

# Human Sovereignty Eclipsed? Toward a Posthumanist Reading of the Traumatized Subject in J.M. Coetzee's *Disgrace*

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The main aim of this article is to analyse J.M. Coetzee's *Disgrace* (1999) from a posthumanist perspective. By focusing on the character David Lurie, this article analyses the complex materiality of bodies and the agentic powers of nonhuman entities in coping with individual trauma, where agency is no longer considered to be the distinguishing quality unique to humans. In so doing, it highlights the interdependence of the human and the nonhuman and the idea that environment is not a mere canvas onto which characters' traumas are being reflected. On the contrary, it is a material-affective matrix which becomes a catalyst for making sense of the world in post-apartheid South Africa. At the same time, as this article argues, it decentres the sovereignty of the human subject.

## Introductory Remarks

Queer studies scholar Jose Esteban Muñoz aptly describes 'disidentification' as a way of reading that 'scrambles' the intended meanings of a given text (Muñoz 1999, 31). The reader both explores and exposes its ossified hegemonic scope such as racialized, classed, gendered meanings and limitations (Muñoz 1999, 31–32). For Muñoz, disidentification is powerful because it transforms the encoded meanings of a text into the 'raw material for representing a disempowered politics or positionality that has been rendered unthinkable by the dominant culture' (Muñoz 1999, 31–32). Working in the spirit of this interventionist mode, this study primarily seeks to disidentify with the idea of centralizing and universalizing the human figure, or what Giorgio Agamben calls an 'anthropological machine' which altogether makes up the conceptual, material, philosophical, and political production of the human as such

(Agamben 2004, 37). Endorsing Bruno Latour who critically underlines a gap that is culturally and socially constructed between ‘two entirely distinct ontological zones: that of human beings on one hand; that of nonhumans on the other’ (Latour 1993, 10), it seems to be ethically imperative to challenge the concept of the human as a privileged, dominant, and fixed figure – supposedly an independent entity that is alienated from its socio-ecological surroundings. Such perspective can be best found in Rosi Braidotti’s words on the human subject. Braidotti conceives of the human subject as a relational entity that rests on the following principle:

[...] an enlarged sense of inter-connection between self and others, including the non-human or ‘earth’ others. This practice of relating to others requires and is enhanced by the rejection of self-centered individualism. It produces a new way of combining self-interests with the well-being of an enlarged community, based on environmental inter-connections. (Braidotti 2013, 48)

Braidotti’s emphasis on relating to others and her rejection of self-centred individualism clearly rethinks agency that is no longer considered to be the distinguishing quality unique to humans. In this respect, I especially insist the indivisibility of nature and culture, and human and nonhuman<sup>1</sup> in my reading of J.M. Coetzee’s (1999) novel *Disgrace*. This study thus revisits *Disgrace* within South Africa’s transition from apartheid (1948–1994) to post-apartheid,<sup>2</sup> which was marked by crisis, violence, death, and suffering. By so doing, it examines the representation of the traumatized human subject from a posthumanist perspective. My reading advocates for a renewed attention to

1. From an ethical perspective, I choose to use the word ‘nonhuman’ without a hyphen to lessen the hierarchical gap between human and nonhuman realms as this article critically rethinks these binaries.
2. Apartheid, which in Afrikaans means ‘separateness’, was a system held in South Africa from 1948 until 1994. It was followed by the anti-apartheid movement and resulted in the abolishment of apartheid laws, creating a new constitution granting equal rights to all citizens of South Africa, and a new government system of democracy. In 1991, Nelson Mandela was elected as president of the African National Congress (ANC), in which he worked in an intensive capacity for three years until apartheid finally came to an end in 1994. In 1994, when the government scheduled new elections, Mandela became president and the ANC won South Africa’s first democratic election. Amongst the first pieces of legislation passed by the new democratic parliament was the Promotion of National Unity and Reconciliation Act of 1995, which created the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC). The TRC began hearings in 1996. Principally, the South African TRC promised to ‘uncover the truth’ about violence and past atrocities and bring reconciliation across a divided country. The TRC’s main goal was to achieve reconciliation by unravelling the truths about the past and atrocity while constructing a collective and shared memory and conscience to compensate for structural forgetfulness and an inability to speak that had split South Africa for so long. The TRC made ambitious contributions in the revelation of the facts of injustice during the time of apartheid. The commission’s emphasis was on gathering evidence and uncovering information from both victims and perpetrators. It did not aim at prosecuting individuals for their past crimes, yet it showed insistent efforts of national reconciliation under ‘new South Africa’. Despite the ambitious efforts of the TRC, there were important limitations and challenges about coming to terms with the horrors of the past. The TRC overlooked the beneficiaries of mass violations of rights. Additionally, although the TRC reported that women needed a special hearing and needed to be encouraged to speak, it nevertheless silenced the testimonies in terms of gender-specific violence against South African women, including rape. Since the TRC did not have a category for sexual and gender-based violence, crimes of this nature were addressed as ‘serious ill-treatment’. The neglect to acknowledge gendered violence relegated women to silence when giving testimony about sexual abuse and rape. Coetzee’s *Disgrace* takes the post-apartheid era and its contested nature as well as the TRC as its background.

vitality and generative capability, which are appropriate for human and nonhuman matter alike in order to expand and complicate how the human subject copes with traumatic experiences.

A critical reading such as this is a challenging task and it requires a methodology that unites diverse theoretical frameworks, such as trauma theory and posthumanism. This study first briefly discusses some key tenets within the field of trauma theory, mainly those concerned with the issue of the (un)representability of trauma. It then sketches the burgeoning field of posthumanist theoretical framework by following Braidotti. This study argues that posthumanism becomes a productive ground for approaching the fictionalized traumatized subject. Put another way, this theoretical framework opens up a new way of representing and speaking individual trauma thanks to its critical engagement with nonhuman entities and materiality. We are not autonomous beings and our bodies continuously affect and are being affected by other entities that have an agency and vitality themselves in the world. In this context, it is argued that *Disgrace* critically questions the traumatized human subject as an isolated, pain-stricken and fragmented individual.

In this light, it is suggestive to give a brief summary of *Disgrace* and see how trauma maps onto characters in very different ways. *Disgrace* is set in a post-apartheid fictional world. The novel depicts the story of the racist and sexist colonial power structures that surround the white urban male protagonist, David Lurie, a twice-divorced, 52-year-old disillusioned professor of communications and Romantic poetry at Cape Technical University. David is obsessed with writing his chamber opera 'Byron in Italy'. In the meantime, he sexually harasses his student, Melanie. After his affair (not quite rape as David describes it) with Melanie, he is forced to resign from his job in Cape Town due to his refusal to make an appropriately contrite public statement. He then joins his daughter Lucy, who lives at a small-holding near a village about 25 kilometres away from the city of Grahamstown in the Eastern Cape Province of South Africa. Lucy manages a dog kennel and grows flowers and vegetables for sale at a farmer's market with the help of one of the black neighbours, Petrus, who is introduced as a financially successful gardener.

In the Eastern Cape, David starts to work on a voluntarily basis at the Animal Welfare Clinic (Animal Shelter) and then at the Settler's hospital crematorium, helping Bev Shaw, a friend of Lucy, who keeps an animal shelter and frequently euthanizes animals because they are no longer wanted or needed by their owners. Shortly after the move, David and Lucy are subjected to a violent attack at the hands of three black men. Lucy is brutally gang-raped, David is set on fire and all the dogs on the property are fatally shot, except Kathy, the bulldog. To her father's shock and horror, Lucy refuses to accuse the three black Africans who perpetrate the crimes. As the story unfolds, the reader understands that one of the rapists – the young boy Pollux – is related to Petrus and has become a member of the household. Petrus himself is suspiciously absent during the afternoon of the rape and he refuses to comment on it, which exasperates David. In the meantime, Lucy earnestly decides to stay on the farm and agrees to be Petrus's wife and keep the interracial child that she conceived because of the rape.

It is clearly seen from the summary that there is the silenced female voice and oppression of women and, more significantly, trauma through rape which becomes the core theme of *Disgrace*. This study, however, does not deal with the traumatic experiences of the female. Although there is a glimpse of resistance to subordination and sense of survival and renewal on the parts of women characters, especially with Soraya and Lucy,<sup>3</sup> this study critically deals with how David copes with his traumatic experiences. In this context, it explores David's transformation from an autonomous rational subject to an open-ended and porous one that recalibrates the concept of the human and the entrenched humanist exceptionalism.

*Disgrace* is told through the eyes of David Lurie, who begins the story by saying that 'he has, to his mind, solved the problem of sex rather well' (Coetzee 1999, 11). In the novel we see that David's idea of solving the problem of sex renders domination and exploitation instead of mutual desire. We see him first with Soraya, a prostitute with 'long black hair and dark, liquid eye and honey browned body' (Coetzee 1999, 1). This representation suggests that Soraya is marked and visualized in racial terms, underlying her probably Indian origins. Moreover, for David, Soraya is amongst the books categorized under 'exoticized' (Coetzee 1999, 7) which he arbitrarily picks up. David insistently continues to racialize and exoticize other women, including his student Melanie with whom he has a sexual affair. He describes the consummation as 'not rape, not quite that, but undesired nevertheless, undesired to the core' (Coetzee 1999, 25). It is clear that David authors his own exoticized book, reimagining and reframing his student Melanie as a supposedly Asian beauty with 'small and thin, with close-cropped black hair, wide almost Chinese cheekbones, and large, dark eyes' (Coetzee 1999, 12). The continuing racialization and sexual exploitation inflicted on women's bodies eventually ends with David's disciplinary hearing. Telling the members of the disciplinary committee that he is reluctant to participate in the public hearing because he is a grown man with desire, he makes a confession without penitence and simply wants the sentence to be passed on:

Manas, we went through the repentance business yesterday. I told you what I thought. I won't do it. I appeared before an officially constituted tribunal, before a branch of the law. Before that secular tribunal, I pleaded guilty, a secular plea. That plea should suffice. Repentance is neither here nor there. Repentance belongs to another world, to another universe of discourse. (Coetzee 1999, 48)

David's enunciation refers to the refusal of the juridical logic and the rejection of identifying himself as a sinner. This gesture clearly marks him as an autonomous rational subject whose acts are considered separate from the outside world. Nevertheless, the university walls do not provide comfort for this white autonomous subject. The university does not allow David to feel at home anymore. The reader

3. To illustrate briefly, David runs into Soraya in St. George Street one day and invades her private life. However, Soraya simply rebuffs him by reclaiming her own separate identity and body. In the aftermath of the event in the Eastern Cape, Lucy builds a new relationship with the world by building herself up from almost ground zero level. By deciding to keep the interracial child that she conceives because of the rape, she reimagines herself as radically open to the life and complex realities in the Eastern Cape.

almost feels like a kind of voyeur watching David behind the closed doors and witnessing the erasure of his famous scholarly self-centred self. I suggest that this moment designates a crisis in David's life. Immediately after the hearing, David has to seek refuge in the old pastoral country life with its smell of baking bread and with a crop in the earth. David describes what he sees as follows: 'five hectares of land, most it arable, a wind pump, stables and outbuildings, and a low, sprawling farmhouse painted yellow, with a galvanized-iron roof and a covered stoep [. . .] the front boundary by a wire fence and clumps of nasturtiums and geraniums' (Coetzee 1999, 59). As expected, none of these aspects stirs excitement in David. Further, as he becomes the object of violence, his crisis becomes especially acute. Having been attacked and brutally beaten and then locked into the bathroom, David encounters an event that could be described more than a crisis because he obliquely witnesses Lucy's rape in the Eastern Cape.

This article deals with this condition of David precisely because it compels him to surpass the traumatic threshold through an embodied and affective engagement with the world that comprises both the human and the nonhuman. To start with, David's particular engagement with the world, which will be discussed in the following sections, entails a brief discussion of the representability of trauma by following critics such as Cathy Caruth (1995), Dominick LaCapra (2001) and Shoshana Felman (Felman and Laub 1992). Next, a brief posthumanist discussion is introduced as an alternative conceptual tool to demonstrate how David copes with the dominant effects of the traumatic experiences that he goes through.

### The (Un)Representability of Trauma

It could be argued that Cathy Caruth's formulation of the paradoxes of trauma,<sup>4</sup> including its representability in her canonical work, *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative and History* (Caruth 1995), marks the beginning of the major debates of trauma theory in the early 1990s. Building on Sigmund Freud's notion of trauma, Caruth (1995, 92) formulates trauma as 'a certain paradox: that the most direct seeing of a violent event may occur as an absolute inability to know it'. In his seminal work, *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, Freud (2003 [1920]) theorizes that the human psyche is driven by two major instinctual drives: Eros or the sexual instincts, which Freud later saw as compatible with the self-preservative instincts, and Thanatos or the death-instinct. For Freud, the concept of the death-instinct marks the human tendency towards destruction, including sometimes self-destruction. With regards to traumatic events, Freud sees repetition-compulsion as an effort to come to

4. Trauma derives from the Greek word designating a physical wound. In the early editions of the *Oxford Dictionary of English*, the entries for trauma refer to physical wounds. First used in English in the seventeenth century in the area medicine, the term literally meant a bodily injury caused by an external agent. Physicians, thus, applied herbs and balsams to injuries. However, in the late nineteenth century, the term shifted to the mental realm about clinical work in psychoanalysis and psychiatry.

grips with and to accept the fact of death (Freud 2003 [1920], 8–10). In this context, he defines trauma as an event that pierces the individual's everyday protective stimulus and distorts his/her memory and identity. According to him, any excitations from the outside could be powerful enough to break through the subject's protective shield. In his view, an event such as external trauma is bound to provoke a disturbance on a large scale in the functioning of the organism's energy because of the excessive amount of stimulus, which is very difficult to master.

By following Freud, Caruth then argues that trauma sears directly into the psyche, 'almost like a piece of shrapnel' (Caruth 1995, 93). She considers that trauma consists 'in the structure of its experience or reception; the event is not assimilated fully at the time, but only belatedly, in its repeated possession of the one who experiences it' (Caruth 1995, 5). The traumatic experience for Caruth does not include the awareness of the event and it can only be recognized through repetition of the experience in its belatedness and intrusive return. While Freud reads the story of Tancred and Clorinda as an unconscious repetition of trauma, Caruth's analysis expands the Freudian moment. She argues that there is a voice that is 'paradoxically relapsed through the wound' (Caruth 1995, 3). Caruth foregrounds the idea that the wound that speaks is not precisely Tancred's own but the wound, the trauma of another. She addresses the particularity of the wound and how it sparks another kind of story when she points at the 'story of a wound that cries out, that addresses us in the attempt to tell us of a reality or truth that is not otherwise available' (Caruth 1995, 4). Caruth's conception of trauma resorts to the belatedness and the latency of the event. In this context, she believes literature is inextricably bound up with trauma. Her analysis of the story of Tancred and Clorinda shows us that literature, to a great extent, communicates what resists ordinary memory or understanding. Caruth maintains that imaginative literature or figurative language gives a voice to traumatized individuals. She underscores the role and function of literature by highlighting its capacity to transmit what cannot be communicated in straightforward ways.

This way, Caruth has created a conceptual framework through which scholars take seriously the role of trauma and literature in the twentieth century. For instance, trauma's insistent resistance to articulation and its belatedness are reoriented in Shoshana Felman's discussions in her work on the language of crisis. Felman offers a new pedagogy of trauma and writes extensively about the limits of language and interpretation, particularly regarding Holocaust testimony. In *Testimony: Crises of Witnessing in Literature, Psychoanalysis, and History* (Felman and Laub 1992) she and the psychoanalyst Dori Laub take the traumatic event as their theoretical ground to talk about the acts of remembrance. Instead of focusing insistently on the unconscious process of repetition (as Caruth does), Felman and Laub take the traumatized subject as the absolute witness to the Holocaust who becomes 'the vehicle of an occurrence' (Felman and Laub 1992, 3). These authors describe survivors of the Holocaust as the 'bearers of [...] the secrecy and the secret of contemporary history' (Felman and Laub 1992, 3-4). Felman and Laub take the Holocaust as the paradigm of a radical historical crisis of witnessing, an event that

eliminates its own witness. Ultimately, for these theorists, trauma is designated by the disorder of memory and the ambivalence between the registration of the event and its full comprehension by the subject.

With regards to the trauma's resistance to articulation, Dominick LaCapra points out that 'one disorientingly feels what one cannot represent, one numbingly represents what one cannot feel' (LaCapra 2001, 42). In this context, LaCapra follows Freud's insights about trauma treatment. As has been mentioned, Freud introduces the concepts of the repetition compulsion and working through and he also defines acting out when he writes: 'The patient does not remember anything of what he has forgotten and repressed but acts it out. He reproduces it not as a memory but as an action; he repeats it, without, of course, knowing that he is repeating it' (Freud and Strachey 1989, 150). For Freud, acting out is an essential aspect of trauma treatment. Processes of working through trauma or loss, on the contrary, entail a healthy process (such as mourning) that allows the subject to recover from loss. By building on these ideas, LaCapra suggests 'acting out' and 'working through' as two interconnected modes of coming to terms with trauma. In LaCapra's views, victims of severely traumatizing events may never fully recover from the trauma they encounter; moreover, there is always a tendency for them to repeat the original event. In this context, victims act out in the Freudian sense, which means they emotionally repeat a still-present past. They also work through their trauma in the sense that they can distinguish between the past, the present, and the future

Drawing from recent criticism, which constitutes the core of my study, there has perhaps been too much of a tendency to become fixated on acting-out, on the repetition-compulsion, to see it as a way of preventing closure, harmonization, any facile notion of cure. But also, by the same token, to eliminate any other possibility of working-through, or simply to identify all working-through as closure, totalization, full cure, full mastery, so that there's a kind of all-or-nothing logic in which one is in a double bind: either the totalization or the closure you resist; or acting-out the repetition-compulsion, with almost no other possibilities (LaCapra 2001, 42). LaCapra does not rely much on the aporetic trend in trauma theory; rather, he posits working through as a process of coming to terms with trauma and moving beyond it. Working through, allows the victim the possibility of being an ethical agent who gains self-reflexive and critical distance from the problem. He argues that there are possibilities of working through that do not resort to the extreme transcendental realm of acting out, or total immersion into the past.

When looked at from this lens of trauma theory, it can be argued that David's bearing witness to violence in the Eastern Cape sears directly into his psyche. In Caruthian lexicon it appears belatedly in the form of nightmares:

Lucy is not improving She stayed up all night, claiming she cannot sleep; then in the afternoons he finds her asleep on the sofa [...] This is not what he came for to be stuck in the back of beyond, warding off demons, nursing his daughter, attending to a dying enterprise. If he came for anything, it was to gather himself, gather his forces. Here he is losing himself day by day. The demons do not pass him pay. He has nightmares of his own in which wallows in a bed of blood, or, panting, shouting

soundlessly, runs from the man face to face like a hawk [...] One night, half sleepwalking, half demented, he strips his own bed, even turns the mattress over, looking for stains. (Coetzee 1999, 121)

As in this episode, David's coherent self, especially after the attack, shatters. At this moment, he experiences an intrusive return of the original event in the form of nightmares, nightly disturbances and sleepwalking. The refuge shelter in the Eastern Cape becomes a locus of demons and nightmares for David. Moreover, as Lucy gradually withdraws from him and refuses to report the rape, David cannot fully understand the stakes of her decision. As time goes by, he gives himself to outdoors. He works in the garden and sits long hours by the dam, carefully observing ducks and other animals. He broods over his scholarly Byron Project. However, the project does not flourish, and the words fail David. He says, 'the first notes remain as elusive as wisps of smoke' (Coetzee 1999, 141).

### **Posthuman Visions and the Demise of the Male Subject**

What this article proposes is that David works through his trauma by paying close attention to outdoors and the nonhuman realm, instead of immersing himself in a transcendental Byronic consciousness. In particular, David works at the Animal Shelter with Bev Shaw, helping her in feeding the dogs. He also helps with the euthanasia of the dogs, whose owners abandon them due to broken limbs, infected bites, malnutrition, and disease. Until this moment of his life, David has been indifferent to animals. Now, he holds the dogs still and lets them sniff him and lick his hand. When Bev Shaw puts the needle to them, David encounters the dim eyes of the dogs and their buckled legs as the drug hits their heart. At this moment, he does not understand what happens to him. Tears flow down his face and his hands shake. Thereafter, he invests much of his time to the Animal Shelter, where 'his whole being is gripped by what happens in the theatre' (Coetzee 1999, 143). It might be argued that this condition marks David's shift from the universalist image of the human subject to an embodied and affective subject. In order to fully understand David's shift, I suggest we turn to Braidotti's concept of the subject. She underlines the relationality of the subject as follows:

What are the parameters that define a posthuman knowing subject, her scientific credibility and ethical accountability? [...] I argue that posthuman knowledge claims go beyond the critiques of the universalist image of 'Man' and of human exceptionalism. The conceptual foundation I envisage for the critical posthumanities is a neo-Spinozist monistic ontology that assumes radical immanence, i.e. the primacy of intelligent and self-organizing matter. This implies that the posthuman knowing subject has to be understood as a relational embodied and embedded, affective and accountable entity and not only as a transcendental consciousness. (Braidotti 2018, 1)



Braidotti's conceptual foundation overrules the Western conceptualization of matter as being inert and passive.<sup>5</sup> She focuses on liveliness and the way this liveliness complicates agency and causality. For Braidotti, the vitality of matter animates the composition of posthuman subjects of knowledge that is embedded and embodied in a web of relations with human and nonhuman others. Braidotti brings in the concept of zoe, 'the generic animating life force or the nonhuman vital force of life which is a property not of an individual or species, but rather of the monolithic universe of matter' (Braidotti 2018, 12). Braidotti defines zoe as the 'dynamic, self-organizing structure of life itself' of which anthropos or bios is just a thin segment. In this context, Braidotti argues that subjectivity can then be re-defined as an expanded self that includes non-anthropomorphic elements of zoe. Braidotti emphasizes a zoe-centric worldview, or a worldview that values this generic life in all of its iterations, which effectively decentres bios and the 'Man' as the 'measure of all things' (Braidotti 2018, 13). Braidotti's rejection of the Man as the measure of all things invites us to see the world and subjectivity otherwise and think across previously segregated categories such as nature–culture, human–nonhuman, animate–inanimate, and mind–matter.

*Disgrace* provides a telling example for the fictional moves of this posthumanist vision. The novel re-defines the human subject as an expanded self through an interactive relation between nature and culture, mind and matter. Specifically, David works in the middle of the waste management industry in Salem, near Grahamstown. Dogs, once referred to by Lucy as still meaningful, quickly become undesired and rendered as waste or abject in the landscape. In a way, dogs besiege the people of Grahamstown, who simultaneously possess them for other needs, particularly for safety and protection in the troubled transitional period from apartheid to post-apartheid. In this regard, dogs are ambivalently both wanted and unwanted; waste and unwaste; visible and invisible. They are caught within the movement between survival and death; subservience and silence. David prepares the bags that are full of dead dog bodies, loads them to the trolley and disposes them to the grounds of the Settler's hospital, to the incinerator. At this moment, he cannot help intervening in the crew's work in the crematorium:

On his first Monday he left it to them to do the incinerating [...] After a while, the workmen began to beat the bags with the backs of their shovels before loading them to break the rigid limbs. It was then that he intervened and took over the job himself. [...] The incinerator is anthracite-fueled, with an electric fan to suck air through the flues. When the crew arrive for work, they first rake out the ashes from the previous day, then charge the fire. [...] By the time the orderlies arrive in the morning with the first bags of hospital waste, there are already numbers of women and children waiting to pick through it for syringes, pins, washable bandages, anything for which there is a market, but particularly for pills which they sell to *muti* shops or trade in the streets [...] There are vagrants too. Why has he taken on this job? [...]

5. For further theoretical discussion about matter and vibrancy, see feminist new materialist Jane Bennett's concept of 'vibrant matter' (Bennett 2010, 2–10) and Stacy Alaimo's term 'trans-corporeality' (Alaimo 2010, 4–5).

For the sake of dogs? But the dogs are dead. For himself, then. For his idea of the world, world in which men do not use shovels to beat corpses into a more convenient shape for processing. (Coetzee 1999, 144–145)

This engagement is pivotal and can be best read as a moment of re-creation at several levels such as envisioning an alternate subjectivity to the supremacy of Man. David's engagement with the nonhuman realm in the crematorium work, I suggest, brings in a posthumanist sense of subjectivity that is not restricted to binding only individuals. Instead, there is a transversal effort which takes place between nature and culture, human and nonhuman, mind and matter. David becomes just a segment at this moment of interconnection to other human beings and matter. In that moment of the crematorium work, David actively engages with the world that is both materially and affectively embedded in the flow of entities, whether the hospital crew, women, children and vagrants, or hospital waste, fuel anthracite, and the dead dog ashes that escape the furnace. At this moment, matter, in the Braidottian sense of self-organizing and intelligent aspect, renders a catalyst for David to rethink the species hierarchy and human exceptionalism. My main claim is that David finds himself in an insistent mobile space where the often unpredictable and unwanted actions of human bodies, nonhuman creatures, and chemical agents are intertwined as he is obviously encouraged to recalibrate his sense of being in the world. His understanding of subjecthood in this interference of many bodies and forces starts to change.

Moreover, David strives hard to save the honour of the dead dogs in this emergent human and nonhuman space. It can be suggested that, this moment, at the very least, reads as David's process of working through his trauma, as we already know that he fails to save his daughter from being raped.<sup>6</sup> Instead, David tries to save the dead dogs as a way for compensation for his failure. I read his intervention in the crematorium as a move beyond a mere survival in the aftermath of the incident at the smallholding. David cannot bear the consequences of overshooting his target once again. He should save the honour of the dead dogs so that he could save both himself, Lucy, and perhaps pay the price for what he had done to Melanie. In this context, David, to a great extent, does not dwell upon the traumatic nature of the past in order to avoid submersion in its debilitating affect. We can associate this strategic move with an active construction of a particular narrative or rather with a formation of a mobile fluid space where he devotes himself to a more complex process of subject-formation. In this light, Derek Attridge argues that animals and art provide the core of David's new life (Attridge 2000, 107–108). He also emphasizes that neither of these constitutes any kind of answer or way out for David in the end, which brings him close to incompleteness similar to the moment when he thinks himself as 'I have lived/I have burnt up' (Attridge 2000, 109). By following Attridge, I would also claim that this incompleteness clearly brings forth a posthumanist vision of the subject, highlighting the idea that individuals are not independently existent entities.

6. Even though David sexually harasses women and 'rapes' his student Melanie, there is a way in which he is deeply troubled and further traumatized by the violent attack in the Eastern Cape. This attack, in an oblique way, opens a way to criticize David's insistent colonial male gaze.

Once he finds himself in a chain of violent events, David starts to construct a new form of subjectivity and knowledge through transversal alliances between multiple human and nonhuman entities and actors in the landscape. He tries to come to terms with what he ceases to be. This new existence is open-ended, inter-relational, trans-species, and designates a posthumanist space that David begins to inhabit.

In this regard, Andrew Pickering's conceptualization of posthumanist space is illuminating. Pickering understands posthumanism as follows: 'Human and nonhuman agents are associated in networks and evolve together in those networks' (Pickering 1995, 11). For Pickering, this is a 'space in which the human actors are still there, but now inextricably entangled with the non-human', and the human actors are 'no longer at the center of action and calling the shots. The world makes us in one and the same process as we make the world' (Pickering 1995, 26). Pickering's emphasis on the material world insistently highlights the idea that materiality leaks into our lives in substantial ways. This leakage is clearly seen in David's engagement with the landscape, especially with the nonhuman realm precisely because David, as the white autonomous rational subject, is culturally domesticated and regenerated by the crematorium work. Owing to the strange impact of this work on David, we are inclined to see him not as a transcendental rational subject but an entity amongst other species. As the novel progresses toward the end, we see David as an old man, who sits among the crippled dogs and cats, singing to himself and playing the banjo:

The dog is fascinated by the sound of banjo. When he strums the stings, the dog sits up, cocks it head, listens. When he hums Teresa's lines, the humming begins to swell with feeling (it is as though his larynx thickens: he can feel the hammer of blood in his throat), the dog smacks its lips and seems on the point of singing it too or howling. Would he dare to do that: bring a dog into the piece, allow it to lose its own lament? Why not? (Coetzee 1999, 215)

David's above portrayal blurs the conceptualization of the human subject as a self-identical, unique, coherent, and rational individual because David dwells in the human-animal continuum. Considering this, Tom Herron aptly argues that in being close to animals at the Animal Shelter and in looking after them even when they are dead, David gradually sympathizes with the suffering of animals (Herron 2005, 479). The more he sympathizes, as Herron argues, the more David 'moves into a realm of nonsignificant, a thing neither fully human nor fully animal: a kind of ghost' (Herron 2005, 480). In sync with Herron's observation, it could also be argued that this sense of spectrality entails an understanding that both the nonhuman animal and the so-called inanimate matter have the potential for being a self-organizing force for David. The above scene dramatically influences David's already exhausted endeavour, the Byron libretto. In an earlier moment, David addresses this libretto as a profound service to mankind (Coetzee 1999, 146). Ironically and uncannily, the libretto itself in its present state becomes a challenge for David. The libretto is willing to open itself to encompass the human and the animal, ceasing to be the perfect model of human-made knowledge. This condition speaks well to what Braidotti contends about the critical knowledge production: 'The challenge for critical theory is

momentous: we need to visualize the subject as a transversal entity encompassing the human, our genetic neighbors, the animals, and the earth as a whole' (Braidotti 2013, 82).

### Conclusion: Rethinking Trauma Subjects as Porous and Processual

As a conclusion, David is not the ideal Byronic scholar anymore. It could be argued that he finds himself regenerated<sup>7</sup> through the proximity of the nonhuman skin, the smell, the toxic drift of dead dog ashes, and the circulation of unruly substances in the middle of the waste management in the Eastern Cape. Put another way, the proxy-livingness of ashes and hospital waste render David as a porous subject. Thus, we cannot rely on the Cartesian conception of persons and bodies where there are firmly defined boundaries between object and subject; inside and outside; born and made, as well as nature and culture. This is manifest especially in David's new existence and his relationship with his banjo, animals, and the Byron libretto, which entails human and nonhuman continuum.

The porousness of David marks the figuration of the human subject that is in trouble and should be rethought otherwise. Such an understanding of the human subject foregrounds critical and creative expression and possibilities for questioning both humanism and anthropocentrism that David as a white colonial male subject has privileged in all his life. Moreover, it dilutes, if not surpasses, the mastery of the human subject in the novel. In the end, David expands and complicates subjectivity as a simultaneously and holistically biological, emotional, historical amalgam that continually seeks meaning and narration in order to adapt itself to the environment.

In the light of my discussions, my final suggestion is that David, as a traumatized character, most particularly works through his trauma and makes sense of the world in the aftermath of the violent attack through posthumanist moves and the liveliness of matter. In this way, he neither locks the traumatic experience into the psyche nor the body, but gestures towards a dynamic rhythm which moves in and out of the subject that is tuned to recalibration and revision through the multiplicity in which it happens. *Disgrace* critically engages with the human subject not as a merely linguistically constructed entity. Instead, it understands the subject as materially emergent and relationally embodied, which at the same time expands the contours of the process of working through psychic trauma. Instead of valorizing the transcendental human subject first and foremost, transferring agency to the material and affective capacities of the nonhuman realm, *Disgrace* encourages the reader to rethink trauma subjects as porous and processual. In this way, it provides thought-provoking insights into the conventional vantage point of psychologically oriented trauma theories and how we talk about psychic trauma and its subjects.

7. See Rita Barnard's (2007) *Apartheid and Beyond: South African Writers and the Politics of Place*, and Chris Danta's (2007) 'Like a Dog... like a Lamb: Becoming Sacrificial Animal in Kafka and Coetzee'.

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