels within the accounts given in both novellas by the first-person narrators, Dawn in “The Vietnam Project” and Jacobus Coetzee in “The Narrative of Jacobus Coetzee.” In *D*, Kossew argues, history and fiction are blurred and constructed: “History is shown to be authored and ideological, not the objective account it pretends to be” (“Border” 62). Dawn in the early 1970s is writing for a boss metafictionally called Coetzee a propaganda report analyzing psychological warfare, and violence against the other is framed within the report he is writing. Dawn and his boss work in the Mythography Department at an American institute. On the other hand, Jacobus is an author who gives a historical account about a hunting trip he undertook to the African interior of the Western Cape in 1760 in which he meets the wild Hottentots, is humiliated, and in return, gets a brutal revenge. J. M. Coetzee poses in the preface as the translator of both the Dutch travel journal of his 18<sup>th</sup> century ancestor and his father’s, Dr. S. J. Coetzee’s, Afrikaans afterword. According to McDonald, Coetzee here vents a sense of “authorial complicity with the overlapping histories of Western writing” (*Literature* 307). Dawn and Jacobus provisionally construct their worlds and show the discursive nature of texts.

i. “The Vietnam Project”

Postmodern texts like “The Vietnam Project” problematize realist representation by highlighting the self-reflexive and constructed aspects of literary works. Dawn

incorporates in his narrative parts of his proposal on psychological warfare to the Department of Defense, a propaganda plan in the form of radio broadcasting against the Vietnamese. Violence against the Vietnamese is incorporated and defamiliarized/framed within his report in the form of pictures he plans to include in the final version. He actually incorporates the introduction of his Vietnam propaganda report “New Life Project” in his narrative. Dawn is writing his report for a picky supervisor named Coetzee who repeatedly asks Dawn for revisions. Metafiction—“the most distinctive formal practice employed by postmodern writers” (Nicol 30-31)—is thus immediately present in Dawn’s narrative.<sup>144</sup> Dawn’s task in the propaganda report is to aid the Americans by improving the propaganda tactics and myths that can be used to control the Vietcong not only militarily but culturally as well. Dawn is a mythographer who perpetuates colonial myths and constructs imperial history.

Within his narrative, Dawn is paranoid about his own body and sexual life. As with other Coetzee characters, he is concerned with the body as an ontological state of being. “I am vexed by the indiscipline of my body. I have often wished I had another one” (5). He is not happy in his corporeal being: “My health is poor. I have a treacherous wife, an unhappy home, unsympathetic superiors. I suffer from headaches. I sleep badly. I am eating myself out” (29). He experiences a split of body versus will. He is no

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<sup>144</sup> It should be acknowledged that defamiliarization as I will use it in this chapter, like the metafictional assumptions that characterize postmodernism that I argue elsewhere, can be attacked for its ambivalence as a tool that enables one to challenge or alternatively improve colonial myths. Defamiliarization of the sort used by Dawn as a mythographer may not seem to determine a definite historical truth separate from discursive construction. And Coetzee’s awareness of his implication in this sophistry via his metafictional ploys may not sound adequate for critics who seek more than acknowledging one’s awareness of this problem and look for a way out of it into a socially responsible conception of history. Coetzee should be doing something else, critics would argue. However, I argue throughout this dissertation that the material body is an embodiment of history and politics, that its suffering and oppression are not denied in Coetzee’s apartheid novels even though Coetzee complicates how we access historical subject matter in fiction. At least, we should not dismiss Coetzee’s novels as politically empty.

different from other Coetzee characters who rant about their nagging bodily being. He has a troubled relation with a body that often betrays him in pains, aches, constrictions, and tightness, especially when he works. “From head to foot I am the subject of a revolting body” (7). His sex life with his wife is equally unsatisfactory for him, and he finds her withdrawn and disengaged at his climax. In his obsessional worry about his body, he describes how his “semen drips like urine into the futile sewers of Marilyn’s reproductive ducts” (8). His body is his “enemy body” (8), especially after the morning hours of his creative outburst. Like K in *LTMK*, Dawn is “a thin man” whose body “voids all nutriment half-digested” (11). His body is estranged one level in the self-conscious reflections he vents about his life and ongoing writing project. As such, the body is textualized in language and constructed as a discourse.

Although Dawn is fixated on his sexual relationship with his wife Marilyn and has weird sexual fantasies about her sleeping during the act and suspicions about her infidelity, his preoccupation with the body is clearer in the war pictures he has belonging to the Vietnam report research, some of which are to be incorporated in the final version of the report. He carries with him in his briefcase 24 pictures of tortured/violated human bodies.<sup>145</sup> The pictures are so graphic that they give Dawn what he calls “the stabilizing knowledge” that his imagination can be free and active (13). He values the pictures and keeps them secret. His wife, he tells us, feels he has a “secret, a cancer of shameful

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<sup>145</sup> The pictures have the pretense of being actual ones. Dawn refused a tour of Vietnam when he was offered one upon joining the Vietnam Project (14), but his research materials and war footage are taken from his screening of the entire Vietnam archives at the Kennedy Institute where he works (16) and his library research conducted in the basement of the Harry S. Truman Library (5). Dawn is a creative writer as he sees himself (1), a mythographer, but his report is meant to be both creative and documentary. This interesting link supports the postmodern idea of history as the mediated real, as the historiographically metafictional.

knowledge” (10).<sup>146</sup> He is pleased he is distanced from the framed suffering in the pictures and commends himself “for having kept away from the physical Vietnam” (16). The pictures frame/distance the shocking reality of racial and sexual violence perpetrated on the other body in Vietnam, the place he is not in. They embody the metafictional and historiographic treatment of violence in *D* as an estranged human construct. The pictures are texts, in a sense, for they indicate the subjective textualization of history in captured images. Nicol argues that “The effect of metafiction is often to foreground and problematize the act of ‘framing’ in both fiction and the real world” (37). Metafiction problematizes all acts of narration and storytelling. As Joan Gillmer argues, the images contained in the pictures bear on “an underlying vortex of extreme anxiety and emotional turmoil” (108). The pictures frame the obscene torture they contain and mark it as a past event, as what Hutcheon would call “a trace” through which we access history. They are “indices of cultural decline” (Gillmer 108) and “a distillation of imperialist violence” (Head; *Coetzee* 32). However, this violence is mediated as a visual portrait and doubly mediated as material for a research project on military propaganda. Dawn is a first-person narrator metafictionally reflecting on his essay being written and shaping itself and his troubled relation with Coetzee the boss he is writing the report for.

Dawn’s narcissistic attachment to the war pictures he has mirrors the “narcissistic” and “textual self-awareness” Hutcheon attributes to metafictional narratives (*Narcissistic* 1). The pictures draw attention to themselves as pictures and archival material for a research project. Significantly, they allow Coetzee to avoid direct,

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<sup>146</sup> Interestingly, Mrs. Curren in *AI* thinks of her bone cancer as the result of the shame she incurred due to her complicity in the violations of South Africa’s apartheid. See p. 99. In each case, violence against the other is expressed in terms of a cancer-inducing shame.

hackneyed representation of violence in realistic narratives. In this sense, the pictures act to “defamiliarize” the way we perceive violence and receive it realistically—which, paradoxically for the Russian Formalists, draws our attention more to them while foregrounding the medium of representation.<sup>147</sup> The pictures are the foregrounded form for the violent content in them, which highlights the technique of art as transforming our perception and estranging the familiar. One picture is explicitly sexual and shows the sexual violence that adds to the racial violence perpetrated on the other body. Although we do not know for sure whether what is depicted in the picture is an act of rape or prostitution, sex is rendered as a violent act, as one of the visceral abuses of colonialism:

It shows Clifford Loman, 6’2”, 220 lb., onetime linebacker for the University of Houston, now a sergeant in the 1<sup>st</sup> Air Cavalry, copulating with a Vietnamese. Loman shows off his strength: arching backward with his hands on his buttocks he lifts the woman on his erect penis. Perhaps he even walks with her, for her hands are thrown out as if she is trying to keep her balance. He smiles broadly, she turns a sleepy, foolish face on the unknown photographer. Behind them a blank television screen winks back the flash of the bulb. I have given the picture the provisional title “Father Makes Merry with Children” and assigned it a place in Section 7. (13)<sup>148</sup>

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<sup>147</sup> For a cogent account on Russian Formalism and defamiliarization, see R. H. Stacy. According to Stacy, the Formalist word “ostranenie” is often translated into English as “estrangement,” “alienation,” and “defamiliarization” (3). I also use them as synonyms.

<sup>148</sup> In a piece entitled “Regarding the Torture of Others” in which she condemns the torture of the Iraqi prisoners in Abu Ghraib, Sontag notes the confluence of the sexual and the physically violent in the photographs taken in Abu Ghraib. Sontag writes: “It is surely revealing, as more Abu Ghraib photographs enter public view, that torture photographs are interleaved with pornographic images of American soldiers having sex with one another. In fact, most of the torture photographs have a sexual theme, as in those showing the coercing of prisoners to perform, or simulate, sexual acts among themselves” (133). As

Dawn mocks the patriarchal, patronizing role of colonialism. No wonder, Coetzee endeavors in *D*, as Sheila Collingwood-Whittick argues, “to systematically expose and thereby debunk the compendium of myths by which colonialism strives both to rationalise itself and to justify the behavior of its agents” (75). The girl’s “sleepy, foolish” face is indicative of the typical objectification and dehumanization of the female body in colonial settings. And that both the American soldier and the Vietnamese victim are aware of the photographer indicates the constructedness of the act that captures and frames bodily violence. The soldier’s broad smile gives an idea about the willful violence he forces on the Vietnamese girl and his satisfaction with being photographed. Although rape would be a case of more “immediate/unmediated” violence as opposed to prostitution, the image we have, regardless of its exact nature, remains a framed one. The blank television screen in the background of the picture is a self-referential invocation of visual representation and possibly a reminder that such images were not broadcast.

In another picture Dawn has and plans to use in his report, two sergeants exhibit the severed heads of Vietnamese men. The picture offers a variation on the sexual violence described in the previous one:

Berry and Wilson squat on their heels and smile, partly for the camera but mostly out of the glowing wellbeing of their strong young bodies. Behind them we see scrub, then a wall of trees. Propped on the ground before him Wilson holds the severed head of a man. Berry has two, which he holds by the hair. The heads are

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in Coetzee’s novel, the photographs from Abu Ghraib prison in the aftermath of the invasion of Iraq in 2003 show the combination of sexual humiliation and physical violence.

Vietnamese, taken from corpses or near-corpses. They are trophies: the Annamese mammals. They look stony, as severed heads always seem to do so. (15)<sup>149</sup>

We, like Dawn, experience the suffering body through the estrangement of images and reproduced copies. We access the real through the framing device of the picture and within a self-conscious narrative about a scholarly propaganda report in progress. That the American soldiers smile in both pictures shows an indifference to human suffering expected in any brutal war, and that the soldiers smile for the camera as in the previous picture indicates a conscious capturing of bodily violation in the representational image of the photograph.<sup>150</sup> The severed heads look typically “stony,” but the estrangement of the body occurs because this stoniness, which indicates the obdurate nature of the material body, is captured in a picture and described by Dawn.<sup>151</sup> There are echoes of the severed heads Kurtz keeps on his fence in Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness*. A third picture

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<sup>149</sup> The sadomasochistic dimension of the picture stems from the phallic connotations of the heads. The severed heads in this apparent “orgy” of violence can signify the emasculation of the Vietnamese by a potent military force. As with the previous picture, there is a sexual theme to the committed violence, although this theme is more symbolic this time.

<sup>150</sup> Similarly, and commenting on the indifferent attitude of the American soldiers with regard to the scandal of the Abu Ghraib photographs, Sontag writes: “Soldiers now pose, thumbs up, before the atrocities they commit, and send off the pictures to their buddies. ... What is illustrated by these photographs is as much the culture of shamelessness as the reigning admiration for unapologetic brutality” (“Regarding the Torture of Others” 137).

<sup>151</sup> Since Coetzee is “defamiliarizing” traditional accounts of violence via his technique of capturing this violence within framed war pictures distanced from their original Vietnam context, we are actually faced with the heightened impact of the pictures. For the Russian Formalist critic Viktor Shklovsky, art works by transforming our perception of things and thus by countering “habitualization.” Shklovsky memorably writes in “Art as Technique” that estrangement as an artistic method makes “the stone stony”: “And art exists that one may recover the sensation of life; it exists to make one feel things, to make the stone stony. The purpose of art is to impart the sensation of things as they are perceived and not as they are known. The technique of art is to make objects ‘unfamiliar,’ to make forms difficult, to increase the difficulty and length of perception because the process of perception is an aesthetic end in itself and must be prolonged. Art is *a way of experiencing the artfulness of an object; the object is not important*” (emphasis original; 55). Shklovsky and Coetzee, it seems, share the assumption that the typical experience of things, the characteristic of stoniness, is more real if made strange by means of fresh description and novel representation. However, I would not say that in Coetzee the idea of representation is more important than what is being represented. Pain and suffering are never overwhelmed by techniques.

Dawn has is from a film he screened at Kennedy from a prison showing the black eye of a Vietnamese prisoner placed in a tiger cage and desperately staring outwards. Dawn describes it as follows: “I have a 12” × 12” blowup of the prisoner. He has raised himself on one elbow, lifting his face toward the blurred grid of the wire. Dazzled by the sky, he sees as yet only the looming outlines of his spectators. His face is thin. From one eye glints a point of light; the other is in the dark of the cage” (16). He is puzzled by the glint in the prisoner’s eye which yields “no passage into the interior of this obscure but indubitable man” (16-17). The picture captures the brutalization and dehumanization of the prisoner. At another level, the picture is taken from an archival film at an American library, which shows, according to Hutcheon’s conception of history, that history is accessible to us through textual traces including films and archival materials.

Dawn applauds himself for being away from “the physical Vietnam: the insolence of the people, the filth and flies and no doubt stench, the eyes of prisoners, whom I would no doubt have had to face, watching the camera with naïve curiosity, too unconscious to see it as ruler of their destiny—these things belong to an irredeemable Vietnam in the world which only embarrasses and alienates me” (16). However, even in not directly dealing with the other body Dawn discursively asserts it as the stereotypical, cultural other. He is not in a negative and oppressive Vietnam, but distant bodily suffering is captured in the materials and war images that shape his imagination. He negates the other body through the obliterating violence at one point: “But like everything else they withered before us. We bathed them in seas of fire, praying for the miracle. In the heart of the flame their bodies glowed with heavenly light; in our ears their voices rang; but when the fire died they were only ash” (17). At another, he asserts the impenetrability of the

other body through violence: “We cut their flesh open, we reached into their dying bodies, tearing out their livers, hoping to be washed in their blood; but they screamed and gushed like our most negligible phantoms. We forced ourselves deeper than we had ever gone before into their women; but when we came back we were still alone, and the women like stones” (18). Such bodily violence meant to give a sense of assurance and ontological certainty to the colonizer yields the opposite in the form of paranoid fears and anxieties. It fails to touch the core of the colonized as a materially resistant body.

The violence perpetrated on the other, estranged as it is, touches the colonialist as well. Both colonizer and colonized, as Fanon argues in *The Wretched of the Earth*, are touched by this cycle of violence and counter-violence. Dawn is not at ease in his own body: “My spirit should soar into the endless interior distances, but dragging it back, alas, is this tyrant body” (32). The colonial violence that touches the bodies but not the souls of the colonized does the opposite to the distant, yet complicit, perpetrator. The discursive violence he was exposed to, it seems, has its toll on his body. Dawn explains his plight using the trope of the “dolorous wound” in the Arthurian legend:

There is no doubt that I am a sick man. Vietnam has cost me too much. *I use the metaphor of the dolorous wound.* Something is wrong in my kingdom. Inside my body, beneath the skin and muscle and flesh that drape me, I am bleeding.

Sometimes I think the wound is in my stomach, that it bleeds slime and despair over the food that should be nourishing me, seeping in little puddles that rot the crooks of my obscurer hooked organs. At other times I imagine a wound weeping somewhere in the cavern behind my eyes. There is no doubt that I must find and care for it, or else die of it. (my emphasis; 32)

Via the metaphor of the “dolorous wound,” Dawn makes a link between a bodily state and a cultural one.<sup>152</sup> He sees in the waste laid by the Vietnam War the cause of his unhappy corporeal being. As Diane Herndl puts it in a discussion of some key texts on illness and bodies, “The experience of illness today, though, is a peculiarly postmodern condition” (773). Illness for postmodernists shows the overlap between sociopolitical and the biological. Dawn’s war-related illness and his attempts to come to terms with it are a case in point. Dawn speaks metaphorically about the damage colonialism leaves on the body of the colonizer and puts himself in a position similar to that of Mrs. Curren in *AI* where bodily cancer is metaphorically deemed a reflection of a sociopolitical one. Faces from his Vietnamese pictures come to him in his dreams and he sees “the smiling teeth, the hooded gaze” (34).<sup>153</sup> The war is his sickness as apartheid is Mrs. Curren’s symbolic cancer. His psychotic thoughts are indicative:

Since February of 1965 their war has been living its life at my expense. I know and I know and I know what it is that has eaten away my manhood from inside, devoured the food that should have nourished me. It is a thing, a child not mine, once a baby squat and yellow whelmed in the dead center of my body, sucking my blood, growing by my waste, now, 1973, a hideous mongol boy who stretches his limbs inside my hollow bones, gnaws my liver with its smiling teeth, voids his

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<sup>152</sup> This double literary allusion employed by Coetzee through his fictional character Dawn concerns the wounded Fisher King in the Arthurian legend. The maimed King’s kingdom falls to waste and suffers, just as he does, from famine, drought, and sterility. In the Arthurian tradition, the impotence of the King is linked to the lost fertility and barrenness of the land, which is why we find this symbolic motif in T. S. Eliot’s famous poem “The Waste Land.” Dawn, “emasculated” in his relation with a wife he believes is cuckolding him and by authoritative superiors, finds in the “dolorous wound” a fit description for the failures of his personal life and broader political failures.

<sup>153</sup> In *WB*, the magistrate repeatedly sees in his dream visions the hooded figure or blank face of the barbarian girl, and Mrs. Curren in *AI* feels she walks on the corpses of black bodies about to resurface from the ground. This adds a psychological dimension to the impact of the suffering body on the colonizer. Violence that touches the body of the colonized affects the colonizer’s mind or mental state.

bilious filth into my systems, and will not go. I want an end to it! I want my deliverance! (38-39)

While cancer in *AI* is likened to a crab gnawing at Mrs. Curren's body from inside, the Vietnam war is likened by Dawn to a stunted boy similarly damaging his body from within. The war metaphorically materializes inside his body as a deformed, abortive life potential.<sup>154</sup> In his "psychosis," Dawn is "a victim of the imperialist project he serves" (Poyner; *Paradox* 20), a project that gives him an imperial identity yet destroys him.

The result of war paranoia on Dawn is counter violence on his son Martin: "Holding it like a pencil, I push the knife in. The child kicks and flails. A long, flat ice-sheet of sound takes place" (42). This act of stabbing one's son represents for Jolly "the proximity of sadism and masochism" (*Colonization* 118) since it is equally directed at part of himself. This body manifests the inscribed violence of colonialism and colonial legacy. As Fanon illustrates, colonialism itself is a mutually violent<sup>155</sup> and dehumanizing process. Dawn is sent to a mental institution after his breakdown and away from his wife, whom he blames for his problems. Although he is a researcher working in a library in California and has never been to Vietnam, the framed violence he carries around with him for his research project on war propaganda is deemed a corrupting one. The diagnosis of the doctors "is that intimate contact with the design of war made me callous to suffering and created in me a need for violent solutions to problems of living, infecting me at the same time with guilty feelings that showed themselves in nervous symptoms" (48). He develops anti-war sentiments and his narrative becomes symptomatic of

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<sup>154</sup> I have mentioned in my Introduction, pp. 25-26, that Coetzee characterizes South African literature as one confined to the deformity and stuntedness of life it has to deal with. The same basic idea arises here.

<sup>155</sup> See Fanon's chapter "On Violence" in *The Wretched of the Earth*.

hysteria, like Magda's in *HC*, whereby he tells his doctors his thoughts about war. He feels complicit in the guilt of the war: "I tell my doctors these things with the flashing glance and ringing tone of hysteria that even I detect. They soothe me. After lunch I take my capsule and sleep" (48). The novella ends when Dawn is in his cell at an American mental institution pondering sand, hoping to find what went wrong in his life (49). A war neurotic, Dawn ends up dismissing his propaganda report and advocating more violence, a massive poison attack on the enemy country. His research into the war costs him his mind and results in more wishful, psychopathic violence.

ii. "The Narrative of Jacobus Coetzee"

The second novella in *D* continues to underscore the metafictional/constructed status of history, a postmodern historiographic approach distorting the relation between history and its writing and a questioning of what constitutes the historical in fiction and how history is accessed as a textual product. Collingwood-Whittick describes the second narrative as particularly important in Coetzee's fiction, "for it lays the ideological foundations on which much of that oeuvre is built" (89).<sup>156</sup> If historiography is Coetzee's main theme in *D*, then, and as Hutcheon would argue, that is an ideological position that manifests the politics of postmodern representation. The narrative highlights metafiction and the writing of history as a construct. In a sense, it is Coetzee's own contribution to what he calls "the history of the Hottentots" ("How" 7).<sup>157</sup> In this narrative, Coetzee

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<sup>156</sup> I have been highlighting the politics of postmodern representation and the postcolonial import of Coetzee's apartheid fictions. This chapter sheds more light on metafiction and historiography.

<sup>157</sup> In a short piece entitled "How I learned about America, and Africa, in Texas," Coetzee recounts how as a graduate student at the University of Texas he came upon library books "unopened since the 1920s; reports on the territory of South West Africa by its German explorers and administrators, accounts of punitive expeditions against the Nama and Herero, dissertations on the physical anthropology of the natives, monographs by the German ethnologist Carl Meinhof on the Khoisan languages" (7). What is

presents not a South Africa of the present but a dislocated 18<sup>th</sup> century one, which highlights history as a narrative/discourse. The narrative has an epigraph from Flaubert that mirrors Coetzee's own postmodern stance on history: "What is important is the philosophy of history" (53). Coetzee makes it clear that he is deconstructing history as a master discourse by reducing it to a construct. Collingwood-Whittick calls the narrative "a complex amalgam of reality and illusion, historical fact and authorial invention" (76). The distant past in the narrative testifies to Coetzee's postmodern "desire to approach the present from a point of difference, cutting it loose from a continuous temporal process within which it is guaranteed a position of dominance" (Green 131).

In *D*, Coetzee represents history as a subjectively constructed discourse. He is aware that he is not a historian and that a realist novelist, which Coetzee is not, is thought to be like the objective historian, if that can possibly exist. In this novella, Coetzee utilizes a hierarchy of texts that foster his metafictional approach and yet intensify the narrative's historical pretense. We have different accounts of the same journey. Coetzee poses as the translator of a diary left and narrated by one of his ancestors (an illiterate Boer named Jacobus Coetzee)<sup>158</sup> from 1760 about his explorations and hunting trips into the interior of the Western Cape. His ancestor's account/diary is followed by a short historical document (an appendix) in the form of an oral deposition the ancestor related that year to a scribe, the Political Secretariat at the Castle of Good Hope, and transcribed by 'O.M Bergh, Councillor & Secretary' and signed by the apparently illiterate Jacobus

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interesting is that such seventeenth- and eighteenth-century materials became the core for his first novel, *D*. As Coetzee states in the same piece, he read accounts by missionaries, travelers, and linguists including the accounts on the Hottentots contributed by his own "remote ancestor Jacobus Coetzee, *floruit 1760*" (7). These accounts discursively estrange the real via distortion and conscious textualization.<sup>158</sup> Hereafter referred to by his first name as Jacobus just to distinguish him from other Coetzees populating the novella.

as a 'X' (125). This deposition that summarizes the narrative itself is meant to give it more authority and establish its accuracy. However, it does not seem to exactly correspond with the narrative itself, and contradictions and/or inconsistencies do arise. In truth, Jacobus's signature to the oral deposition is substantiated by two witnesses (125). As Canepari-Labib indicates, this act indicates that he was illiterate and not only shows "the existence of different authors of the text (thus giving rise to issues of authority) but, because 'X' is a sign which can be infinitely imitated and iterated, it alludes to the responsibility which, the author suggests, the entire Western world is required to share" (112). The translator's preface that precedes the narrative comments on the publication and attempts to establish the translator's ethos by announcing the few changes he made to his ancestor's Dutch narrative (55); it even ends with thanks to those who assisted with the translation and the preparation of the typescript and archival staff (55).

Also appended to the diary is an afterword (the introduction in Afrikaans to the Dutch version of the narrative) written by Dr. S. J. Coetzee, the author's/translator's father, and published in 1951 (55).<sup>159</sup> This afterword, in turn, was generated from lectures given by the father at the University of Stellenbosch between 1934 and 1948 and translated by J.M. Coetzee who claims in his Preface that Dr. S. J. Coetzee is his father (55).<sup>160</sup> The afterword poses as a scholarly document with notes and citations at the end (122) and some parenthetical citations. However, it does not document the specific information it provides about Jacobus's expedition and gives implausible details that are

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<sup>159</sup> Of course, we know that Coetzee is not the translator and his father is not the editor who wrote the afterword. Coetzee is just falsifying and playfully presenting the making of history, i.e. historiography.

<sup>160</sup> According to Post, in these references to other Coetzees, Coetzee "allies himself with his Afrikaner ancestors who are primarily responsible for the racial situation which exists in South Africa today" (68). The real father of Coetzee, we know, was a retired attorney and not a university academic.

more imaginative than scholarly (Collingwood-Whittick 77). It undermines the main narrative and states that Jacobus's narrative was deposited to "a Castle hack who heard out Coetzee's story with the impatience of a bureaucrat and jotted down a hasty précis for the Governor's desk" (108). Moreover, the afterword gives footnotes but cites sources inaccurately once we verify the sources used, as Gallagher does (*Story* 79), which puts to question the South African historicism Coetzee critiques. The afterword is no less exaggerated, self-conscious, and prejudiced than the main narrative with its description of elaborate animal slaughters, eating of elephant hearts by hunters as a prized delicacy (117), and a final wish that the reader enjoyed this adventure (117). Following the same vein of prejudice against the native Hottentots in the main narrative, and in terms familiar in colonial discourse posting the native as the "savage" enemy of civilization, the afterword tells of their eating parts of dead animals (112), their mutilating and eating live cattle (113), their drinking animal blood (113), and their indolence (114-115). It describes the Namaqua as depraved immoral people (117-118) and does not mention the punitive expedition of Jacobus against them, dismissing it as historically irrelevant (121) for "the annals of exploration" (120). The irony we detect in the afterword's exaggerated and constructed descriptions of the natives is reinforced by the pastiche effect through which Jacobus's narrative itself is meant to mirror the genre of the explorer's narrative and contribute to such a discourse. As Nicol writes, in postmodern fiction irony is "not just cynical, not just a way of making fun of the world. It demonstrates a knowingness about how reality is ideologically constructed" (13). In a sense, Coetzee's employment of irony serves to undermine colonial discourse while pointing out its mediation in language.

Postmodern fiction is not simply playful or lacking in seriousness as Marxist critics would argue. Watson speaks of “the pseudoscholarship in which the second half of the novel was embedded” (“Colonialism” 371) and asks: “What sense are we to make of a supposed translation of one Jacobus Coetzee’s journey in 1760, a man who was an illiterate in actual reality ...?” (“Colonialism” 372). This is a question at the heart of Coetzee’s historiographic understanding of history as subject to construction and fictionalization. The multi-layered structure of the narrative intensifies the metafictional play and irony of both the main narrative and its attached materials. History is made a web of documents and a proliferation of writers and mediators. These challenge any realistic account that seeks to represent the real. History is a process of construction never free from meta-histories and discursive manipulation. Julian Gitzen rightly observes that in Coetzee’s case “Repeatedly his novels focus upon the processes by which history is made and recorded, emphasizing how history is registered in human consciousness through the medium of language” (3). In the words of Marais, in Jacobus’s narrative, Coetzee “depicts not so much the colonial encounter as earlier fictional and historiographical representations of this encounter” (“Ethics” 161). The whole second part of *D*, it turns out, highlights the distortions and fictionalization history can be subjected to. It shows that history cannot be represented objectively or without mediation or mythmaking. The overall effect of this structural complication, as I argue in this section, is to estrange and frame the bodily content Jacobus’s narrative incorporates.

Foucault, apparently in line with Hutcheon’s views on history as a textual construct accessed and produced from documents and Coetzee’s seeming employment of

this notion in *D*, discusses the primary relationship between history and the document and history's preoccupation with developing and working on documents. Foucault writes:

Now, through a mutation that is not of very recent origin, but which has still not come to an end, history has altered its position in relation to the document: it has taken as its primary task, not the interpretation of the document, nor the attempt to decide whether it is telling the truth or what is its expressive value, but to work on it from within and to develop it: history now organizes the document, divides it up, distributes it, orders it, arranges it in levels, establishes series, distinguishes between what is relevant and what is not, discovers elements, defines unities, describes relations. (*Archaeology* 6-7)

This discursive understanding of history in Foucault's thought is even clearer when he argues that "history is the work expended on material documentation (books, texts, accounts, registers, acts, buildings, institutions, laws, techniques, objects, customs, etc.) that exists, in every time and place, in every society, either in a spontaneous or in a consciously organized form" (*Archaeology* 7). Foucault's postmodern conception of history approaches the historiographic. History for him is grouping documents and placing them in relation to each other. One basic definition Foucault offers for discourse is "a group of statements in so far as they belong to the same discursive formation" (*Archaeology* 117). Discourse in Foucault's thought is hegemonic, constituted by dominant groups in a society as a field of truth through an imposition of specific knowledge and values, and hence its power (Slemon; "Monuments" 6). In what follows, and having discussed the historiographic framework of the second novella in *D* and established Coetzee's manipulation of history, I focus more on Jacobus's narrative itself.

The structure of the novel and this second narrative in particular makes us constantly aware that the violated, material body of the other is estranged within an elaborate system of representation. As such, the violence against the native body recorded in Jacobus's narrative is wrapped within the other fictional layers before and after it, and hence estranged and framed. Moreover, violence in Jacobus's narrative is constructed as the product of an explorer's narrative, and hence never totally objective or free from imaginative ramblings. In addition to the intricate structure of this second novella in *D*, self-conscious narration—as in expecting the reader to complete the details of the narrated events (100) or contradictory accounts for the same event, as in the crossing of a river and Klawer's drowning (94) and Klawer's passing it and becoming sick in the next paragraph (94), a retelling technique Coetzee used in *HC*—serves the function of heightening the playful metafictional thrust of the novel. The result is that history emerges as a constructed discourse within the discourse of the novel.

Jacobus's narrative details three expeditions, one beyond the Great River and two to the land of the Great Namaqua. This explorer and elephant hunter is more involved in the violence perpetrated on the other body. Jacobus—“physically aggressive, supremely self-confident, and self-righteous—is a foil to doubting, introspective Eugene Dawn” and while violence in “The Vietnam Project” is “largely distant, abstract, filtered through Eugene Dawn's imagination, Coetzee makes the slaughter here concrete, inescapable” (Penner; *Countries* 41, 47). Jacobus is directly engaged in the violence he perpetrates on the other body, but he is equally constructing this body in his narrative according to hegemonic discourses. And although the violence here is different from the framed violence Dawn experiences vicariously in the war pictures he has, the body is still

estranged and wrapped within Jacobus's narrative with its elaborate textual trappings and attachments mentioned earlier in this section.

I have cited before Coetzee's comments in *White Writing* on the accounts by the early explorers of the Cape about the natives in terms of "squalor, disease and blank torpor" (27), common terminology constituting the Discourse of the Cape that defines the Hottentots as indolent and slothful (18).<sup>161</sup> Travel journals for postmodernists like Hutcheon, are one means of textually accessing history as a trace. In Jacobus's narrative, the Hottentots are described immediately, and according to common negative tropes in colonial discourse, as people who follow their beasts from pasture to another, as servants with a peculiar smell who wear sheepskins and have no interest in religion (57). The Bushman is described as "a different creature, a wild animal with an animal's soul" (58). A dehumanizing, exaggerated language is used to describe Bushmen who do not have the merits of a settled culture: "the creatures get around a lot, they are like dogs, they can run all day without tiring, and when they migrate they carry nothing with them" (58). For Jacobus, the only good way to kill a Bushman "is to catch him in the open where your horse can run him down" (58). The Bushmen are described as elusive men living in hills and mountains and coming down to get the cattle. "It is only when you hunt them as you hunt jackals that you can really clear a stretch of country. You need plenty of men" (59). Bushmen are hunted down, killed, and burned alive. They are wild by nature: "If you bring a young one up with the Hottentots he will make a good herder, for he has inborn knowledge of the veld and wild animals" (60).<sup>162</sup> "They age quickly, both men and

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<sup>161</sup> See Chapter Two, pp. 178-179.

<sup>162</sup> The Bushmen belong to what Sahlin calls "the hunting-gathering world" (23). They rely on cattle and the veld for subsistence.

women. When they are thirty they are so wrinkled that they look like old people” (61). For Jacobus, a Bushman girl is powerless like her men who have been killed before her eyes by the colonizer: “You have become Power itself now and she nothing, a rag you wipe yourself on and throw away” (61). Racially and sexually violated/objectified, she is at the will of a colonizer free from all responsibility. Jacobus poses as a historian or an anthropologist contributing to a discourse on the other body, which reminds one of Said’s main argument in *Orientalism* about the field of knowledge constituted by travelers, scholars, writers, among others, on the Orient as a hegemonic discourse.

After this general description of the Hottentots and Bushmen, the narrative focusing on the journey begins. Jacobus journeys beyond the Great River to hunt elephants and takes with him his Hottentot servants into the land of the Great Namaqua. Throughout, he sees himself as an omnipotent master imposing his will on inferior servants; he feels he is on a religious mission compared with indigenous people who have no idea of religion. He feels he is an explorer protected by his gun and free to roam and acquire land. The Hottentots, when met in the wild, are described in line with anthropological and ethnographic discourses and associations: “In body he is not an impressive creature. He is short and yellow, he wrinkles early, his face has little animation, his belly is slack” (65). Jacobus continues his negative description of the native Hottentots and their lifestyle:

I had forgotten the terrors that the communal life of the Hottentots can hold for the established soul. A skeletal hound thumped the earth with its tail, its neck tied to a rock with a thong too tight for its teeth to reach. Odours of the slaughtering pole drifted on the air. Desolate stupidity in the women’s eyes. Flies sucking

mucus from the lips of children. Scorched twigs in the dust. A tortoise shell baked white. Everywhere the surface of life was cracked with hunger. How could they tolerate the insects they lived amongst? (72)<sup>163</sup>

Significantly, Jacobus records the same “stupidity” in the eyes of native Hottentot women that Dawn describes on the face of the sexually violated Vietnamese girl. And the filth and flies Jacobus describes evoke similar descriptions by the magistrate regarding the barbarian prisoners in *WB*, which all hint at the intertextual, discursive nature of the other body as viewed by the colonizer. The Hottentot chieftain Jacobus tries to see to give presents to is sick and dying. Inside the tent, “The air inside was thick with flies and stank of urine” (72), which again reminds one of the smell of the tortured barbarian prisoners in *WB*. Jacobus comes back to find the wild Hottentots stealing his and his men’s items and driving off his cattle, acts that will trigger retaliatory violence on Jacobus’s part later on in the narrative.

As they leave the Namaqua village, Jacobus gets sick and weak with delirium. In a sense, what he took to be a potent body betrays him: “I drank and drank, and then evacuated my bowels in a furious gush. I was too weak to ride, perhaps too weak to shoot straight” (74). His body becomes a source of humiliation, “Thus I lay, wafted in my own smells, smiling and listening” (75). The excremental language Jacobus employs applies to both colonizer and colonized and suggests the allegorization of the material body as a

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<sup>163</sup> The “hunger” Jacobus speaks of in the case of the Bushmen is common in representations of the natives’ sloth, the main activity being securing adequate food for survival. A similar point is made by Sahlins (23) in his reevaluation of the hunting-gathering economies. We only know that Coetzee is not himself contributing to such negative discourses about the natives because he establishes Jacobus as an unreliable narrator whose narrative distorts and deconstructs itself. The same applies to *WB* in which Coetzee makes the magistrate clearly speak of and condemn the prejudiced stereotypes settlers hold against the natives. See Chapter Two, for example, p. 170.

discursive metaphor for political relations within the colonial situation.<sup>164</sup> Like other Coetzee characters, this explorer also ponders his bodily being and the experience of embodiment. He too is made to offer a discourse on the diseased body in pain. He is wrapped in blankets like a corpse in the wagon. He fouls his blankets and bed. His men desert him, and he is taken back to some huts for menstruating women. “My fevers came and went, distinguishable only by the flexings of the soul’s wings that came with fever and the lumpish tedium of the return to earth” (77). His humiliated state heightens his bodily consciousness and his consciousness about his surroundings, his ontological being: “*I am all that I see*. Such loneliness! Not a stone, not a bush, not a wretched provident ant that is not comprehended in this travelling sphere. What is there that is not me? I am a transparent sac with a black core full of images and a gun” (my emphasis; 79). Just as his “eye” devours the territorial space before him and becomes conflated with his “I,” his gun becomes a marker of his imperial identity. He reflects that his gun is what assures him against the sheer isolation he feels and the otherness outside. The wild animals he kills with his gun assure him of his unique position of power and his separate existence from that of the victim. In other words, violence gives him an ontological proof of a superior being and diminishes the anxiety caused by what is external to the self.

Jacobus reasons that the gun can save us against

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<sup>164</sup> In this regard, Jacobus is not much different from Magda in *HC* and the magistrate in *WB* who also use excremental language to describe their degradation as colonizers who are robbed of their privileged status. For example, the magistrate smells of “shit” when he is tortured and deprived of washing his body and clothes. The smell of “urine” and “shit” he feels on the barbarian prisoners becomes his new situation in captivity. The same applies to Jacobus who describes the natives as filthy and comes to experience his own filth more intensely once he is sick and abandoned by his slaves. The ease with which bodily attributes and descriptions are transferred among the colonizers and the colonized indicates the abomination and repulsiveness of any oppressive system or colonial situation.

the fear that all life is within us. It does so by laying at our feet all the evidence we need of a dying and therefore a living world. I move through the wilderness with my gun at the shoulder of my eye and slay elephants, hippopotami, rhinoceres, buffalo, lions, leopards, dogs, giraffes, antelope and buck of all descriptions, fowl of all descriptions, hares, and snakes; I leave behind me a mountain of skin, bones, inedible gristle, and excrement. All this is my dispersed pyramid to life. A bush too, no doubt, is dead and therefore the otherness of life. A bush, too, no doubt, is alive. From a practical point of view, however, a gun is useless against it. There are other extensions of the self that might be efficacious against bushes and trees and turn their death into a hymn of life, a flame-throwing device for example. But as for a gun, a charge shot into a tree means nothing, the tree does not bleed, it is undisturbed, it lives on trapped in its treeness, out there and therefore in here. Otherwise with the hare that pants out its life at one's feet. The death of the hare is the logic of salvation. For either he was living out there and is dying into a world of objects, and I am content; or he was living with me and would not die within me, for we know that no man ever yet hated his own flesh, that flesh will not kill itself, that every suicide is a declaration of the otherness of the killer from victim. (79)

Solid, boundless, and engulfing existence of the in-itself solicits Jacobus's metaphysical reflections. Violence is his means of negating the otherness of the other and the threat the other poses for a master's life. More importantly, the violence he practices as a hunter's way of life is effaced and estranged as the ramblings of a feverish man. It is his response to his fears that the natives might have "a history in which I shall be a term. Such is the

material basis of the malady of the master's soul" (81). For Jacobus, violence against the other is what assures him that he is not the victim of the other's violence.

In a sick state in a secluded hut, Jacobus's body asserts its materiality, and Jacobus is confronted more with the body's need for relief and then food. Like the magistrate in *WB*, he is made to feel what it means to live in a body and as a body. He continues to negatively construct the native body in his illness. However, we understand the materiality described by a man delirious with a fever as a discursively estranged materiality within the textual folds that constitute Jacobus's narrative and wrap it:

An eruption was forming on my left buttock an inch or so from my anus. Could this be a cancer? Did cancers grow in the buttocks? Or was it simply a gigantic pimple, an aftereffect of the unsavory yellow soup that dribbled out of me? I had told Klawer to clean me, and he had done so, but only with a scrap of wool. Hottentots know nothing of soap and shun water to the extent of tying their prepuces shut while swimming. Hence the noxious smell of their women's clefts.  
(82)

Jacobus becomes fascinated by this pustule, and thus by the contingency of the body: "Hourly I fingered the bubble in my flesh. I did not mind dying but I did not wish to die of a putrefying backside" (82). He imagines it "as a bulb shooting roots into my fertile flesh. It had grown sensitive to pressure, but to gentle finger-stroking it still yielded a pleasant itch. Thus I was not quite alone" (83). Like the hungry magistrate in *WB* during his confinement but unlike K when placed in state camps in *LTMK*, Jacobus wants to be a whole body: "I needed better food. Since my confinement began I had eaten nothing but

broth without meat. My stomach grated, my bowels heaved fruitlessly. Face down in the dust I yelled for food” (83). But there is a degree of humiliation in being at the mercy of a nagging body: “It was soon feeding time. Klawer brought me the witch-woman’s soup. I demanded meat. He fetched dried meat. I tore into it like a dog” (83). Eating, though, is not an escape from a weak body satiated with food, for Jacobus’s stomach is not ready for meat: “All night it contorted itself about the strings of chewed meat, and finally expelled them in acid gusts which ate into the delicate surface of my carbuncle. The oiliest wisp of wool in Klawer’s gentlest hand could no longer wring from it a tremor of pleasure. Instead, there began a faint throbbing, a little heart in time with my big heart” (84). Bodily suffering aligns Jacobus with his victims and undergirds the material existence of the body, but once the body is understood within the complicated framework of the narrative and its attachments, it becomes estranged by textuality and discourse.

The Hottentots Jacobus describes, like the natives with voracious appetites described in *WB*, ritually and grotesquely kill a calf whose mother they caught. “The women were at this minute pounding the calf with clubs in preparation for its slaughter: by breaking the minor blood vessels while its heart still beat they would lessen drainage of blood from its already pallid flesh” (84). Jacobus longs for meat from this calf. The soup he eats off the meat with wild onions secured by Klawer is “the first appetizing meal” he had “in captivity and one which provoked no immediate rejection” (84). Although Jacobus longs for the calf’s “liver or tongue roasted,” he knows that he cannot “stomach such elementary fare” (84). This bodily mode of being of desire, elimination, and pain is again reminiscent of what the magistrate endures in *WB* as a result of torture and strict food regimen. Mediated by discourse or estranged in language, the body refuses

to disappear, which potentially solves the problematic relationship between history and language in that the material body exists and is real, but it needs the mediation of language to be accessed. Jacobus directly experiences the demands of his body, yet our ability to experience a relation to Jacobus's other body exists in and through language. It is language that allows us to approximate the pain of the self and that of the other.

The Hottentots are discursively viewed as Jacobus's civilizational other:

"Boredom is a sentiment not available to the Hottentot: it is a sign of higher humanity" (85). They dance, eat, debauch, and drink without limits. He wakes up hungry with the fever and weakness gone. Since Klauer does not bring him food, Jacobus walks to the other side of the stream towards the huts. "I did not hesitate to cross the stream into the main camp: after such a debauch as last night's the Hottentots would sleep all day. An enemy could have eradicated them" (86). He wonders about the "indolent" Hottentots: "Aside from their greed for the trash in my wagon, had they exhibited any consistent attributes but sloth and an appetite for meat?" (97-98). Jacobus sees himself as belonging to a higher realm of existence and sees the natives as savages who embody all the stereotypical attributes of sensuality, idleness, voraciousness, and filth. Looking for breakfast, he finds his men sleeping with women in the huts. On his side of the stream and next to his hut is that of the sick chieftain. He enters his hut and removes the blankets to find "his left leg between knee and groin swaddled tightly in a binding from which issued a smell of rot. His belly had been sewn shut" (87). Except for Klauer, the idle servants refuse to leave with him for civilization. Before he leaves, he tends his carbuncle in the bushes. "Then I took off my trousers, propped my head against a rock, and, lying on the small of my back with knees in the air, scrupulously anointed my flaming jewel

with damp wool” (89). He tries to violate it with his fingers and endures the pain of forcing it to yield. “My bowels had turned to water again. I scrambled up and squatted over the stream. A paroxysm of yellow ooze drifted downstream. I washed and readied myself for labour anew” (89). After some exertions at his inflamed skin, and “with exquisite surprise, I heard, or if not heard felt in my eardrums, the tissues give way and bathe my fingers in a spurt and then a steady dribble of wet warmth” (89). The experience of illness and pain we saw in the case of Mrs. Curren and the magistrate is echoed here. It becomes a condition that forces Jacobus to rethink his position of superiority as a dominant self with relation to the other. More importantly, and before anything else, illness makes Jacobus ontologically view his existence as that of a body. As Herndl argues, one way of thinking about illness is an ontological one in which it becomes “a state of being” and not simply a matter of ethical responsibility toward ourselves or sick others (783). The pain of the self supersedes that of the other.

As Jacobus drips his fistula in the stream, Namaqua children come and take his clothes. What happens next is a manifestation of colonial violence and counter-violence:

Roaring like a lion and enveloped in spray like Aphrodite,<sup>165</sup> I fell upon them. My claws raked welts of skin and flesh from their fleeing backs. A massive fist thundered one to the ground. Jehovah I fell upon his back, and while his little playmates scattered in bushes and regrouped, I ground his face on the stones, wrenched him upright, kicked him down (with the ball of my foot, lest I break a toe), wrenched him up, kicked him down, and so on, shouting the while in the

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<sup>165</sup> It is ironic that Jacobus, full of rage and hatred, likens himself to Aphrodite, the Greek goddess of love and beauty.

foulest Hottentot I could summon conjurations to his mates to come back and fight like men. (90)

Enacting savage colonial violence on the other body, he bites off a boy's ear. But he is in turn punished by the Namaqua elders. "Like a great beetle I lay on my back and warded off knees and feet from my vulnerable abdomen" (90). Other men join the boys and beat and humiliate a naked, filthy Jacobus. In addition to the beating he gets, he is more humiliated as "Ants, ants raped from their nest, enraged and bewildered, their little pincers scything and their bodies bulging with acid, descended between my spread buttocks on to my tender anus, on to my weeping rose, my nobly laden testicles. I screamed with pain and shame" (90-91). His servants stay with the wild Hottentots and only Klawer leaves with him. As Fanon argues, "The violence of the colonial regime and the counterviolence of the colonized balance each other and respond to each other in an extraordinary reciprocal homogeneity" (*Wretched* 46). Jacobus flees the Namaqua village intent on coming back to take revenge for the humiliations he endured.

Klawer gets sick en route and Jacobus leaves him. Lonely and weak, Jacobus has the existential will to survive as a body. He thinks of animals, beetles unprotected and feigning death before danger: "You may pull off his legs off one by one and he will not wince. It is only when you pull the head off his body that a tiny insect shudder runs through him; and this is certainly involuntary" (96). Reflecting on what happened to him, he thinks of himself as a beetle under the Hottentot captivity, ready to lose many things to save its bodily core,

In the blindest alley of the labyrinth of my self I had hidden myself away, abandoning mile after mile of defences. The Hottentot assault had been disappointing. It had fallen on my shame, a judicious point of attack; but it had been baffled from the beginning, in a body which partook too of the labyrinth, by the continuity of my exterior with the interior surface of my digestive track. The male body has no inner space. (96)

Having been mistreated and humiliated by the natives, he returns with more men for retribution. His second journey to the land of the Great Namaqua constitutes the narrative in which he returns to punish them. He and his Griqua men come back on horses and shoot and kill the natives, dealing genocide to the Namaqua. They pillage the village, punish the Namaqua and the deserters, and recover their stolen properties. The first victim is a girl on her way to a stream: “A shot, one of the simple, matter of fact kind I have always admired, took her between the shoulder-blades and hurled her to the ground with the force of a horse’s kick” (100). Another girl is raped by a Griqua soldier who “was doing things to the child on the ground” (102). The passivity of the violated female body captured in the language and the agency attributed to the male violator are reminiscent of the picture Dawn carries in the first novella in *D* in which a well-built American soldier sexually manipulates the tiny body of a Vietnamese girl.

Jacobus, as a potent colonizer, pronounces over the natives a “sentence of death” (101) and deals what, in his terms, is justice: “On this day I would return as a storm-cloud casting the shadow of my justice over a small patch of the earth” (101). He, in cold blood, shoots one servant after he pushes the muzzle of his gun into the servant’s mouth, a shot that once fired into the head leaves the servant’s eyes “crossed” and blood seeping out of

the servant's mouth (104). What Attwell calls "the fiction of self-preservation" characterized by ontological and metaphysical reflections about his situation and body is replaced by "the fiction of self-assertion" of rape and killing ("Labyrinth" 21). In other words, there is a shift in the narrative from Jacobus's preoccupation with his ailing body and passive suffering to the active exertion of force against the other body. Jacobus burns the huts and collects the cattle with his Griqua men. He shoots his former servants mercilessly, believing that he is fulfilling God's will against those who deserve death. For Jacobus, "All are guilty, without exception" (106):<sup>166</sup>

Through their deaths I, who after they had expelled me had wandered the desert like a pallid symbol, again asserted my reality. No more than any other man do I enjoy killing; but I have taken it upon myself to be the one to pull the trigger, performing this sacrifice for myself and my countrymen, who exist, and committing upon the dark folk the murders we have all wished. All are guilty, without exception. I include the Hottentots. Who knows for what unimaginable crimes of the spirit they died, through me? God's judgment is just, irreprehensible, and incomprehensible. His mercy pays no heed to merit. I am a tool in the hands of history. (106)<sup>167</sup>

Violence, despite its potentially depraving excess, "is couched in terms of pseudo-rationality" and "is suggestive of the madness of oppressive ideologies, here,

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<sup>166</sup> In a sense, Jacobus views the natives as essentially guilty just as Joll in *WB* views the barbarians as also guilty. This Kafkan idea is present in the short story "In the Penal Colony" in which guilt is also treated as what is beyond doubt. It is insightful that in Kafka's story the setting for the inflicted torture is a colony. If the (colonized) prisoners are inherently guilty, justice meted out by the (authoritative) colonizer in the form of inflicted pain is what counters this guilt.

<sup>167</sup> Interestingly, apartheid policies in South Africa were seen as divine in nature, as the fulfillment of God's will in favor of white dominance. See, for example, James Barber (140).

imperialism, colonialism and apartheid” (Poyner; *Paradox* 30). Aware that the depiction of detailed violence can be morally corrupting, Coetzee only abnegates the framing device of the picture used in the first novella in *D* to adopt the estranging techniques of exaggeration and subjective construction in this novella. The result is that our understanding of Jacobus’s unwarranted violation of the natives or his description of his own bodily trauma is mediated by our awareness of his paranoid, megalomaniac vision as a master dealing with inferior servants.<sup>168</sup> Moreover, the linguistic folds that precede Jacobus’s narrative and follow it—the translator’s note, the appendix which is Jacobus’s deposition of the narrative, and the editor’s afterword—all highlight Coetzee’s framing/estranging of the body and the discursive construction of history. Coetzee seems to indicate that any postmodern political or historical position on the oppressed body should acknowledge that the bodily suffering of the other exists in or through language.

The afterword given after Jacobus’s narrative by Coetzee’s supposed father, Dr. S. J. Coetzee, highlights the status of the original narrative as a textual construct about an

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<sup>168</sup> I have mentioned in my discussion of *WB* in Chapter Three (in a footnote on p. 179) that Elizabeth Costello in Coetzee’s novel of that title objects to the depiction of extreme, detailed violence/evil as morally depraving. She thus rejects the depiction of the fates of Hitler’s would-be assassins in a novel as the executions described open a dark realm of evil the imagination should not tread into. This relevant lecture she gives, “The Problem of Evil,” is on a novel by one Paul West entitled *The Very Rich Hours of Count von Stauffenberg*. Costello’s argument is that both writer and reader cannot emerge from such an experience unscathed. She takes the horror and obscenity of violence and torture to be contagious. I understand that there might be possible objections to Costello’s argument as historical atrocities like the Holocaust, lynchings, Abu Ghraib, and apartheid itself need to be realistically represented to be known and condemned. Coetzee’s “defamiliarization” of violence in *D* is a step away from the realistic representation Costello objects to. The point is to complicate and set limits to imagination so that murderous violence does not get easily or clearly depicted in fiction without some form of mediation. The extent to which Costello’s ideas and opinions are to be equated with those of Coetzee remains contested. However, we should remember that there are realist representations of physical violence in Coetzee. In *WB*, for example, the thrashing of the barbarian prisoners happens onstage, and the same applies to the magistrate’s own torture. It is the specific context and nature of each novel that complicates material suffering. Once again, Coetzee takes us back to the postmodern problematic of representation.

explorer of South Africa in the 18<sup>th</sup> century. The Hottentot habits highlighted in this afterword repeat many of the descriptions given in Jacobus's exploration narrative and continue to be discursively negative. The afterword is followed by an appendix containing the deposition of Jacobus's narrative, which foregrounds the framing of bodily violence within texts and narratives and estranges the real within the constructed. The afterword and the appendix both reiterate the main narrative lines of the original account and enhance them, yet they allow us to see intertextual relations and the original narrative's status as history in the constructed sense of anecdote. The result is a historiographic account, or what is similar in effect, on the body as a discourse.

Jacobus appeals to the colonial myth that he as a civilized and pious man is responsible for dealing justice on earth against those who have no destiny. He uses religion as an excuse to justify his existential massacre against the Namaqua. Just as Joll in *WB* believes that the barbarians are essentially a guilty enemy, Jacobus also believes in the natives' guilt. This violence Jacobus represents in his narrative is presented as "real" violence against the other body just as we are expected to take for granted Jacobus's far-fetched descriptions of the native Bushmen and Hottentots as materially excessive bodies beyond civilization. However, we know from the structure of the novella as a whole that Coetzee is exposing the historiography implicit in all attempts to speak of the real. History, for Coetzee, is both subjective and fictive, a matter of selecting and arranging documents. It is an intricate process of fabrication, rewriting, and defamiliarization. It is in this second part of *D* that Coetzee most clearly shows the "mythic" status of history he

once referred to in his piece entitled “The Novel Today”<sup>169</sup> and writes in line with the views of Hutcheon and Foucault on history.

### III. *Foe*: The Body between Doubt and Estrangement

I have argued so far that Coetzee in *D* complicates our understanding of material history by showing how we access it through a variety of estranged, textualized forms like pictures, archival documents, and narratives. In this section on *F*, I argue that Coetzee continues to redefine history and estrange politics by subjecting the body to doubt and fictional estrangement. And since the body refuses to be effaced in language, I argue that Coetzee as a postmodernist is alienating the body rather than doing away with it. *F* is a novel about “the nature of narrative art” (Penner; *Countries* 116). It rewrites Daniel Defoe’s *Robinson Crusoe*.<sup>170</sup> The problematic setting is not contemporary South Africa of the publication time in the mid 1980s, one characterized by racial oppression and violations of human rights, but rather a remote island and then London of Defoe’s times. Instead of seeking solutions and dealing with current political issue, detractors would argue, Coetzee resorts to 18<sup>th</sup> century themes and feminist epistolary fictions. Critics typically consider the novel’s metafiction as politically irrelevant. As Hutcheon puts it, metafiction “constitutes its own first critical commentary” and thus “sets up the theoretical frame of reference in which it must be considered” (*Narcissistic* 6). Hence, *F* was viewed as a narcissistic, self-absorbed text not bearing on apartheid politics.

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<sup>169</sup> See my Introduction, pp. 20-21.

<sup>170</sup> Coetzee’s more recent engagement with Daniel Defoe’s *Robinson Crusoe* is his Nobel lecture in 2003 entitled “He and His Man” in which he examines the relationship between Defoe the writer and Robinson Crusoe the man whose island story Defoe wrote. In both Coetzee texts the relationship between the character and the writer is depicted as potentially that of “foes” in that Susan Barton in *F* sees in Foe a rival who appropriates her story and Robinson Crusoe in “He and His Man” sees in Defoe a rival writer who masters the art of writing yet who, like Crusoe, can have difficulties with writing. See Works Cited.

However, the novel is not devoid of political value. At the center of the novel is the “doubtful,” ambivalent bodily presence of Friday between a ghostly and substantial body, between a discursive construct and a materially suffering body. The body’s wavering between embodiment and disembodiment is, I argue, a postmodern understanding of the textual traces with which we access/estrangle history. As some critics have pointed out, the novel brings together the concerns of postmodernism within a feminist and postcolonial context.<sup>171</sup> *F* consists of four sections that, I argue, estrange Friday’s body within fictional layers. Coetzee frames his postmodern treatment of the enslaved, colonized body within a narrative about the making of fiction, which gives it an ethical and political thrust without undermining the novel’s metafictional nature. Friday’s body is also further estranged within the fictional and referential complexity of the novel, mixing first-person accounts, letters, dialogue, and unidentified narrators. More importantly, the novel’s sections doubt Friday’s silent body and never make us sure about the suggested materiality of this body, which in turn highlights the body’s construction in discourse and the allegorically discursive significance of Friday’s body as a trope for racial oppression. *F* dramatizes a postmodern way of representing the body that acknowledges the existence of the historical real and its essential mediation or estrangement in textuality.

The novel begins when Susan Barton<sup>172</sup> begins her memoir/journal to the writer Foe to have her island story written. Her island story constitutes the first part of the novel. It is framed in single quotation marks to foreground its nature as a narrative addressed to the writer Foe. It begins as follows: ““At last I could row no further. My hands were

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<sup>171</sup> See for example Dovey (*Novels* 330).

<sup>172</sup> Hereafter referred to by her last name as Barton.

blistered, my back was burned, my body ached. With a sigh, making barely a splash, I slipped overboard” (5). Barton writes for Foe, describing her year of castaway island experiences and within the account addresses Crusoe on his island. Upon first meeting Crusoe, she introduces herself to him using almost the same words that begin the narrative: “““Then at last I could row no further. My hands were raw, my back was burned, my body ached. With a sigh, making barely a splash, I slipped overboard and began to swim towards your island. The waves took me and bore me on to the beach. The rest you know”” (11). This account is her first-person confession/monologue, a traveler’s account in the form of a journal or an autobiographical letter to Foe and mostly within inverted commas. In this part, Barton writes to Foe so that he will rewrite her narrative into selling fiction. Authorship becomes the novel’s metafictional problematic and structural complexity its salient feature. In part two, the rescued Barton writes letters<sup>173</sup> from London (many of which are not read by Foe and some are not even sent to him) to Foe, who is hiding from his creditors. She recounts her attempts to send Friday back home. The letters detail her daily life in London in the absence of Foe. In part three, she and Foe exchange thoughts on the silent Friday, discuss the writing process, and end up in bed in his refuge. Part four is narrated anonymously and makes us metafictionally enter the world of the dead characters and reexamine some of the novel’s problematic areas. It is a short, puzzling section narrated by a narrator who enters Foe’s home and opens Friday’s mouth. Friday’s body, enigmatic in the first three parts, is further estranged here. It descends more into fictive wrappings that, as we will see, paradoxically assert its estranged materiality. Friday as a mutilated body whose materiality is

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<sup>173</sup> Actually, the first part that is Barton’s account to Foe can be thought of as a lengthy letter addressed as a monologue to a silent listener.

constructed and doubted in language is also an estranged metaphor for colonization and oppression. He is allegorically the violated body in history, be it apartheid or colonialism, which is beyond all representational attempts.

Barton, as a castaway, is narrating to Foe and addressing Cruso early in the novel. We get to know this at the end of the novel when the unnamed narrator enters the house of Foe and opens a box to read from the beginning of the island account I have already cited. The island she finds herself on is already inhabited by Friday, a black African slave,<sup>174</sup> and his master Robinson Cruso. In this unfolding drama of the body, Barton's female body is sexually violated by Cruso (30) and Cruso himself experiences an intensified bodily being in the form of fever and tooth decay and pain. Moreover, animal bodies are hunted and killed for skins and food. However, I want to direct my attention to Friday's body since it is the primary trope for the colonized body and allegorically stands for the oppressed slaves and blacks in South Africa; and it is around this body that postmodernism and postcolonialism overlap. While *F* shares with *AI* and *HC* a preoccupation with the problematic and difficult position of the woman as a writer and is narrated to a great extent by a female narrator, the postmodern treatment of the body centers more on an alternative marginalized body lost in the midst of Barton's and Foe fictional debates, that of the enslaved, disenfranchised, and colonized Friday.<sup>175</sup>

Throughout the narrative, Friday is the silent slave who obediently lives with Cruso and then Barton. His linguistic skills are limited to his needs and to what Cruso

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<sup>174</sup> Susan immediately notices his African physical features upon his approach, like his head of "fuzzy wool" (5), "the broad nose," "dark grey" skin, and "the thick lips" (6).

<sup>175</sup> For an account of the problem of "women's creativity" in *Foe* and the appropriation of the female voice by the patriarchy of the literary canon, see Josephine Dodd.

taught him (21), the functional words by means of which he can obey his master Cruso. When Barton is surprised at his lack of speech and limited understanding, she is told by Cruso that Friday has no tongue. This immediately throws Friday into the realm of the grotesquely substantial body for her. However, this body is ambiguated because she looks at his open mouth but cannot see anything in the dark (22); she says it was too dark anyway and she saw nothing but Friday's white teeth (22). In describing this scene to Foe later on in the narrative, she tells him that she felt "abhorrence" (119) when Cruso opened Friday's mouth and asked her to look. She tells Foe that she "averted" her eyes from seeing "the thick stub at the back of the mouth" and that this mutilation haunted her imagination along with the possibility of other mutilations (119). Cruso claims it was the slavers who cut out Friday's tongue (23). His reply to a curious and yet suspicious Barton deserves quoting at length, for it shows the discursive nature of representation/storytelling, casts the very materiality of the body in doubt, robs it of its substance, and thus reduces it to the textual:

'Cruso gazed steadily back at me. Though I cannot now swear to it, I believe he was smiling. "Perhaps the slavers, who are Moors, hold the tongue to be a delicacy," he said. "Or perhaps they grew weary of listening to Friday's wails of grief, that went on day and night. Perhaps they wanted to prevent him from ever telling his story: who he was, where his home lay, how it came about that he was taken. Perhaps they cut out the tongue of every cannibal they took, as a punishment. How will we ever know the truth?" (23)

In estranging the body, Coetzee makes Friday's body less material and more figural by hinting at Barton's inability to ascertain Friday's mutilation and by making Cruso give

conflicting accounts about this “mutilated” body, which enhances the rich associations and meanings we can give to this material body. Cruso’s repeated word “perhaps” casts the body’s materiality into further doubt. His smiling can mean that he is deceiving and fooling Barton in his explanation and that there is a different story to Friday’s mutilation Cruso does not disclose, or simply that Friday’s tongue is intact and he is simply incommunicative.<sup>176</sup> Likewise, Cruso gives contradictory, multiple accounts about his own story and once claims that Friday was a cannibal. Barton is obsessed with finding the truth about Friday’s mutilation, how Friday was captured by slave-traders, if this is the truth, and how he was mutilated. Barton already suspects Cruso’s conflicting accounts because of his old age, bad temper, unreliable memory, fevers, and isolated life. Cruso would say he was the son of a rich merchant and then say he was a poor boy once captured by the Moors (12). Once he would say he took Friday as a slave after a shipwreck and then would say Friday was a cannibal he saved from other cannibals (12). Barton is lost in a maze of doubt, “So in the end I did not know what was truth, what was lies, and what was mere rambling” (12). If Coetzee is presenting a doubted—or rather a more pervasively and subversively doubtful—body, this does not mean that he is negating specific material suffering. Rather, he might be complicating the existence of such materiality without the mediation of language and tropes. In such terms, the doubtful body is estranged rather than effaced.

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<sup>176</sup> Lewis MacLeod concurs that Friday is located inside “the discursive networks at work both inside and outside the confines of the novel” and challenges textual evidence of the mutilation and goes as far as claiming that we can assume that he “possesses a tongue” and that his silence can be read as a “voluntary act, to think Friday has the capacity, just not the inclination, for speech” (7). The mutilation taken for granted, he argues, serves the discursive interpretive projects of critics. While I do not deny that Friday as a mutilated slave richly serves allegorical interpretations, my point is that Friday’s doubted mutilation is Coetzee’s postmodern way of estranging the real as materialized on the other body.

Barton accepts Friday's mutilation as a grotesque bodily violation. She experiences some revulsion and horror at Friday's body and thinks about other possible mutilations on this body (24, 32). The otherness of this body makes her imagine the act of mutilation he was supposedly subjected to and shudder. She treats Friday as an incomplete body, although she never ascertained its mutilation: "I covertly observed him as he ate, and with distaste heard the tiny coughs he gave now and then to clear his throat, saw how he did his chewing between his front teeth, like a fish. I caught myself flinching when he came near, holding my breath so as not to have to smell him. Behind his back I wiped the utensils his hands had touched" (24). She is even repelled by his "woodsmoke" (144). Barton depicts him as a materially repulsive body despite her doubts about his story. That Friday eats with his front teeth may mean that he has no back teeth or that they are simply decayed. However, she treats the doubtful body as a violated one and takes for granted Friday's "abject" mutilation,

Hitherto I had given to Friday's life as little thought as I would have a dog's or any other dumb beast's—less, indeed, for I had a horror of his mutilated state which made me shut him from my mind, and flinch away when he came near me. This casting of petals was the first sign I had that a spirit or soul—call it what you will—stirred beneath that dull and unpleasing exterior. (32)

Friday's transgressive body demands her attention and simultaneously revulsion. She is not sure whether Cruso or slavers cut out his tongue, how they did it, and if in the first place it was cut. She says she never heard of such a practice among slavers and never saw a dumb slave before (84). She also remembers that a knife was the only tool Cruso had (84), but she remains in doubt. She did not look into Friday's mouth when Cruso

asked her to do so as an “Aversion came over me that we feel for all the mutilated” (85), and when she did not avert her eyes she saw nothing but Friday’s teeth. Hence, the materiality of the body is cast into doubt by distancing/estranging it via storytelling and narration and by elusively representing it. At the same time, it is accepted and Friday is treated accordingly as a grotesque body marked by its excessive materiality.

Friday’s grotesque body, if we accept his oral wound as Barton does, is like those of other Coetzee characters in their mutilation, muteness, and disability. The grotesque body, abject or disabled, challenges its excluded status of otherness via its openness and incompleteness. It signifies lack of order and restraint. As a body that disrupts boundaries, this grotesque body challenges paradigms of hegemony and cultural boundaries of exclusion.<sup>177</sup> The open body is grotesque in that it is unfinished and lacking closure. Bakhtin’s theory of the grotesque shows how male/female bodies can be transgressive of their limits, unfinished, challenging binary distinctions, and disruptive of hierarchies. The grotesque body in Bakhtin is open, “not separated from the world by clearly defined boundaries; it is blended with the world, with animals, with objects...” (*Rabelais* 27). Friday’s gaping, mutilated mouth—if we accept the mutilation—fits this description. Moreover, the body as a lived existence is an ontological reality that is read and interpreted even through a simple racist gaze, which is why Barton flinches at Friday’s approach and shows a dislike for his material being. Commenting on Bakhtin’s concept of “grotesque realism,” Stallybrass and White argue that such realism “uses the material body—flesh conceptualized as corpulent excess—to represent cosmic, social, topographical and linguistic elements of the world” (8-9). They also argue that

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<sup>177</sup> In this sense, bodily difference or grotesqueness acts adversely and puts to question the rationale for persecution and racism.

“grotesque realism” shows the body “as multiple, bulging, over-or under-sized, protuberant and incomplete. The openings and orifices of this carnival body are emphasized, not its closure and finish. It is an image of impure corporeal bulk with its orifices (mouth, flared nostrils, anus) yawning wide and its lower regions (belly, legs, feet, buttocks and genitals) given priority over its upper regions (head, ‘spirit’, reason)” (9). In Friday’s case, oral deformity that casts the body in the realm of the material simultaneously supplements the material to privilege the sociopolitical in which the body is invested. A material body with an oral disfigurement like Friday’s—or K’s body in *LTMK*—is a starting point for figuration beyond this body, for its disfiguration figures.

Throughout, Friday’s lack of desire for Barton makes her suspect other mutilations as well. When they are in Foe’s abode in London, Friday finds Foe’s robes and wigs and dances and hums in his own way. He even plays the flute. She finds him one time at Foe’s table with a pen in hand writing a series of the letter O, which might signify his own lack as a male body and link him with Magda in *HC* who sees herself as a cipher or absence. Barton is in doubt about another mutilation, the unmaning of Friday, which again, if true, takes us to the material realm of the body and lower/grotesque bodily functions and figures beyond this disfiguration. When he dances in Foe’s robes and wig, she tells Foe, ““When I heard the humming that first morning and came to the door and was met with the spectacle of Friday at his dancing with his robes flying about him, I was so confounded that I gaped without shame at what had hitherto been veiled from me. For though I had seen Friday naked before, it had been only from a distance ...” (119). She continues describing the same ambiguous scene in a language that gives more room for doubt: ““In the distance nothing was still and yet everything was still. The

*whirling robe* was a scarlet bell settled upon Friday's shoulders and enclosing him; Friday was the dark pillar at its centre. What had been hidden from me was revealed. I saw; or, I should say, my eyes were open to what was present to them" (my emphasis; 119).<sup>178</sup> There are strong suggestions of this other wound and the ambiguous Friday remains "a hole in the narrative" as she describes him to Foe (121). Barton does not specifically name the other wound as castration, as the unmaning of a slave. The passive structures she uses heighten her lack of agency in affirming or denying what she saw, and thus her continued doubting of Friday's body. Coetzee himself in an interview with Morphet says that he, like Barton, does not know if Friday is "potent or not" (463) and that nobody has "sufficient authority to say for sure how it is that Friday has no tongue" (462). This lack of specification on Coetzee's part contributes to doubting the body and discursively estranging it from the literal to the symbolic, thus establishing Friday as more than an individual body and making him an inclusive trope for the oppressed.

The link between tongue and phallus is suggestive as Friday's is a symbolic decapitation in the form of silence and thus lack of mastery. While Coetzee, like other critics of the novel,<sup>179</sup> seems to accept that Friday has no tongue, he is not endorsing the means of such mutilation/deformity. And while the body's mutilation underscores its transgressive materiality, the fact that Friday is silent and that his body is constructed by those around him who tell his story casts this very materiality into question without

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<sup>178</sup> Friday's dervishlike, ecstatic spinning suggests a mystical element about him. Like the shaman who "can assume a prophetic voice, partly outside the society and entirely outside the metropolis" and who "can afford to be irresponsible, immature and irrational" (Nandy 473), the silent Friday is the unconventionally marginalized and yet defiant figure, the voice that refuses to be spoken and yet has its own presence. The Sufi Muslims who whirl and energetically dance like Friday, however, often chant and shout. Friday retains the typical characteristics of a dervish of being poor and lacking in means, and thus being more spiritual and less materialistic, but he lacks the vociferous language Sufi dervishes use.

<sup>179</sup> For example, Spivak describes Friday as "an abducted savage with his tongue cut out" ("Ethics" 27).

negating it. Coetzee highlights the materiality of the suffering body and at the same time doubts the existence of such a bodily reality away from textual construction and mediation in writing. He continues to problematize the relationship between the body and language and how real bodies (enslaved/subjected) are still produced in language once represented. In this metafictional novel, history emerges as inevitably (re)constructed and storytelling as essentially retelling and fictionalizing the real. In addition to doubting Friday's mutilation by way of estranging it, Coetzee allows us to see Friday as a discourse negotiated by Foe and Barton in the exchanges that follow the first part of the novel, Barton's castaway narrative, and come before the last surreal part in which the narrative is given over to an unknown narrator. In such exchanges, as we will see, Barton articulates a further distinction between material bodies existing outside textuality, or substantial ones, and textual bodies that are the substance for storytelling and narration. If substantial bodies presumably exist outside language and are grounded in "real" existence, textual bodies seem to be fictive ones, imaginative versions of their real-life counterparts. Barton is aware that she can return to the life of a substantial body if she deserts her story and returns to her normal life, "But such a life is abject. It is the life of a thing. A whore used by men is used as a substantial body" (126). However, and in her desperate efforts for her story to be told, things get blurred for her and she doubts the distinction between life and art, between real and fictive bodies. Foe reassures a doubting Barton, "In a life of writing books, I have often, believe me, been lost in the maze of doubting" (135). The substantial gets too close to being a mere story. And when this substantial body is silent or marginalized, it becomes less substantial and more discursive, more of an allegorical story for unspeakable oppression in history.

In section two consisting of letters by Barton to the absent writer Foe, letters which show the process of authorship and fiction building and the crossing of boundaries between characters and authors, she also questions the materiality of the body once narrated and represented and experiences a different form of doubt, “When I reflect on my story I seem to exist only as the one who came, the one who longed to be gone: a being without substance, a ghost beside the true body of Cruso. Is that the fate of all storytellers? Yet I was as much a body as Cruso. I ate and drank, I woke and slept, I longed” (51). At one level, Barton is distanced from her story in time and space, and, at another, she is further distanced from her story because she gives it over to Foe. She has to struggle against the appropriation of her (“true”) story by the professional writer Foe and thus has to fight the historical oppression of women by men. Other than the story she hopes to be written, she has no evidence of having lived on the island, the same story that distances her from the real. Moreover, she does not have the authority a writer like Foe has. If Cruso is a more substantial body for her, it is because he remained distant from writing on the island<sup>180</sup> and never pursued a fictionalized account of his life on the island. The body loses its substantiality to doubted substance in storytelling and textual construction. Barton vies with Foe over the authorship of her story and loses a sense of direction or certainty. The body is estranged behind the multiplicity of speaking positions and identities/selves it assumes in writing.

Barton loses her faith in/control over her story as a completed novel and senses her own fictionality before Foe’s manipulative, appropriative strategies. His interference

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<sup>180</sup> Barton was surprised to find out that Cruso never kept a journal on the island (34) and was not interested in documenting his stay there.

in her story and her closeness to the writer of her story make her experience more doubt and confusion about substantial and fictive bodies:

In the beginning I thought I would tell you the story of the island and, being done with that, return to my former life. But now all my life grows to be a story and there is nothing of my own self left to me. . . . But now I am full of doubt. Nothing is left to me but doubt. I am doubt itself. Who is speaking me? Am I a phantom too? To what order do I belong? And you: who are you? (133)

She loses her assured position as an author with the interference of Foe with her life and story. Her story haunts her just as she haunts her story, and the self is inseparable from textuality. Lost between her own story and Foe's appropriation of that story, she becomes doubtful about who she is and views her body as a phantom presence, as a matter of narration. She loses the distance between herself and her story. She lives her story just as her story lives/haunts her and feels the closeness of different orders of the real. The story she wants told is given over to Foe, and thus she is more objectified and distanced from the real. She thinks that the girl who claims she is the lost daughter Barton is looking for belongs to a different order, not the substantial one, and was sent by Foe "speaking words" he "made up for her" (133). She takes the girl to be one of Foe's characters and entreats him, "Return to me the substance I have lost, Mr. Foe: that is my entreaty. For though my story gives the truth, it does not give the substance of the truth . . ." (51).<sup>181</sup>

She accuses him of undermining the verisimilitude of her story, and thus robbing her of

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<sup>181</sup> The white woman narrator's voice is used by Coetzee here to interrogate the structures of authority, power, and language. In this sense, Barton is similar to Magda in *HC* as a white female narrator trying to master a story but is subjected to discursive oppression. The white woman's voice is unauthorized, outside recognized literary forms. When she speaks, she does not have the authority of the canon. And when others speak for her, she risks compromising her voice. Barton is self-conscious about her situation.

the substance of her tale. Because she seeks Foe to write her memoir into a story, she is “mediating her past self to a written self” (Rankin 314). Foe makes her doubt the existence of her lost daughter. He asks her about her daughter if she “is substantial or is she a story too?” (152). These metafictional exchanges enact the postmodern conception of history in fiction as a textualized construct. While they seem at the surface level to efface Friday’s story and weaken the theme of the colonized body, their function is actually quite the opposite if we see them as a foregrounding of Coetzee’s project of explicating how the real is estranged in language.

In the first place, Barton resorted to Foe as a famous writer who heard many confessions (48) and has a reputation for producing intriguing fiction. Back in London, she replies to a captain when he encourages her to write her story, “A liveliness is lost in the writing down which must be supplied by art, and I have no art” (40). She wants to be “a free woman who asserts her freedom by telling her story according to her own desire” (131), but she is aware she needs the artifice a writer like Foe can provide to make her story sellable. Her metafictional debates with Foe color the narrative. When she insists she wants the truth and no lies told in her story (40), he responds that for storytellers, “their trade is in books, not in truth” (40). In a letter she tells Foe that “You are a writer who knows above all how many words can be sucked from a cannibal feast, how few from a woman cowering in the wind. It is all a matter of words and numbers of words, is it not?” (94). Barton wants a true account about the island episode and Foe wants to add some coloring. Foe suggests a five-part structure for her story and recommends making the island just one episode in it, “It is thus that we make up a book,” he tells her, “loss, then quest, then recovery: beginning, then middle, then end” (117). Barton counts on the

progress of the writing process and tells Foe, ““More is at stake in the history you write, I will admit, for it must not only tell the truth about us but please its readers too. Will you not bear it in mind, however, that my life is drearily suspended till your writing is done?”” (63). Afraid that her story will be dull to readers if it does not include strange elements, she resorts to Foe to supply the missing exotic elements. She is sad, however, that these can belittle the truth of her narrative, ““Alas,”” she asks, ““will the day ever arrive when we can make a story without strange circumstances?”” (67). Barton wants an author who can give her story some “substance” (51), to make it worthwhile for readers. Writing, however, “proves a slow business” as Barton asserts (88). While Barton and Foe debate mimetic versus antimimetic art, both are aware of the essential constructedness of writing and the discursive estrangement of the real in language.

While Barton first assumes that for her story to be told she needs the stylistic competence Foe possesses, she comes to realize that she has more problems; the story is bound to be “stupid,” she complains, because it “so doggedly holds its silence...The true story will not be heard till by *art* we have found a means of giving voice to Friday” (my emphasis; 117-118). Just as the magistrate and the medical officer fail to fathom the otherness of the barbarian girl and K in *WB* and *LTMK* respectively, Barton is faced with the same impasse. “Continuing to seek authorial mastery (the right to tell her own story), Susan then attempts to colonize Friday as the subject of her narrative” (Chapman “Writing” 332). For Chapman—echoing one of Lyotard’s main points in “Answering the Question: What is Postmodernism?”—the postmodern novel is characterized by “the putting forward of the unrepresentable in presentation itself” (“Writing” 337). Because

Friday's body is one that is not able to be represented, Coetzee resorts to discursively estranging it as the silent, ambiguous body others freely construct.

Barton tries to teach Friday language, to write and know words to get him to tell his story, as she knows that the only tongue that can tell this story is the tongue he lost. No other legitimate story can be told in his silence. Their fates become intertwined. She tells Foe in a letter, "To tell my story and be silent on Friday's tongue is no better than offering a book for sale with pages in it quietly left empty. Yet the only tongue that can tell Friday's secret in the tongue he has lost!" (67). The deconstructive gap in her story is the loss of Friday's tongue. On another occasion, she tells Foe, "The story of Friday's tongue is a story unable to be told, or unable to be told by me. That is to say, many stories can be told of Friday's tongue, but the true story is buried within Friday, who is mute" (118). Since Friday is a silent body, the pure materiality of his existence as a body cannot be accessed without the mediation/construction of language, regardless of the inadequacy of language to fully capture material realities. It is for this reason that other characters doubt his true story. As one critic puts it, "One reason for doubt is the mystery of Friday's muteness" (D'Hoker 37). Barton knows her story cannot be true if it does not account for Friday's lost tongue. Therefore, she indirectly begins to construct this body as an unfathomable one. She estranges it from the realm of the material to the discursive one of tropes. Friday becomes "the first figure to become a ghost of his former self, the first body to be cannibalized by Susan Barton's post-island narrative project" (Jolly; *Colonization* 9). In representing Friday in terms of silence and absence, Barton is also establishing the allegorical cultural and historical significance of silence.

Again, the doubting of the body foregrounds the status of Friday as an allegorized figure for the violated other in history and reduces the status of Friday as a specifically mutilated body at the individual level. Barton wants to decode Friday's body, but he cannot legitimate any account about him. His body is being read by Barton who tries to understand how he lost his tongue (and probably his male member), how he obeyed his master all this time. However, this constructed body suggestively insists on its physicality and transgressive potential. Friday's mutilated body subverts attempts to tell its true story via other tongues (and thus attempts at constructing his body by the female narrator or by the author she entrusts her story to, Foe) since he himself does not validate any attempted story. Barton thinks metaphorically about the missing tongue as a trope for another sexual mutilation: "Now when Crusoe told me that the slavers were in the habit of cutting out the tongues of their prisoners to make them more tractable, I wondered whether he might not be employing a figure, for the sake of delicacy: whether the lost tongue might stand not only for itself but for a more atrocious mutilation; whether by a dumb slave I was to understand a slave unmanned" (118-119). She is aware, then, of the problematic distinction between substantial bodies and discursively estranged ones. She is aware of how bodies can be treated as political symbols and metaphors for oppression.

Like the magistrate and the medic before her in *WB* and *LTMK*, Barton tries to penetrate and fathom the other body of Friday in front of her. This "poor simpleton" (39), as she thinks of him, is reminiscent of how the medic views K in *LTMK*. His body figures his situation through his supposed castration and equivalent loss of the tongue. The body wavers between the literal and figurative as such mutilations are not confirmed and their

value remains richly significant. Barton explains that in the absence of his own voice and tongue, Friday is subjected to her construction and discursive estrangement of his body:

Friday has no command of words and therefore no defence against being re-shaped day by day in conformity with the desires of others. ... No matter what he is to himself (is he anything to himself?—how can he tell us?), what he is to the world is what I make of him. Therefore the silence of Friday is a helpless silence. ... Whereas the silence I keep regarding Bahia and other matters is chosen and purposeful: it is my own silence. (121-122)

She uses language, like Cruso before her, to subject the mute Friday to her will.<sup>182</sup>

Coetzee continues a pre-occupation with language and its relationship with power and sociopolitical oppression. For Barton, Friday as a story is a gap in her narrative, a textual hole, and thus disembodied. She complains about how his silence, not having a story, paradoxically reduces him to a linguistic construct or a fictive status: “I say he is a cannibal and he becomes a cannibal; I say he is a laundryman and he becomes a laundryman. What is the truth of Friday?” (121). Marais writes that “By conflating imperialism and authorship, Coetzee also demonstrates that the dialectic of self and other informing the coloniser-colonised relationship also informs the author-text relationship; that the imperialist gesture is, essentially, an *hermeneutic act*” (emphasis original; “Hermeneutics” 69). Marais brings together reading and colonizing/appropriating the other. But Susan’s manipulation of Friday does not change the fact that he is neither laundryman nor cannibal, that he eludes assimilation into her cognitive codes, for “these

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<sup>182</sup> Since Coetzee is highlighting the authoritative, colonizing power of words, he is suggesting a relationship between imperialism and mastery/authorship. Hence, a critic like Marais speaks of Cruso’s “authorial imperialism” in the form of a “hermeneutic urge to domesticate Friday” (“Hermeneutics” 69).

are mere names, they do not touch his essence, he is a substantial body, he is himself, Friday is Friday” (122). Patrick Hayes says that Friday in his muteness is “subject to the infinite regress of fictionality” (278). The muted body of Friday is subjected to construction by others according to their desires. In a similar vein, Fanon argues that “the black soul is a construction by white folk” (*Black* xviii). Fanon also notes that “to speak is to exist absolutely for the other” (*Black* 1). In this logic, a silent Friday does not exist as an absolute body for Barton. Highlighting the power of hegemonic discursive construction, Fanon also cites Sartre’s claim that “It is the anti-Semite who *makes* the Jew” (emphasis original; qtd. in *Black* 73) implying that the Jew or the black man as a parallel analogy is he who is considered so by others. In other words, the other is victimized by and enslaved by what Fanon calls “cultural imposition” (168). Butler concedes that the body cannot escape linguistic representation despite the limitations of such a claim. She contends:

Language is said to fabricate or to figure the body, to produce or construct it, to constitute or to make it. Thus, language is said to act, which involves a tropological understanding of language as performing and performative. There is, of course, something quite scandalous involved in the strong version of construction that is sometimes at work when, for instance, the doctrine of construction implies that the body is not only made *by* language, but made *of* language, or that the body is somehow reducible to the linguistic coordinates by which it is identified or identifiable, as if there is no nonlinguistic stuff at issue. (emphasis original; “How” 256)

If Coetzee's overall project is complicating the relationship between the body and language and between history and discourse, it becomes necessary for him to estrange Friday's body as a materiality contingent upon yet independent from construction.

Barton is aware that the silent Friday is a "real" body despite what she makes of him and despite the inescapability of construction—in a word, despite the novel's discursive estrangement. As she begins to try to teach him more words in Foe's home, she is aware of her potential complicity in Friday's oppression in language: "There are times when benevolence deserts me and I use words only as the shortest way to subject him to my will. At such times I understand why Crusoe preferred not to disturb his muteness. I understand, that is to say, why a man will choose to be a slaveholder" (60-61). The material body is essentially estranged and textualized in language. In addition to highlighting the oppression which Friday's silence signifies, "Coetzee's account also raises the problem of white liberal complicity in this voicelessness, and the ways in which Friday has been *constructed* as voiceless by the European and continuing colonial writing of South African his/story" (Tiffin; "Post-Colonial Literatures" 29). Barton dismisses the truth about Friday, Foe would support, that he is a "substantial body" or that he is "himself, Friday is Friday" (122) because only Friday can tell the truth and reject what others make of him. Barton blurs the boundaries between the substantial Friday, Friday as a body, and Friday as a story and material for representation, i.e. as "substance."<sup>183</sup> She is not in doubt about the materiality of his body close to her, but she is in doubt about his substance, his true (hi)story that is not revealed to her. She attempts to no avail to return Friday to the linguistic stage in which "he lived immersed in the

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<sup>183</sup> The same distinction is made by Poyner (*Paradox* 91, 98-99, 104).

prattle of words as unthinking as a fish in water” (60). Her dilemma is being confronted with silent materiality and then struggling with how to deal with/represent such alterity. Her efforts to decode the silent body are analogous to the attempts of other Coetzee characters to decipher a resistant body. Marais comments on her attempts to textualize the other body and writes that during the novel she “tries to interpret Friday’s silence, in this way mirroring the stance of the reader in relation to the text” (“Reading/Colonizing” 12). And as Boehmer points out, the other body “can represent only its own physicality, its own strangeness” (270). Boehmer further writes that if it represents “its own silence, the colonized body speaks; uttering its wounds, it negates its muted condition” (272), which means that the silent body discursively and allegorically signifies for the reader. For one critic, this figural treatment of the body “violates the body by translating it into a term in a representative scheme. This denies the substantiality of the body and effectively effaces the body from the text” (Jolly; *Colonization* 8). Thus, Coetzee’s project can be viewed as complicating our understanding of material history and the troubled relation between the literal and the metaphorical. It conveys the impossibility of capturing bodily materiality and speaking of it without some form of estrangement or mediation. As I have argued throughout this dissertation, Coetzee as a postmodernist makes us question common assumptions about the ability of language to represent reality or fix reference.

An African slave, Friday, silent and apparently mutilated like many colonized, violated bodies, challenges by his silence and other means of symbolic signification the authority of those who talk or write. His silence, Stephen Clingman argues, “is his ultimate resistance” (49). Friday is silent not only because of a suspected physical mutilation but because of cultural and political marginalization and ideological structures

of narratives and language that render “Fridays” silent or make them speak in the tongue of the colonizer and in his discourse. Friday’s silence is a trope “typically read as symbolic of the denial of (political) voice to black South Africans by white colonists” (Worthington 253). His doubtful wound is doubly significant as it signifies, beyond the body, a history of enslavement and linguistic manipulation. The body is hence a trope for more significant othering. As such, its relation to the South African situation remains essentially and inescapably discursive. Coetzee asserts in a 1987 interview with Morphet that *F* still deals with (post)colonial issues, the manifestations of oppression, and legacies of colonialism: “*Foe* is a retreat from the South African situation, but only from that situation in a narrow temporal perspective. It is not a retreat from the subject of colonialism or from questions of power” (462).<sup>184</sup> In another interview, Coetzee describes *F* as an “interrogation of authority” (*Doubling* 247). In one sense, the material body has its own historical authority, but Coetzee estranges the expression of such authority over the ambivalent body of Friday. And for one critic, until “the end, Friday remains voiceless, the subject of interpretative will-to-power” (Worthington 255). On a related note, Chris Bongie calls Barton “the hermeneutic subject, who is always also an imperial subject, lives in the hope of recovering the ‘secret body’ that she, like the magistrate, feels is lacking to her” (267). But Friday’s elusiveness/mystery shows the failure of constructive attempts to capture his essence, and paradoxically, an unspeakable history of oppression. Silence itself, as refusal to signify, signifies the unsignifiable and estranges the familiar.

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<sup>184</sup> In this assertion, Coetzee returns *F* to the status of a “Third World” text about the experiences of colonial suffering and marginalization. Although the structure of the novel and its experimental nature problematize its “Third Worldism,” it is thematically that *F* interrogates the colonial experience.

While critics have viewed silence negatively by pointing out its lack of political resistance to apartheid and political realities, others have acknowledged that in *Foe* Coetzee “uses silence to engage with history” (Marais; “Disarming Silence” 131). In a paragraph summarizing the argument, Marais argues that silence has meanings and attributes:

From the Levinasian allusions in Coetzee’s depiction of Susan Barton’s intercourse with Friday in *Foe*, it is therefore clear that, rather than simply being a “language of defeat” or the “voice of complicity,” silence may be interpreted in the novel as enabling a form of resistance that is grounded in ethical authority. Silence here is therefore associated with the ability of the other to resist violence and affect the autonomous subject in a way that brings about the substitution of careless freedom for the burdensome anxiety of responsibility for the other.

(“Disarming Silence” 137)

Marais concludes that while traditional politically committed writings “seek to oppose the violence of apartheid through resistance, Coetzee’s novel’s strategies of excession attempt to resist *all* violence by imparting a sense of the radical opposition of the absolute other” (emphasis original; 141). In other words, the novel engages history as Marais argues, not by using “force, but in the ethical authority of the other” (“Disarming Silence” 141). Barton hints at her ethical duty toward Friday as a body, “Thus it has become, in a manner of speaking, between Friday and myself. I do not love him, but he is mine” (111). Later on, she tells Foe a symbolic story about a man who took pity on an old one and carried him on his shoulders to cross a high river and how the old man would not get down, turning the man who carried him into “a beast of burden” (148). She is

ethically bound by this mute Friday in front of her. Although she doubts his story, she does not doubt him as a material body close to her.

Paradoxically, the materiality of the body is asserted and estranged in language. The mute Friday remains a trope, an allegorized version of the oppressed other. In the last section of the novel, which is the culmination of the body's discursive estrangement, a new narrator suddenly and magically enters a fictional world of Foe. Friday's abject body is his own sign/text, for his home in the wrecked ship visited by the anonymous narrator in this surreal/dreamlike ending is a place beyond language where bodies are their own signs and ends. The narrator metafictionally enters the house of the author (De)Foe to find the dead bodies of Barton and Foe and finds Friday's body wrapped and hard.<sup>185</sup> In this surprising ending, "the themes of narrative art and colonialism coalesce" (Penner; *Countries* 127). Foe and Barton, who went to bed in the previous section, now "lie side by side in bed, not touching. The skin, dry as paper, is stretched tight over their bones. Their lips have receded, uncovering their teeth, so that they seem to be smiling. Their eyes are closed" (153). A good time has passed after the previous section and the characters and the author are dead now, yet magically without decomposing.<sup>186</sup> However, Friday seems still faintly alive and warm and the narrator tries to part his teeth, thus

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<sup>185</sup> For many critics the unknown narrator of the fourth and last section of the novel is potentially the author Coetzee himself, having dispensed of Foe and Susan as authors within the text. For example, see Dodd, p. 328 and p. 332. For Denis Donoghue, the speaker is "the voice of poetic imagination" (qtd. in Post; "Noise" 152). For Penner, the narrator is "an interloper" and a "visitor," a "consciousness" that created the characters (*Countries* 126). Regardless of the identity of the narrator in the novel's epilogue, Coetzee seems to be suggesting a connection between writing and disenfranchisement and highlighting the ideologies imposed by texts on readers. Barton's disabled authorial voice needed the authorial mediation of a male writer like Foe, and now—as if registering the rejection of colonialist, patriarchal discourse Foe represents—Foe, who silenced Barton, is himself silenced and pushed to the background. Instead, it is Friday who gains more as a dominant narrative presence in this last section.

<sup>186</sup> This fantastic dislocation of time is an instance of Coetzee's postmodern technique of manipulating reality. The postmodern novel, rejecting traditional realism, often uses what is called "magic realism."

doing what Barton did not, and listen to him. When the narrator opens Friday's mouth, his body speaks vicariously, "From his mouth, without a breath, issue the sounds of the island" (154). The narrator tries to read Friday's body or fathom his story. His attempts to make Friday's silence signify are not successful, for Friday signifies through negation, and we are back to the same dilemma of a resistant materiality estranged in language.

The next time the narrator sees Friday in this fictional house of Foe he has turned to the wall. "About his neck—I had not observed this before—is a scar like a necklace, left by a rope or chain" (155). This immediately allegorizes the material body and speaks for the authority of the oppressed body enslaved and subjected in history. The narrator finds and begins to read the beginning of Barton's narrative addressed to Foe about rowing and then slipping overboard when tired (155). As he reads, he magically slips overboard in the scene of the shipwreck of Friday's slave ship and the petals Friday once cast. He goes under water to the wreck and enters it after many years to find Barton and her captain "fat as pigs in their white nightclothes, their limbs extending stiffly from their trunks, their hands, puckered from long immersion, held out in blessing, float like stars against the low roof" (157). He moves beneath them to find Friday in a corner and "half buried in sand, his knees drawn up, his hands between his thighs" (157). This time there is suggestively a chain around his neck (157). The narrator asks Friday about this ship. However, the response comes from the narrator: "But this is not a place of words. Each syllable, as it comes out, is caught and filled with water and diffused. This is a place where bodies are their own signs. It is the home of Friday" (157). This is apparently a non-allegorical place beyond texts and language, the site of the colonial body that has its own authority in history. The body insists on its physical presence outside language and

before its construction through language. The home of Friday, it turns out, is his buried story. It is the story of his body that needs to be recovered and communicated. And just as Friday's body is the site of his story, his story is bound to be about the body's estranged relation to storytelling and narration. Once the narrator again presses Friday's mouth open and the novel ends, what comes out is not words, but "a slow stream, without breath, without interruption. It flows up through his body and out upon me; it passes through the cabin, through the wreck; washing the cliffs and shores of the island, it runs northward and southward to the ends of the earth. Soft and cold, dark and unending, it beats against my eyelids, against the skin of my face" (157). Friday's body/text makes him heard and recognized. His marginalized body, like Magda's, challenges the master's dominant discourse. His body, if castrated and tongueless, is beyond gender and closed boundaries. Its openness threatens the assumed closure/completion of his oppressors.

Friday's home is a wordless place beyond texts and language, the site of the colonial body that has its own historical authority. With Friday, "his substantiality prefigures any (colonialist) story that might be told about him" (Poyner; *Paradox* 109). Friday's abject, excluded body is his own sign/text, for his home in the wrecked ship visited in the ending is a place beyond language where bodies are their own signs and ends. As such, Friday is still a trope for material suffering in history within a larger context of colonialism and power relations. The body, after all, is a marker of difference and a site of oppression. Friday's body demands that we not be indifferent to it. It demands its material existence before social and cultural construction. Silence reduces him to the level of a mute brute that is nothing but a body. However, this body, which is beyond writing and representation, remains bound in language. The proliferating texts or

interpretations revolving around such a body can never be validated, but the trope of the cut tongue is a reminder of the subjection of Africans and blacks in slavery, colonization, and then apartheid; the cut tongue stands for oppression, exploitation, violence, and lack of communication. Friday's mutilated body is materially visceral and, importantly, a trope for its oppression/violation in the way hysteria in *HC* and cancer in *AI* are tropes for various kinds of historical oppression. The body is beyond common language; it is existentially and ontologically present. As the unsignifiable, it still signifies for us.

Acknowledging the agency of silence, Spivak speaks of Friday as "the unemphatic agent of withholding in the text" (*Critique* 190). Barton's story is bound to be lacking and incomplete without the validation of Friday himself who is holding his silence. Spivak also argues that "we also know that Coetzee's entire book warns that Friday's body is not its own sign" (*Critique* 193). Spivak is aware that it is difficult to view the body without signs and meanings and that although the body seemingly does not signify much beyond its embodiment, its resistance richly signifies. The literal resists yet is intertwined with the figurative. Whether in the realm of life or death, Friday is a silent body. His body appears non-figural, irreducible to language, and his absolute alterity is beyond description. A silent body is ineluctably substantial, yet it is also discursive, or else irrelevant and non-existent in history as a discourse. May argues that the body in *WB*, as it is at the end of *F* he cites, "is no vehicle, whether of soul or mind: rather, it is its own place" and that bodies thus "signify nothing but themselves" (410). In a similar vein, G. Scott Bishop writes that Friday is a body in itself, but Bishop rightly points out the interpretive attempts that discursively estrange the body in language and return it to the level of metaphors. Friday for Bishop

is an unmediated being, and his story is an unmediated story. Still, both Michael and Friday become not only the subject of interpretation (and therefore the subject of authority) of other characters in the book, but also the subject of the reader's interpretation. Coetzee puts us, as readers, in the very position he finds questionable. We see Michael's and Friday's presence as literary and political issues, and we try to interpret the meaning of them as characters; but Coetzee has made Michael and especially Friday resistant to interpretation. That is their nature as figures in the novels: they suggest that the reader should interpret, but they thwart any interpretation. They remain steadfastly silent. (56)

Spivak in her classic essay "Can the Subaltern Speak?" presented her famous thesis that in the absence of a listening subject and institutional agency the subaltern cannot speak. However, at the end of *F*, the slow stream passing through Friday's open mouth challenges boundaries between the inside and the outside, between the local and universal. It challenges the very notions of speech and silence. "After all of the other storytellers in the novel are dead ... Friday's body alone lives to haunt the text, asking to be read in its own right" (Wright; *Writing* 66). The authority of the suffering body and its resistance to interpretation are evident. They are not to be doubted, yet they have to be mediated or estranged somehow. The narrator, in claiming that Friday's body is an end beyond signification, apparently negates the metaphorical body constructed on Friday while we simultaneously recognize the allegorical and metaphorical meanings of this brute materiality. Bongie argues that Friday, "Rather than inhabiting a world of figures that cannot be reduced to a body, appears to stand as a body that cannot be reduced to the

figural world of Barton and Foe” (270). But this body that resists reduction to the figural is another kind of figure that is more than a body.

In conclusion, the puzzle *F* poses for the reader is the discursive estrangement of the body, how the substantial body has a troubled, paradoxical relation with language. At one level, the colonized body does not signify in a language anything beyond its own materiality, or language fails to capture its otherness and thus it persists in being material, rejecting reduction to textuality and thus familiarity. Friday’s body is his sign in its silence and resistance. It has been oppressed via language by being taught the language of the colonizer or robbed of the power to speak. The violated body cannot be spoken for by the author, or language cannot render the oppression of such a body whose materiality is the only proof of its subjection. Such a body has been treated and exploited as a body. And as a body, Friday resists signification. His silence refuses to be spoken. At another level, while this enslaved body may be beyond language, the only way it can be mediated linguistically is in terms of absence and silence, i.e. in terms of unrepresentability. This body may be silent or inarticulate, but its materiality signifies an enforced otherness and a history of subjection and suffering. Friday as a resistant body remains metaphorical, “the personification of total aphasia” (Rankin 316). The body’s resistance to allegorization is itself allegorical for the reader. As Boehmer argues, “[r]epresenting its own silence, the colonized body speaks; uttering its wounds, it negates its muted condition” (272). The materiality of this subjected body speaks for it while Friday remains an example of “the subaltern alterity for which his white South African creator declines to speak” (Thieme 70). Frank argues that “The ill body is certainly not mute—it speaks eloquently in pains and symptoms—but it is inarticulate” (*Wounded 2*). The bodily inscription Friday was

subjected to (or had culturally imposed on him) signifies his oppression and the construction of his body via power relations. His body is the site for the inscription of colonial violence, be it physical or cultural. Friday's body remains an enigmatic text and the "hole" in the narrative. If it speaks symptomatically, as Frank would have it, it is then beyond the literal and closer to the allegorical of discourse and linguistic tropes. Barton, still trying to decode Friday, says, "It is for us to descend into the mouth (since we speak in figures). It is for us to open Friday's mouth and hear what it holds: silence, perhaps, or a roar, like the roar of a seashell held to the ear" (142). We speak of Friday the body in figures and via language, and the material body is estranged as a textual one.

#### IV. Conclusion: Toward Allegorizing the Body

Aware of the body's problematic and paradoxical relation to language, Butler argues that the body returns to the language that fails to capture its essence and that its existence beyond language necessarily and ambivalently allegorizes it. She asserts:

Although the body depends on language to be known, the body also exceeds every possible linguistic effort of capture. It would be tempting to conclude that this means that the body exists outside of language, that it has an ontology separable from any linguistic one, and that we might be able to describe this separable ontology. But this is where I would hesitate, perhaps permanently, for as we begin that description of what is outside language, the chiasm reappears: we have already contaminated, though not contained, the very body we seek to establish in its ontological purity. The body escapes its linguistic grasp, but so too does it escape the subsequent effort to determine ontologically that every escape.

The very description of the extralinguistic body allegorizes the problem of the chiasmic relation between language and the body and so fails to supply the distinction it seeks to articulate. (“How” 257)

This touches the heart of the postmodern problematic of representation. Coetzee, then, is aware that a material history of oppression enacted on the other body is beyond representational ploys and that material suffering resists language. If he enacts a postmodern representation of constructed bodies trapped in language and wrapped within fictional layers, it is paradoxically, perhaps, by way of articulating a specific brand of postmodern politics that acknowledges the historical real and yet shows its inaccessibility to us except via language and discourse. And in dramatizing the oppressed body’s resistance to signification, he is simultaneously allegorizing the material body and turning it into a metaphor for unspeakable, generalized suffering in history. Friday, after all, is often read beyond Friday as a body and as “the mute colonial subject” (Graham 232). My next chapter addresses the issue of postmodern allegorizing. Building on the discussion in four chapters thus far, I offer next a reading of Coetzee’s apartheid novels as postmodern allegories of the body in two senses: one traditionally discursive and intellectual with relation to apartheid realities and historical oppression and another visceral and literal sense—and thus allegorical, as I will explain, in its own way.

## Chapter Five: Conclusion: Postmodern Allegories and the Politics of Representation

Allegories are, in the realm of thoughts, what ruins are in the realm of things.

Walter Benjamin

Allegory, then, is the doubling—indeed, the multiplication—of “texts” within and around a work of literature or art.

David Joselit

### I. Postmodernism and Allegory

As Brenda Machosky reminds us, allegory is “to say one thing and mean another. Allegory has always demanded that we think otherwise” (7). The term is derived from a Greek word meaning to “speak otherwise,” other than what is said. It is a way of writing and interpreting literature highlighting a contrast between an apparent meaning and an intended one. It can be a genre or a rhetorical device (an extended metaphor). J. A. Cuddon defines it as “a story in verse or prose with a double meaning: a primary or surface meaning; and a secondary or under-the-surface meaning” (22). For Butler, allegory, besides being a narrative in which something is spoken “otherwise” than what is apparently said, is a narrative in which “one offers a sequential narrative ordering for something which cannot be described sequentially, and where the apparent referent of the allegory becomes the very action of elaboration that allegorical narrative performs” (*Excitable* 177). By nature, allegory highlights the difficulties of articulating what is not, or cannot be, said. It hints at an “other” difficult to articulate. It is implicated in the problematic of referentiality and representation, which accounts for its relevance in a

postmodern critique of Coetzee's apartheid works.<sup>187</sup> Traditionally, the literal meaning in allegory is shadowed by the figurative one. Because this surface meaning is doubled by the figurative one external to the text and because allegory refers us to distant origins of meaning suggested by Benjamin's metaphor of "ruins," a good deal of allegorical interpretation becomes abstractly intellectual, trying to establish links between what is stated and what is implied. And this is one level of allegorical interpretation we can use in Coetzee. But since this traditional approach is inadequate and problematic for critics because allegory is deemed in this sense as the symbolic, evasive representation<sup>188</sup> of abstract ideas or moral principles (as in famous allegories like John Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress* and George Orwell's *Animal Farm*), I seek in this chapter to articulate another level of allegorical interpretation, what I will call a "visceral" one. I argue that Coetzee's apartheid novels problematize our understanding of allegory (the interpretive act) and that allegory in them functions at different levels, intellectually distant and literal ones.

In Coetzee's revision of received notions of allegory, the narrative is as important as, if not more important than, the external sphere of conceptual meanings. This is Coetzee's diversion from simple allegories in which the surface meaning is overwhelmed by a deeper one of commentary. In traditional allegories, characters are abstractions and the plot communicates a moral doctrine. In Coetzee, narrative facts are not overwhelmed by meanings. Coetzee defamiliarizes allegory and allegorizes, in the process, the non-allegorical, i.e. the literal. The first-order level of overt meaning foregrounds

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<sup>187</sup> Allegory, Deborah Madsen reminds us, "assumes that it is dealing with the kinds of issues which resist expression in other forms and which resist simple statement or definition" (123). It explores the difficulties we ascribe to language as an expressive medium.

<sup>188</sup> The most famous critique of Coetzee's allegorical novels as evasive attempts shying away from naming apartheid realities with their exact names is probably Gordimer's review of *LTMK*. See my Introduction, pp. 15-16.

referentiality and complicates it. It is even more important than the covert parallels. The literal level of meaning that is traditionally submerged under the symbolic one is foregrounded, which reverses allegory's interest in intellectual otherness. Bodily suffering that happens at the literal level of Coetzee's apartheid novels cannot be eclipsed by our interpretive meanings or by the external referents. Aware of criticisms that allegory is abstractly rational and mechanical, Coetzee seeks to revise this notion of allegory as dissociated, to dramatize allegory's political and historical investment via a literality that overwhelms any figurative constructions of meaning, without necessarily negating allegory's connection to abstraction. The literal and the metaphorical interact, but the literal is not jettisoned, like a booster rocket, once it is launched at meaning. If traditional allegory transforms political realities into narrative and tackles them abstractly, Coetzee makes narrative events strongly present. The postmodern interplay between material and constructed bodies is echoed in the interplay of fact and meaning in allegory. Revising allegory in a postmodern fashion, Coetzee in each novel deconstructs the logic through which it works. However, when we look at the apartheid novels in their entirety, we allegorize the literal and read them as allegories of the material body. Each novel performs a visceral materiality of its own, but the general effect on us is still allegorical. Coetzee's postmodern allegory makes this possible.

This study began as an attempt to account for Coetzee's apartheid novels by redeeming their political relevance to their times. The theme I have traced is that in Coetzee we never get past the body but that Coetzee, as a postmodernist, problematizes the representation of the material body with relation to language and discourse. I reflect on my analysis of the problematic of the body and argue that this reading allegorizes the

body at different levels. As a body of works thematically related, the apartheid novels form an allegory. And because postmodernism has been my theoretical framework, I establish relationships between allegorical representation and postmodernism. In seeking to establish an alliance between allegory and postmodernism, I shed light on the political thrust of allegorization and its use by postcolonial writers. I conclude with a brief look at Coetzee's post-apartheid novels which have not been examined because of space limitations and because they are less relevant to the contentious apartheid context. I reiterate premises I argued elsewhere and suggest an alternative way of reading Coetzee.

Disease, torture, pain, deformity, and bodily violations color the apartheid novels, and normal, healthy bodies are difficult to come by. We can see this as a preoccupation with the undeniable authority of suffering and oppression to which the body is subjected in material history.<sup>189</sup> Such bodies act discursively as a trope for the oppressed body within a postcolonial context. They stand in an allegorical relation to materially oppressed bodies in history within and outside the South African context. At another level, the viscosity of suffering and pain existing at the novels' literal level negotiates the distant analogies we might make and forms another visceral level of allegorical significance. The metaphorical meanings are allegorical just as the literal is allegorical in its way. While I might have conceded to Rebecca Saunders' claim that allegory "is a kind of language in which a text's literal meaning is foreign to its proper meaning" (223), I wish to argue that in Coetzee's case the vividness and abundance of bodily suffering in pain, deformity, or disease is not exactly "foreign" to the novels' "proper" meaning. The visceral materiality that abounds in the novels appropriates any

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<sup>189</sup> For Coetzee's comments in this regard, see my Introduction, pp. 55-56.

“proper” allegorical meanings and enacts/embodies them. It bridges the gap between different levels of meaning. And instead of simply making us intellectually ponder the figural context that the novels allude to, Coetzee’s apartheid novels evoke a crude viscosity of pain and suffering that makes them peculiar allegories of the body. To the extent that all readings are somewhat allegorical in that modern allegory generalizes and admits the play of meaning, this dissertation allegorizes Coetzee’s novels and reads them as postmodern allegories of the body at an intellectual level first and, importantly, at a more visceral level second.

To respond to claims that Coetzee’s apartheid writings are not confrontational because they do not realistically document material factors of oppression, we have to reexamine their postmodern engagement of realism as mediated by language and how the body cannot escape construction in words and metaphorical associations. The body is rendered in terms of narratives and storytelling, and history is the product of stories. Coetzee’s postmodern challenge to historical oppression is rooted in discourse and representation. As Radhika Mohanram puts it, the traditional notion of representation “presumes reality to be the presence behind it. In the age of post-structuralist thought, we all concur that reality itself is a discursive construct” (xiv). Coetzee responds to historical oppression via what Tiffin calls a “counter-discourse” that problematizes the real, not via realistic documentation. Hermann Wittenberg argues that as a world author Coetzee “could allow himself a detached sense of postmodern discursive freedom; yet as a South African author pressures impinged on his writing either in the form of repressive state censorship or, equally problematically, in the call to arms for a more politically engaged artistic practice in the service of the anti-apartheid ‘struggle’” (134). His global

postmodernism allows him to simultaneously capture and respond to the local South African situation. Coetzee's postmodern interest in form, language, metafiction, and complication of realist representation is not done at the expense of the political content. Andrew Bennett and Nicholas Royle, highlighting postmodernism's decentering logic, argue that "In place of the centre, but not in its place, there is alterity, otherness, a multiplicity and dispersal of centres, origins, presences" (287). This attack on binary logic is the inclusiveness of Coetzee's postmodern vision and his refashioning of our understanding of history as a master narrative.

I have argued that the relevance of Coetzee's engagement with history stems from his historiographical interest in representation, in the writing of history as manifested in his conception of the interplay between material and constructed bodies. While Coetzee seems to evade a straightforward analysis of concrete South African apartheid realities and thus an active struggle against them, he rejects an a priori judgment on history and seeks to complicate our understanding of historical knowledge and committed fiction. I have also argued elsewhere that a material history of oppression is inseparable from discursive power. Material history remains a problematic concept in Coetzee's fiction. A negative critique of his "dehistoricized" allegories of colonial situations fails to acknowledge that he sought to find a way of addressing apartheid realities as part of a global history of colonialism and struggled against the difficulty of articulating material suffering in fiction because it is often beyond representation or, when described, is subject to fictional construction. Meskell and Weiss lucidly write that "What many commentators have found difficult to grasp is that, rather than mimetically reproducing the past's historical facticity, Coetzee's writing wrestles with the material, bodily affect

of that history” (97). A postmodernist, Coetzee conveys how material suffering is mediated in language and represented as a discourse. As Richard Lehan contends, “One of the major assumptions of postmodernism is that meaning is a human construct, the result of paradigmatic thinking, and the product of the mediated questions we choose to answer” (249). Because postmodernism questions realism, it allows us to relate to the world, not mimetically, but through discourse. Postmodernism’s problematization of representation as discursive should take us to the confluence between postmodernism and allegory because allegory is typically viewed as a means of self-reflexive, discursive representation. Like postmodernism, allegory makes us think “otherwise” about the real. Examined as allegories about the South African situation, the apartheid novels represent that situation discursively and mediate it, which makes them, intellectually, postmodern allegories about the interplay between material history and its fictional reproduction.

Owens underscores allegory’s alliance with the postmodern project and its celebration of ambivalence and problematized reference. For Owens, postmodernism “neither brackets nor suspends the referent but works instead to problematize the activity of reference” (Part 2, 80). Allegory, similarly, problematizes the concept of referentiality and the relationship between the textual and the meta-textual. It celebrates the interplay of possible meanings. In allegory, meanings function at different levels and in different contexts. Hence, what Owens calls “the allegorical impulse,” often deconstructive and ironic, is strongly related to postmodernism. Such an impulse, Owens argues, “that characterizes postmodernism is a direct consequence of its preoccupation with reading” (Part 2, 64). For Owens, allegory and postmodernism are intertwined, especially as far as representation is concerned. In the next section, I align Coetzee’s allegories functioning

at the literal level, what I call visceral allegories, with the material body and align the allegories functioning at the intellectual level, what I call traditional allegories, with the discursively constructed body. The analogy Benjamin draws between allegories and ruins in my epigraph can be understood in terms of the distance from origins ruins make us aware of and thus a mediated, intellectual meaning rather than a direct one. Allegory suggests a difference between present and distant levels of meaning. The distant level of meaning works generally through ideas beyond the immediate context of the work. But Benjamin's figure also emphasizes the (historical) materiality of allegory, its "visceral" subjection to ruin, pain, or destruction.

## II. Intellectual Allegories/Constructed Bodies

In a traditional sense, Coetzee's apartheid novels are allegories of the body. Looked at in their entirety, we can see their discursive relevance to apartheid conditions. Unlike simple allegories that personify abstractions, however, Coetzee's are allegories of the suffering body. Allegory rejects a simple conception of mimesis and problematizes it in line with postmodern leanings. In the light of my persistent explication of their problematic representation of the body, the apartheid novels become postmodern allegories of the body because they pose the representation of the historical real as their main problematic. An allegorical reading is a strong possibility rather than an imposition once we see the works in their entirety and continued dwelling on the body. As allegories of the oppressed body, discursively referring to a South African context that is part of an experience of colonization, the apartheid novels serve this function intellectually for us and at our level of understanding. The novels' discursive relevance to the apartheid South

Africa, which is intellectual and at the level of ideas for us, echoes the discursive construction of the body within them.

Partially, I have attempted to read the apartheid novels in terms of their persistent representation of constructed—as opposed to material—bodies. This reading is allegorical because the novels in this sense echo each other and we read them as such. Allegory, we should remember, can be thought of as a “continued metaphor” (Fletcher 94). It happens, Owens says, “whenever one text is doubled by another” (68). If we are to understand and interpret the novels as doubling each other, we are essentially allegorizing the interpretive act, for “allegorical works do not exist except in a universe of continuing allegoresis, commentary, and interpretation” (Melville 88). In one sense, to read is to allegorize, and allegory invites yet resists interpretation. Jeremy Tambling writes that the “desire to know, which produces allegory, also engenders allegorical interpretation (allegoresis)” (167). An allegorical interpretation is just a particular way of approaching the texts in question. If the novels, as I have argued in the previous chapters, consistently highlight this aspect of the discursive construction of the body and make it a continued metaphor, then they are drawing attention to the discursive level of allegorical meaning, the intellectual one. To give one example, the body of the barbarian girl in *WB* is constructed in Manichean imperial discourses and within the magistrate’s narrative as the other body, which discursively at the traditional, intellectual level of allegory, relates her to the oppressed majority within the apartheid South Africa or even any colonial context.

It is fit that the novels’ representation of the body is read allegorically.

Traditionally, allegory is a means of representing the figural in terms of the literal. In poststructural terms, allegory is a discourse that draws attention to itself because it

negotiates how representation relates to the real. In an allegorical reading, the literal is a clue for the metaphorical, and in Coetzee the body can be understood in terms of the apartheid realities and colonial experiences via an act of reading, which is a discursive act. In the words of Gail Day, allegory “criticizes a simplistic understanding of mimesis as much as it does the grandiose claims of the symbol, but there is no naive ‘beyond’ or cheap dismissal of the problems raised” (116). Allegory, like postmodernism itself, is a way of discursively relating the real. Because it is a trope for discourse and representation, one critic describes it as “the trope of tropes” (qtd. in Melville 57). Coetzee’s emphasis on the discursive construction of the body is in line with allegory’s discursive tropes and distancing/estranging techniques.

The intellectual level at which we can understand Coetzee’s allegories of the body is not to be dismissed as politically irrelevant. The body is ideological in conception and political in representation. The oscillation between the socio-historical and the metafictional provides a framework for understanding the interplay between the construction of the body and its materiality. Coetzee brings forth a broad vision of colonial oppression, within a South African context that is symptomatic of other contexts, even while it enacts postmodern metafiction. The body is constructed in discursive power relations that touch its gender, class, race, yet it is a lived reality with undeniable material presence. To reiterate, postmodernism is preoccupied with representation and who speaks for whom. Hassan offers some characteristic concerns while being aware of conceptual and theoretical difficulties involved in definitions of postmodernism. Hassan gives “traits” (“Making Sense” 445) rather than definitive features. Such postmodern traits range from indeterminacy and fragmentation, to delegitimation and deconstructive thrusts

(445), to hybridization, inversion, and constructionism (446). Significantly, Hassan argues that one postmodern trait is the unrepresentable: “Aniconic, irrealist, postmodern art rejects mimesis, contests the modes of its own representation. It entertains ‘silence,’ ‘exhaustion,’ liminary states which defy articulation: the sublime, the abject, the ineffable, the unspeakable. It explores, as Julia Kristeva says, ‘the exchange between signs and death’; it puts in radical doubt the possibilities of present-ation, re-presentation” (emphasis original; 445). Rejecting direct representation of realities under apartheid, Coetzee asserts an allegorically discursive and postmodern way of viewing history via the bodies he depicts that cannot escape construction in language. For instance, the bodily violence Magda in *HC* speaks of is inseparable from her conscious attempts at writing her diary entries. Her discursive construction of her body in language is not much different from the discursive act through which we allegorically read her as a figure for the oppressed female in a patriarchal, colonial culture.

In an interview with Morphet, Coetzee resists an easy South African label by highlighting the role of the publishing industry in forcing on him the position of being a “South African novelist” (460).<sup>190</sup> He is aware of the problematic reception of his novels for their lack of a definite stance on apartheid politics. However, we as readers politicize the reading act. There is a degree of politics in possibly any text, but that also remains at the interpretive level of ideas because textual politics can be overt or, more often, covert. Coetzee writes in an interview with *WLT* on his book *Giving Offense*: “I am not espousing a position, or not setting out to espouse a position; but that does not mean that a position does not get espoused. I do not fly a banner, but that does not mean that a

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<sup>190</sup> See my Introduction, p. 25.

banner will not get attached to the book. This is how time works, how opinion works” (107). This can be taken as an implicit response to critics who failed to see the political potential of his apartheid novels and denigrated them as evasive allegories. Within a global context that highlights and paradoxically erases the tension between the local and the universal, we find the political relevance of Coetzee’s apartheid novels even when the suffering bodies in them are not particularly “South African” and the times and places covered are not explicitly the apartheid years of the 1970s and 1980s, the years during which Coetzee emerged as a writer. The body in Coetzee exists under oppressive systems, patriarchal, colonial, and racial, that stand in an allegorical relationship to the apartheid system or other unjust power structures.

In *Allegories of Reading*, Paul de Man highlights different levels of reading ranging between the literal and the figural. Readings are treated by de Man as allegorical, acting according to what we bring to texts from the world: “By reading we get, as we say, *inside* a text that was first something alien to us and which we now make our own by an act of understanding. But this understanding becomes at once the representation of an extra-textual meaning” (emphasis original; 12-13). De Man hints at the proximity between the literal and the figural. Readings for him are deconstructive misreadings (17). Northrop Frye, despite having a different conception of allegory,<sup>191</sup> shares de Man’s premise that all commentary is basically allegorical in that we attach meanings and ideas to what we encounter in the texts: “When a work of fiction is written or interpreted

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<sup>191</sup> Frye’s conception of allegory is mainly based on Christian and universalized notions of language, literature, humanity, and history. His theory of allegory is part of his theory of symbols. On the other hand, de Man’s is a poststructuralist, deconstructionist conception that highlights the impossibilities and unreliability of totalizing language, its construction and necessary deconstruction in reading that result in a certain kind of allegories de Man calls “allegories of reading.” As in my epigraph from Benjamin, De Man highlights in his book a temporal difference in terms of a relation between allegory and its origin.

thematically, it becomes a parable or illustrative fable. All formal allegories have ... a strong thematic interest, though it does not follow ... that any thematic criticism of a work of fiction will turn it into an allegory.... Genuine allegory is a structural element in literature: it has to be there, and cannot be added by critical interpretation alone” (*Anatomy* 53-54). Frye adds that “all commentary is allegorical interpretation, an attaching of ideas to the structure of poetic imagery” and that commentary “looks at literature as, in its formal phase, a potential allegory of events and ideas” (*Anatomy* 89). A “naïve allegory” for Frye is one that is clear or direct, one that translates “ideas into images” (*Anatomy* 90). This allegory loses literary merit. For Owens, as for de Man (but not explicitly for Frye), allegory “can no longer be condemned as something merely appended to the work of art, for it is revealed as a structural possibility inherent in every work” (Part 2, 64). Coetzee’s allegories are far from being imposed or naive as they are about mediating the body within self-conscious, multi-layered allegories. It is in their entirety and thematically that we can see them as allegories of the body. Each time we give the literal an interpretive meaning we allegorize it and make it intellectually abstract. However, the problem with allegorizing fiction at the thematic level is that we read it figurally and intellectually, which often reduces its effect in flat, conventional allegories. This is why Coetzee’s allegories of the body align themselves with an empowering postcolonial rhetoric and refuse to subsume the literal under the metaphorical as traditional allegories do. Friday in *F* and K in *LTMK* are representative of this (allegorical) rejection of easy allegorization.

i. The Postcolonial and the Postmodern

Besides being allegories of the body at the interpretive, intellectual level, Coetzee's apartheid novels are postmodern allegories with a strong postcolonial sense, which gives them more political potential over simple allegories.<sup>192</sup> These theoretical perspectives overlap, and their confluences are empowering for fiction. For Kwame Appiah, the "post-" that links the postmodern with the postcolonial is similar in that it "challenges earlier legitimating narratives" (353). Both are subversively interested in the question of the Other. Since postcolonialism and postmodernism challenge history as a master narrative, they are involved in transforming its representation. Acknowledging their complexity and broad range, Tiffin writes:

Very generally, however, "post-colonial" has been used to describe writing and reading practices grounded in some form of colonial experience occurring outside Europe but as a consequence of European expansion into and exploitation of "the other" worlds. "Post-modern" most frequently refers to a complex of writing practices inside Europe and North America, and assimilatively, to works from other areas which seem to fall within its established Euro-American terms. ("Post-Colonialism, Post-Modernism" 170)

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<sup>192</sup> In one critic's words, Coetzee's fiction "ceaselessly explores the moral foundations of imperialism" (Dragunoiu 81). In all of the preceding chapters, I have tried to show that Coetzee's apartheid novels deal with different manifestations of the colonial situation. I have argued that Coetzee interrogates colonial discourse, especially the role of representation in the creation of the other body in colonialism and imperialism. If colonial discourse basically stands for an ensemble of ideas, statements, and concepts about the colonized subject which are produced and reproduced, Coetzee questions the hegemonic rules that govern authoritative colonial discourse. The obdurate materiality of the body he represents, what I call "viscerality" in this chapter, poses a challenge to the authority of colonial discourse for it refuses to be easily incorporated into discursive formations. For example, the magistrate in *WB* fails to capture the tortured barbarian girl in his imperial codes of recognition. Although this does not mean that resistance to signification does not itself signify her status as the silenced other within colonial discourse, this interpretation remains an imposed rather than the only legitimate one.

Coetzee's apartheid novels were attacked for their postmodernness, for assimilating Euro-American perspectives as opposed to being embedded in South African realities.<sup>193</sup> However, and although Coetzee was criticized for his novels' allegorical richness at the traditionally intellectual level, the novels remain rich in postcolonial issues and, thus, politically relevant. "Postcolonial postmodernism" is a safe label for them. Tiffin also writes that some strategies "*such as the move away from realist representation, the refusal of closure, the exposure of the politics of metaphor, the interrogation of forms, the rehabilitation of allegory and the attack on binary structuration of concept and language*" are common characteristics of the postmodern and the postcolonial, although they are "energised by different theoretical assumptions and by vastly different political motivations" (my emphasis; "Post-Colonialism, Post-Modernism" 172). Tiffin says that while we can argue that "certain post-modernist experiments in form proceed from and issue in a political sterility, it is not possible to do the same with post-colonial literatures" ("Post-Colonialism, Post-Modernism" 171). Because the postmodern and the postcolonial problematize notions of history and representation, it is no wonder that, as Tiffin points out, both are marked by a resurfacing interest in allegorization. As such, allegory is a subversive system of representation. It is "a site upon which post-colonial cultures seek to contest and subvert colonialist appropriation through the production of a literary, and specifically anti-imperialist, figurative opposition or textual *counter-discourse*" (emphasis original; Slemon "Monuments" 11). In a novel like *WB* as a postcolonial text, allegory "is employed counter-discursively in order to *expose* the investment of allegory in the colonising project and thus to identify allegorical modes of cognition as the enemy of cultural decolonisation" (emphasis original; Slemon "Monuments" 12). Coetzee's

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<sup>193</sup> For an example of such an accusation, see my Introduction, p. 13.

ambivalent position between postmodernism and postcolonialism adds weight to his novels' political/historical relevance. Allegorization in Coetzee is never innocent. It deconstructs attempts to know the other in terms of the familiar.

There is also a strong presence for allegory in postcolonial literatures. Jameson's notorious claim that third-world texts are "national allegories" on the basis of the conflation of the private and the public testifies to such an assertion ("Third-World"). For Jameson, allegory can function at multiple levels and has the ability "to generate a range of distinct meanings or messages, simultaneously, as the allegorical tenor and vehicle change places" ("Third-World" 74). The "allegorical spirit," Jameson argues, "is profoundly discontinuous, a matter of breaks and heterogeneities, of the multiple polysemia of the dream rather than the homogeneous representation of the symbol" ("Third-World" 73). It is here that Jameson offers his "sweeping hypothesis" I have cited earlier<sup>194</sup> that "[a]ll third-world texts are necessarily...allegorical" and specifically "*national allegories*" in the confluence they stage between "the private and the public" (emphasis original; "Third-World" 69). Again, Jameson's "national allegories" indicates the generalizing trend we associate with allegories and our tendency to read/interpret in a particular way each time we allegorize a body of works. Although Coetzee is not exactly a "third-world writer," Jameson's label is still useful if we consider the fact that Coetzee shares with such writers a preoccupation with the experience of colonialism and its diverse manifestations.<sup>195</sup> This is why saying that Coetzee's apartheid novels are, to draw on Jameson, "national allegories" of the body can be understood at the intellectual level of ideas but within a politicized, more concrete context.

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<sup>194</sup> See my Introduction, p. 78.

<sup>195</sup> See my Introduction, pp. 24-25.

Slemon, discussing the flourishing of allegory in postcolonial literatures, argues that postcolonial allegory makes us “change our received ideas of history” (“Post-Colonial Allegory” 158).<sup>196</sup> As such, post-colonial allegory is usually engaged with questions about the past and reinterpreting history (“Post-Colonial Allegory” 158-9). Postcolonial allegory uses language subversively against imperial logic. It, Slemon writes, “builds the provisional discursive nature of history into the structure and narrative mode of the text so that it becomes approachable only in an act of reading that foregrounds its secondary or conditional nature, its link to fictionality” (“Post-Colonial Allegory” 160). Manichean allegory as a way of representing the other is implicated in the creation of imperial codes and master discourses, in a continuation of colonialism. In *WB*, Coetzee “allegorises the process by which empire, in constructing the ‘other’ into the unit of knowledge known as ‘barbarian’, projects its own binary code onto the colonized and then becomes trapped in its own limiting system of reference” (“Post-Colonial Allegory” 163). *WB*, Slemon argues, is concerned with unsettling the relationship between “allegory and imperialism and in reappropriating allegory to a politics of resistance. Coetzee’s tactic ... is to portray imperial allegorical thinking at the thematic level and to contrast it with the allegorical mode in which the novel itself is written” (163). Just as JanMohamed exposes the Manichean allegorical logic the Empire uses to construct its other in Coetzee’s *WB*,<sup>197</sup> Slemon highlights the subversive potential of Coetzee’s exploitation of allegory in *WB* used to counter imperial cognitive systems. In Coetzee’s revision of traditional allegories, postcolonial, postmodern elements add to

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<sup>196</sup> The same idea is supported indirectly in Joel Fineman’s assertion that “allegory seems regularly to surface in critical or polemical atmospheres” (qtd. in Paul Smith; “Will to Allegory” 120). The alliance between postmodernism and postcolonialism is manifested in the recent revival of allegory.

<sup>197</sup> For JanMohamed’s article, see Works Cited.

the novels' political and historical force. This means that even if we understand Coetzee's apartheid novels in the typical sense of ideas, the novels use allegory to voice anti-imperial, and anti-allegorical, rhetoric. Allegory is employed by Coetzee to subvert established imperial structures which are, by definition, dichotomously allegorical.

Since Coetzee is contextualizing allegory and using it to different ends, we find that his apartheid novels are self-conscious allegories. The novels remind us of their status as allegories of a resistant materiality difficult to grasp yet inaccessible to us without discursive mediation. Coetzee does not accidentally use the word "allegory" or its variants in his novels. He wants us to read the novels in a particular way, and the novels reflect on their reading as such. "Because allegory is a mix of making and reading combined in one mode, its nature is to produce a ruminative self-reflexivity" (Fletcher 77). Allegories are aware of their self-reflexive nature and their methodologies of representing the world, which draws the reader's attention to their fictional status. "Self-reflection is obsessively an aspect of the allegorical method itself, that is, allegory works by defining itself in its enigmatic use" (Fletcher 78). Because Coetzee writes in an allegorical tradition and simultaneously back to this tradition, a look at how we encounter metafictional references to allegory in his apartheid novels is helpful for the discussion.

## ii. Allegorical Doubling

In "Coetzee and His Critics," Dovey treats Coetzee's novels as "self-referential allegories" highlighting "their own position within a set of institutionally authorised discursive practices" (qtd. in Gallagher; *Story* 80-81). Although Dovey is arguing for discursive contexts Coetzee models his works after—like the inarticulate victim's story,

the liberal humanist's discourse, and the farm story—the allegorical self-referentiality she speaks of is legitimate. Hutcheon writes that “Overtly narcissistic texts reveal their self-awareness in explicit thematizations or allegorizations of their diegetic or linguistic identity within the texts themselves” (*Narcissistic* 7). Coetzee's apartheid novels dramatize their own allegorical status, which is the ironic, narcissistic stance many would attribute to postmodern fiction. Although the novels allude to their status as allegories via their self-reflexive employment of the term “allegory,” I argue in this section that this doubling device serves to point out the limitations of a traditional allegorical approach in which the literal meaning is doubled by the metaphorical one. The novels, I argue, defy the traditional allegorical approach they seem to invite.

When asked by Joll and Mandel to interpret an “allegorical set” of ancient wooden slips with unknown script taken to be coded messages between the magistrate and the barbarians, the magistrate in *WB* memorably retorts: “They form an allegory. They can be read in many orders. Further, each slip can be read in many ways” (109). By reading the letters on certain slips as potentially standing for “war,” “vengeance,” or “justice” (109), the magistrate relies on the conventional meaning of allegory in which something stands for another through an intellectual system of equivalents or correspondences. Moreover, he is allegorizing any allegorical reading as the contrast between the signifier and the signified. As ancient imperial relics, the slips are distant from their enunciation and receptive of interpretations. The magistrate found them among the ruins of an ancient civilization in the desert surrounding the settlement. Excavated and uprooted as they are, they lack the immediate context in which they can be “properly” understood, which is why the magistrate uses them to mock the Empire's

men.<sup>198</sup> This self-conscious reference to the status of the novel and to the interpretive act as allegorical represents the intellectually distant, metaphorical realm we traditionally encounter in allegories. Owens argues that “Allegory is consistently attracted to the fragmentary, the imperfect, the incomplete—an affinity which finds its most comprehensive expression in the ruin, which Benjamin identified as the allegorical emblem par excellence” (70). Owens adds that allegory is “an emblem of mortality, of the inevitable dissolution and decay to which everything is subject” (Part 2, 70). Allegories engage history through the metaphor of the lost past. Allegory is based on a basic principle of openness to interpretation and a tacit understanding among writer and reader about a referential world beyond the text to which allegory refers. It constructs meaning and invites us to look for it in ruptures and fragments. Treating the world as a ruin, it is a way of looking at the world in Benjamin’s account of it (Cowan 112). As Owens reminds us, it has its origin in “commentary and exegesis” (68) and is the model of “all commentary, all critique, insofar as these are involved in rewriting a primary text in terms of its figural meaning” (69). Allegory “holds its meanings walled off from the source or initial stage of its utterance” (Fletcher 94). The Empire’s representatives want to know what the characters on the slips stand for, and the magistrate’s reply highlights their openness to interpretation and subverts the Empire’s attempts to dominate signification. When he attempts to “read” some slips to Joll and Mandel, the magistrate ironically reads them as an allegory of oppression, which, metaphorically, reflects back on the status of the novel with relation to apartheid politics at the traditionally intellectual level. Just as we know that the magistrate cannot read barbarian script, granting that the

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<sup>198</sup> See Chapter Three, p. 215.

relics carry barbarian language, we know that a traditional allegorical reading is distant from the original meaning the text seeks to communicate.

At the peak of his frustration with the silent barbarian girl, the magistrate—an allegorist looking for signs and hidden meanings in torture rooms, tortured bodies, burial places, the cycle of the seasons, and the sounds of the night—vents his frustration in trying to distance himself from the girl’s torturers and questions the “allegorical” constructedness of meaning:

*No! No! No!* I cry to myself. It is I who am seducing myself, out of vanity, into these meanings and correspondences. What depravity is it that is creeping upon me? I search for secrets and answers, no matter how bizarre, like an old woman reading tea-leaves. There is nothing to link me with torturers, people who sit waiting like beetles in dark cellars. How can I believe that a bed is anything but a bed, a woman’s body anything but a site of joy? (43-44)

As an amateur archeologist, cartographer, hunter, historian, and reader of books, the magistrate is a seeker of meaning and relations among signs. No wonder, he directs his interpretive will to the barbarian girl and tries to fathom her story of torture. However, this self-conscious allegorization employed in the novel is used by the magistrate to reflect on histories of imperial oppression. The magistrate not only reiterates the distinction between literal and allegorical readings, but he also resists allegorically reading himself as a figure for the torturer. An allegorical reading in the traditional, abstract sense that Coetzee subverts, and that the magistrate questions, looks for “meanings and correspondences.” For Ashcroft, allegory of the sort used by Coetzee in

*WB* is a “counter-discursive” trope (100). Ashcroft argues that *WB* “allegorizes the ambivalence of white resistance in South Africa” or “the dilemma of any dissenter in oppressive regime” (103-4) and that allegory “is not only a function of writing but of reading” (109). Allegorical writing is doubled by its interpretive counterpart. We can allegorically read the magistrate as a figure for the complicit, reluctant oppressor and the barbarian girl as the oppressed other. However, the text, as evidenced by the magistrate’s doubts about allegorical correspondences, questions received notions of allegory. Moreover, the text negotiates this intellectual allegorizing with a more visceral one, as I argue in the next section.

Significantly, the medic in the last section of *LTMK* concludes and wishes to tell K, “Your stay in the camp was merely an allegory, if you know that word. It was an allegory—speaking at the highest level—of how scandalously, how outrageously a meaning can take up residence in a system without becoming a term in it. Did you notice how, whenever I tried to pin you down, you slipped away?” (166).<sup>199</sup> The medic allegorizes K as the foreign meaning that refuses assimilation into carceral or exploitive systems. He is allegorizing the apparently non-allegorical, i.e. the literal, as embodied in the aberrant materiality of K, and we metaphorically understand K as a trope for the oppressed, disenfranchised other. The novel itself is structured as an allegory of a future South Africa in civil war. The self-conscious allegorization of K by the medic serves to highlight the different levels and ends to which allegory is tweaked in Coetzee’s apartheid fiction. At a traditional allegorical level, K is the other meaning the text cannot

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<sup>199</sup> I have already used this quote in Chapter Three, p. 243. I use it here to highlight the self-conscious allegorization in the novel—with reference to Coetzee’s other apartheid novels—and not simply the body’s resistance to the state’s discursive power. This quote is actually important here to explicate how the literal level of allegory refuses to be eclipsed by the metaphorical one.

contain. However, the novel performs K's otherness by literally, and viscerally, inscribing it on his deformed body. Mrs. Curren in *AI*, when she takes her domestic Florence to the violent township of Guguletu to fetch her son Bheki and as Florence descends from the car with her children suggestively named Hope and Beauty, reflects: "Hope and Beauty. It was like living in an allegory" (90). Mrs. Curren draws on the traditional intellectual sense of allegory as a story in which characters or events stand for ideas or moral traits. Hope and Beauty are personified abstractions like Virtues and Vices in traditional allegories. Importantly, we know that Coetzee is writing in *AI* an allegory about the problematic position of the liberal humanist as embodied in the diseased Mrs. Curren, which allegorizes the material suffering she endures and the one she confronts and depicts in her narrative. A cancerous body is used as a visceral metaphor for the body politic, and Mrs. Curren's body literally figures the "diseased" political state she lives in.

Reflecting on her lonely, monotonous life on a desolate farmhouse and on the lack of communication between the farm dwellers of masters and servants, Magda in *HC* asks,

Is it possible that we spoke? No, we could not have spoken, we must have fronted each other in silence and chewed our way through time, our eyes, his black eyes and my black eyes inherited from him, roaming blank across their fields of vision. Then we have retired to sleep, to dream allegories of baulked desire such as we are blessedly unfitted to interpret. (3)

Magda views dreams as a means of allegorically speaking for the unfulfilled, stunted farm life. She alternatively confirms the literality of her story and asserts that "my story is my story, even if it is a dull black blind stupid miserable story, ignorant of its meaning

and of all its many possible untapped happy variants” (5). However, Magda allegorizes her situation as that of the oppressed other. It is significant that Magda uses the plural “allegories” to refer to a condition of estrangement and marginalization. The equation between dreams and allegories in Magda’s ruminations is significant because it suggests the abstract nature of intellectual allegories that Coetzee seeks to revise. This continued preoccupation with the fate of the oppressed body in history and the self-conscious allusions to allegory in the novels invite intellectually reading them as allegories of the body under oppressive regimes. As postmodern texts, these novels show an interest in language and self-referentiality. The recurrent self-conscious references to allegory within the texts show how the texts “double” each other, how they establish a body of works that we can also read allegorically, and how they potentially revise received notions of allegory. In fact, the repeated references to allegory may be evidence that the true meaning of the works is other than the traditionally allegorical one. Moreover, the self-reflexive employment of allegory within the novels underscores their pastiche effect of imitating/doubling each other as allegories and their erosion of univocal meanings.

Because Coetzee’s novels draw attention to their status as allegories, some interpretations of them were concerned with this allegorical status. For Dovey, allegory can exist in a work like *WB* at both a structural level about a certain discourse the novel deconstructs and a thematic one indicating a liberal humanist’s crisis of interpretation (“Allegory of Allegories” 140-141). Dovey’s larger project in reading Coetzee involved reading the novels as “double-sided allegories: on the one hand, they constitute allegories of prior modes of discourse, wittingly inhabiting them in order to deconstruct them and divest them of their authority...; on the other hand, they are self-reflexive allegories

which refer to their own status as speech acts engaged in a process of subject-constitution” (“Allegory of Allegories” 140). Dovey sees that Coetzee is writing back to certain theories and discourses by way of deconstructing them. Dovey’s answer to neo-Marxist attacks on Coetzee is that they all see language “as a transparent medium for transmitting the realities of an empirical world” and thus fail to see language as itself “constitutive of those realities we are able to perceive” (*Novels* 53). Lois Parkinson Zamora, on the other hand, discusses Coetzee’s early four novels as “allegories of power,” as political allegories resisting injustice and the abuses of political systems through their exposure of the dynamics of Hegelian power relations of masters and servants. She contends, “All of Coetzee’s fiction reiterates the basic political allegory defined by Hegel...” (3). Zamora describes Coetzee’s early fiction as allegories of power exploring “the relations between the powerful and the powerless, between public corruption and private conscience” (3). The novels are read as belonging to a tradition of allegorical “political dissent” (1). Such readings, however, accomplish what I seek to accomplish in this first part of this chapter where I read the apartheid novels as allegories of the body in a traditional sense. There is another way of allegorically reading the novels, though, as I argue in the next section, which is why my allegorical approach is different from those of Dovey and Zamora.

### III. Visceral Allegories/Material Bodies

Coetzee can be understood as reacting to an assertion made by Jameson that third world literature can be always intellectually read as an “allegory of the embattled situation” of that culture/society (“Third” 69). If Coetzee is resisting the reduction of his novels to the label of “national allegory,” then can he be writing an alternative form of

allegory, postmodern visceral allegories rather than intellectually abstract ones? As a postmodernist concerned with the art of storytelling and the ideological import of representation, Coetzee seeks not to make overt political statements about apartheid realities but to make the novel transform the way we think about history; he seeks not to allow it to be “colonized” by the discourse of history, but to make us understand history as a story told and retold.<sup>200</sup> Language itself is a medium of representation and, therefore, we cannot think of a bodily materiality that exists outside culture and discourse. The body is subject to the way we make it signify and the meanings we give to it. I offer here an alternative way of allegorically reading Coetzee’s apartheid novels. Coetzee might be exploiting the metaphorical dimension of allegory, paradoxically perhaps, to highlight another visceral dimension of reading. The apartheid novels are not simply allegories of the body at the intellectual level of ideas but rather visceral allegories of the body at a present and felt level.

The significance of the apartheid works is that the presence of the material body makes up for the absence of specific apartheid contexts. As opposed to the intellectual tradition in which allegory is typically situated, we find in Coetzee a raw bodily presence that complicates easy allegorization. In a sense, Coetzee’s dramatization of the body’s resistance to traditional allegorizing, as in the case of K in *LTMK*, Friday in *F*, and the barbarian girl in *WB*, is a refusal to let the intellectual/figural overcome the literal (although the literal becomes allegorical in its own way). Visceral allegory, as the resistance to conventional allegorizing, becomes another level of allegory that questions

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<sup>200</sup> This point has been elaborated in my Introduction and supported by citing Coetzee’s address at the *Weekly Mail* Book Week in Cape Town, 1987. See pp. 20-21. The general points of the address are also summarized in Gaye Davis’s report on Coetzee’s address entitled “Coetzee and the Cockroach Which Can’t Be Killed.”

and yet points to the limits of allegorization by means of the body. It is a particular kind of allegory that presents us with the visceral and yet whose general effect is “allegorical viscosity.” In these novels, for example, the material body rejects the signification codes that the camp medic, Susan Barton, and the magistrate, respectively, try to impose on it. Each work is an intense allegory in itself in that it reshapes our understanding of allegory as intellectually abstract and forces us to view it as a visceral one. If we simply see the suffering bodies in the apartheid novels as standing in allegorical relation to materially suffering bodies within a South African apartheid context, then we are following the traditional allegorical approach criticized for its cold intellectualism. The allegorical reading we can give to each novel, however, is equally a literally visceral one. The body can exist at the level of ideas, as in traditional allegories, but Coetzee makes it real and specific. The visceral body is, paradoxically, the literal figuration and presentation of pain and suffering. It appropriates any allegorical meanings and embodies them. Coetzee’s apartheid writings convey an impressive sense of reality, which makes the represented body so tangible and close to us that it cannot be doubted.<sup>201</sup> Neither the tortured magistrate in *WB* nor the cancerous Mrs. Curren in *AI* doubts the body in pain. We as readers, also due to the effect of reality conveyed, never doubt their experience of pain, too. Their marginalized position of otherness relates them to the tortured body of the barbarian girl and the deformed body of K. Coetzee, in representing a raw physicality of the body, seems to ask us not to erase the materiality of the body by abstractly and allegorically constructing it as that of the other body. There is something elemental about

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<sup>201</sup> Scarry established the singular and embodied nature of extreme pain in her famous study *The Body in Pain*, and a more recent discussion of pain that engages her work like Schleifer’s *Intangible Materialism* also highlights the objectless, iconic nature of pain as a pure experience of embodiment (133). Despite the complexity of both arguments, they both begin with the simple premise of the materiality or corporeality of pain.

the broken bodies of the barbarian girl in *WB*, K in *LTMK*, the violated natives in *D*, and the mutilated Friday in *F* that invites yet resists allegorization. Although the resistance of such bodies to codification and framing can still be read allegorically, the literal suffering and deformity of each body needs attention on its own, and its context is as important as any figural associations we can make about a South African context implied by Coetzee. Moreover, Joll's dictum in *WB* that pain is a truth beyond doubt hints at the literality and nearness of suffering the barbarian prisoners are subjected to within the magistrate's narrative. The magistrate, we should recall, witnesses their punishment at a close distance. Coetzee's apartheid novels perform bodily suffering as literal events happening to the characters—or those around them—who, in turn, often record their experiences via the immediacy of first-person, present-tense narratives.

Coetzee's apartheid novels were characteristically criticized in the reviews I cited in the Introduction for being allegorical. Critics were unhappy with Coetzee's resort to allegory and his ignoring history in non-militant protagonists. The novels' representation of the historical real was viewed as too allegorically intellectual or self-absorbed for the prevalent occasion of apartheid. For many critics, allegories are abstractly distant. Critics view them as detached from the real, dealing only in signs and concepts and dislocating the truth. As Bainard Cowan puts it, "Transforming things into signs is both what allegory does—its technique—and what it is about—its content" (110). Cowan also argues that allegory "came to be seen as mere convention, inauthentic, not grounded in experience, cut off from being and concerned only with manipulating its repertoire of signs" (111). Critics often object to the abstraction of allegory. Cowan further argues that "By resorting to a fictional mode literally of 'other-discourse' (allegoria), a mode that

conceals its relation to its true objects, allegory shows a conviction that the truth resides elsewhere and is not detachable in relations between sign and signified” (113). Tambling explicates this position and argues that “allegorical representations themselves lack reality, because they exist only at the level of the signifier” (129). Such criticism captures the view that allegories are mechanical and self-consciously discursive. It captures the gist of the hostile reception Coetzee’s apartheid novels received for not being adequately grounded in South African apartheid realities and remaining intellectually distant. The literally visceral level of meaning I offer here counters the traditional conception of allegory as intellectually distant or indirect in its representation of its subject matter.

On the other hand, a critic who argues “against allegory” in Coetzee, like Attridge in *J. M. Coetzee & the Ethics of Reading*, objects to allegorical readings as undermining the event of reading the text at the literal level, which reduces its impact as an encounter with otherness. Attridge, nonetheless, fails to acknowledge that his reading, which is supposed to counter the intellectualizing trend of allegory, is itself an allegorical reading of Coetzee’s novels as literal events. Even if Coetzee takes us to distant settings and allegorically uses temporal difference, there is a strong presence for pain and suffering, and the material body is a strong presence in his allegories. Effaced in discourses, self-consciously represented, or trapped in language, the body is still there, giving Coetzee’s apartheid novels political/historical relevance. This literal level of suffering, which can still be understood allegorically in a thematically coherent body of works, gives Coetzee’s novels their value. In fact, any reading of Coetzee that resists what Owens calls “the allegorical impulse” and systematically examines the novels in terms of their staging of the event of reading and how the otherness staged demands an ethical response is to

some extent inevitably allegorical when it tries to argue an alternative to the allegorical way of reading. Attridge, discussing the importance of Coetzee texts like *D* and *HC* and their “singularity,” argues that their value is not in their “critique of colonialism and its various avatars” since we need no Coetzee to remind us that a colonial history “has been brutal and dehumanizing” for both victims and perpetrators (*Ethics* 30). However, we do need a Coetzee to remind us that such a history of oppression cannot be related unproblematically. Attridge criticizes an allegorical reading of Coetzee that ignores what happens at the text’s literal level. He even entitles a chapter “Against Allegory” and goes on to discuss *WB* and *K* “non-allegorically.” His problem with allegorical readings is that they “encourage the reader to look for meanings beyond the literal, in a realm of significance which the novel may be said to imply without ever directly naming” (*Ethics* 32). Indeed, the novels themselves cast some doubt on the efficacy of generalized allegorical readings. Barton in *F*, the magistrate in *WB*, the medical officer in *LTMK*, and Mrs. Curren in *AI* essentially fail to fathom/interpret the broken bodies they are confronted with. Their abortive attempts to codify alterity suggest a privileging of a visceral level of allegorization over a traditionally conceived one.

Attridge’s approach of highlighting what happens at the literal level of Coetzee’s novels is what I call a visceral level of allegorizing. If each Coetzee apartheid novel dramatizes—that is, figures and presents—the pain and suffering that happen at the literal level, then we can legitimately claim that the novels can be read as allegories of the material body that rejects mere traditional allegorizing.<sup>202</sup> It is this ambivalent aspect of

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<sup>202</sup> Interestingly, Lyotard asserts the status of postmodern texts as events that cannot be judged by “preestablished rules” or familiar norms. In this sense, postmodern texts call attention to themselves and to what happens at the literal level. As events, the texts are preoccupied with their own “rules and

the allegory that shows the interplay between the literal level in which the material body is allegorically beyond allegorizing and the body as a constructed trope that needs to be highlighted, an interplay between visceral vs. intellectual allegorization. There is a difference between saying that the apartheid novels allegorically represent their South African context and saying that they embody and perform abundant material suffering. The latter function is what makes them peculiarly visceral allegories rather than traditional ones. However, even when Coetzee seems to be pointing to a bodily reality beyond discourse, this reality is still being discursively constructed.

A useful model comes from Durrant in *Postcolonial Narrative* who argues that Coetzee's novels, *LTMK*, *WB*, and *F*, are not "an allegory of the historical events themselves but of our *relation* to these events" (emphasis original; 25) as apartheid history itself resists an easy relation. Durrant adds that such figures are "unhomely figures of and for alterity, they *embody* precisely that material history of suffering that the narrative is unable to *represent*. Their bodily presence indicates an unmournable, unverbalizable history, a material history that refuses to be translated into words or conjured away by language" (emphasis original; 26). For Durrant, the novels become allegories of trying to represent the unrepresentable.<sup>203</sup> What Durrant does not say, and

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categories" rather than with predetermined rules (*Postmodern Condition* 81). This supports the idea that bodily events in Coetzee's apartheid novels are not to be supplemented by allegorical theorizing.

<sup>203</sup> The logic that Durrant echoes here and that I hint at in my interpretation of his assertion is Lyotard's. Lyotard's short article appended to his book *The Postmodern Condition* and entitled "Answering the Question: What is Postmodernism?" highlights "the unrepresentable" or the impossibility of presentation within the postmodern project. Lyotard famously defines the postmodern as "that which, in the modern, puts forward the unrepresentable in presentation itself" and as "that which searches for new presentations, not in order to enjoy them but in order to impart a stronger sense of the unrepresentable" (*Postmodern Condition* 81). This definition is in line with my recurrent claim throughout this dissertation that Coetzee problematizes the way his apartheid novels stand with relation to the historical real, that referentiality and the problematic of representation are a strong postmodern theme in Coetzee's fictions of the apartheid period.

what I try to foreground, is that the adamant, literal materiality of suffering, which problematizes easy relation, is itself allegorical beyond conventional allegorization. The physicality embodied in the works, the focus on physical realities of pain, torture, and deformity shows that the distance from a South African context effected by the allegorical approach in terms of place or time is bridged or made shorter due to the viscosity of the suffering body. The allegory here gets less intellectual and calls for a visceral reading that makes us empathize with suffering. The oppressed body “bodies forth” its oppression and makes us feel it. Coetzee’s novels can be seen as traditional allegories of brutal regimes. They evoke dislocated realities of South Africa and show the struggles of the writer to speak about apartheid. However, this level of reading is allegorically intellectual compared with the viscosity of suffering the novels negotiate.

Theorists of allegory realize the paradoxical level of literal figuration allegories can engage. For example, Slemon articulates a distinction between the literal figuration and metaphorical figuration in allegories and writes that “In its simplest form, allegory... is a trope that in saying one thing also says some ‘other’ thing; it is the doubling of some previous or anterior code by a sign, or by a semiotic system, that also signifies a more immediate or ‘literal’ meaning” (“Monuments” 4). In allegories, the literal can signify metaphorically or, importantly, “otherwise.” The pain of Mrs. Curren’s bone disease in *AI*, the torture pain of the barbarian girl and the magistrate in *WB*, the excessive bodily violence in *D*, and the ontological reflections on illness in *HC* and *D* are attempts on Coetzee’s part to literally figure material suffering and make us experience it closely, to make the body signify before and beyond the metaphorical. The direct representation of suffering never allows distant analogies to take precedence over what we find and ponder

at the literal level of meaning. In trying to develop the literal over the metaphorical, Coetzee revises allegory and makes the literal signify in its own way.

Coetzee said in a 1990 interview that censorship on certain topics leads to “an unnatural concentration upon them” and added that his preoccupation with themes of imprisonment, incarceration, and torture is but “a response—I emphasize, a *pathological* response—to the ban on representing what went on in police cells in this country” (qtd. in McDonald; *Police Literature* 308). He traumatically grapples with raw, material suffering represented in his apartheid fictions. Men and women suffer under systems of exploitation and domination. In the process, the body endures variations of disease, torture, deformity, and violation. This “pathological” concern with the body hints at the allegorical and postmodern problematic of representation. Bodily suffering is too much to be digested and explained. It is beyond language, yet, paradoxically, it is accessed and discursively mediated in language. Those who suffer have language to create their suffering and communicate it to others, and they are often lost for words as they try to mediate the immediate. And those silent sufferers have their experiences mediated by the narrators who construct an otherwise brute materiality. After all, one’s pain experienced directly may not need language, although when expressed it relies on membership in a linguistic community, but the pain of the other only exists in and through language, and therefore our ability to experience a relation to the other body and its suffering must come through a language that allows approximations of experience.<sup>204</sup> True to their nature, Coetzee’s allegories make us think “otherwise” about the body.

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<sup>204</sup> As Negri reminds us in his discussion of Wittgenstein’s philosophy, “Wittgenstein and Pain,” pain and language are inseparable in that we know or “exhibit” pain as a concept when we learn language as a

Representing—or even “presenting” as I have said—the suffering body cannot evade textualization, and the real is intertwined with discursive representation. The body has a power that cannot be doubted and is implicated in power relations, in histories of oppression and colonization, yet all acts of rendering this suffering risk questioning a pure materiality. John Moore rightly argues that “No matter how exigent the demands of the spirit—and they are exigent—Coetzee never lets us forget either the appetites or the fragility of the body. His characters live in a world of keen sights and sounds and smells” (154). As opposed to the abstract intellectualism of traditional allegories, Coetzee’s allegories explore bodily suffering effected by unjust power structures. Bodily events like torture and disease are viscerally material and real. The colonized are violated, their bodies are raped and tortured, and the body has an ontology of its own. However, the visceral sense of suffering communicated in each novel is problematized within metafictional and self-reflexive accounts that cast doubt on the real as a fictive construct. Coetzee’s visceral allegories functioning at a level of literal meaning and conveying an experience of embodiment are also postmodern allegories of the mediated body. If in each novel the material body is strongly and vividly present, then this singular presence becomes again allegorical if conceived as a thematic link among the apartheid novels.

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means of collective expression (354-5). The answer “to the problem of the mastery of pain,” Negri writes explicating Wittgenstein’s thought, “implies the advent of a collective subject who is constituted through language” (354). Moreover, in the same essay Negri cites Saul Kripke suggesting that our attitudes toward those who suffer and our ability to imagine their suffering are intensified when we experience pain ourselves, when we know the language of pain, and when we assume the subject position of being in pain to imagine their pain (qtd. in Negri 358). As compared with the pain of the self, the other’s pain is more reliant on the mediation of language.

#### IV. Coda: Coetzee's Post-apartheid Novels

I have highlighted this “committed” quality in Coetzee’s apartheid fictions that brings us face to face with elemental questions about a bodily sense of being and yet constantly distances and mediates the bodily experience within postmodern fictional layers and discursive techniques. Coetzee’s postmodern conception of the body enhances his global status and the global importance of his work. His postmodernism is not only formal or metafictional (aesthetic postmodernism) but also thematic (political postmodernism with feminist and postcolonial thrusts), and Coetzee blurs their boundaries. He interrogates the meaning and value of politics in a postmodern context via a politicized representation of the body that acknowledges the material body as an objective reality but highlights the subjective representations we produce of it. I have asserted the centrality of the body in Coetzee and argued that he situates his work within ongoing debates about postmodern bodies, texts, and their interrelations. The body signifies different realities and perceptions for Coetzee. His oeuvre seems to be engaged with open questions of what it means to be human, what it means to live in a body and as a body, how to express pain and suffering, and how to approach the body from an interdisciplinary stance—feminist, postcolonial, ethical, among others. Coetzee’s project is, in a sense, how to move beyond definitive bodies whether male, female, colored, or non-human and focus more on what we share. As suffering bodies outside language, we are similar; it is in our minds and consciousness—how we see, interpret, and treat the body—that we discursively other the body. Coetzee’s fictions are examples of a practice Christopher Colvin calls “traumatic storytelling.” While I am not interested in the efficacy of this practice in terms of success or failure for the writer or South African

audiences, I think that the fictions about silent, suffering bodies are a response to historical occurrences. In this sense, the suffering body is not only a transcendental signified that is outside of and foundational of language but also an irreducible reminder of non-signification within language. Although Coetzee's political discontent can be for some critics allegorical, globalized, and abstract, the viscosity of suffering is richly indicative, which leaves the postmodern body in Coetzee with an ethical/political task inherent in it and beyond its postmodern enactment.

The theme of the body continues in Coetzee's post-apartheid novels and acquires new dimensions. "Other" bodies continue to suffer racial and gendered violence or simply the effects of mortality. Indeed, bodily suffering continues to be mediated by metafictional, self-conscious strategies, often centering on characters carrying variations on the name J. M. Coetzee. From the suffering of humans and animals in *Disgrace* (1999) in the form of rape, crimes, disease, lethal needles and ultimately incineration, to the solitary suffering of old age and preparation for death in *Elizabeth Costello* (2003), to the pain and humiliations of living as a disabled body with an amputated leg in *Slow Man* (2005), to the pains and desires of an old body with Parkinson's disease in *Diary of a Bad Year* (2007), to the disembodied being of a late novelist in *Summertime* (2009), we find that the body continues to be a pivotal presence in Coetzee's works, both apartheid and post-apartheid. The central image of a brute material presence for the body in apartheid novels like *WB*, *LTMK*, *AI*, and *F* finds the clearest parallel in the post-apartheid novels in the stiff animal corpses awaiting incineration in *Disgrace*. While I am not suggesting that Coetzee equates animal and human bodies, the point is a fascination by a material

presence that is not easily contained in death, burial, or cremation.<sup>205</sup> Animal bodies are more strongly present in the post-apartheid novels and have an ecological and philosophical richness beyond the limited scope of this dissertation.

We continue to find that the metafictional thrust of the post-apartheid novels is woven around characters who are also writers like Costello in *Elizabeth Costello*, Mr. JMC in *Diary of a Bad Year*, and JM Coetzee in *Summertime*, and who are not at ease with embodiment. In the apartheid novels, the conscience-stricken narrators like the magistrate and Mrs. Curren are writers constructing their pain in symbolic language. The apartheid novels are not clearly autobiographical. Their treatment of the relationship between life and fiction is different. With the post-apartheid novels, the South African apartheid context is no longer directly relevant, and the bodily suffering in them acquires a globalized importance. We can still argue for a residue of apartheid suffering in the post-apartheid novels, but, again, the apartheid context is no longer contentious for the reception of these novels. There is a postmodern sense in which Coetzee blurs bodily boundaries and shows the proximity of human and animal bodies, as he does in *Disgrace*, or depicts the ontology of bodies in pain, as he does in *Slow Man*, but the interplay between material vs. constructed bodies is less intense and “history” and “politics” are less problematic labels. As for the apartheid novels, if a specific South African context is sometimes absent or not adequately elaborated to be identified within the novels, this context is also still there as part of the human experience of oppression, brutality, and

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<sup>205</sup> Mrs. Curren in *AI* contemplates the idea of black corpses buried yet surfacing from the ground in a racially divided South Africa. The magistrate in *WB* contemplates the idea of a massive grave for the wretched barbarian bodies to erase the brutal history of the Empire that marked them, and K in *LTMK* carries the ashes of his cremated mother who died in a hospital en route to a country farm; K also contemplates a massive grave the state might resort to to eradicate the corporeal presence of blacks and colored people in labor camps.

colonization. The body in the more recent Coetzee novels is part of a global and humanistic concern with life and the living beings. This expands any contextual South African frames for the body in the early apartheid fictions and establishes a generally progressive, inclusive postmodern conception of the body.

The post-apartheid novels, like the apartheid novels and Coetzee's autobiographical memoirs, testify to Coetzee's long-held belief that the body has an authority that has to be granted. If the body in Coetzee is not to be disavowed, this dissertation, in giving attention to the body as a pivotal theme, is true to its hero.

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