Postcolonial Disgrace

(White) Women and (White) Guilt in the “New” South Africa

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She would rather hide her face and he knows why. Because of the disgrace. Because of the shame […] Not her story to spread but theirs: they are its owners. How they put her in her place, how they showed her what a woman was for.²

What is the white woman’s “place” in the late twentieth/early twenty-first century, in South Africa? What is the significance of the marks of shame that are inscribed on the seemingly blank whiteness of her skin? In the aftermath of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission in South Africa, J.M. Coetzee writes in his novel Disgrace of the “system” of guilt and shame, debt and retribution which operates throughout South African society. He and writers like Antjie Krog, Elleke Boehmer and Gillian Slovo tell stories which traverse and explore the paths tracked by society’s quest for healing and restitution, in the ‘New’ South Africa. White women, too, Coetzee’s protagonist muses, must have a place, a “niche” in the “system” of reparation.

This essay is an attempt to trace the figure of the white woman in a particularly provocative and arguably illuminating South African text, in order to ‘read’ the phrases of meaning that have been inscribed on her body in Disgrace.

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grace. I shall refer, briefly, to a small number of other recent literary texts, in an attempt to indicate discursive tracks which are apparent in post-apartheid South African writing. My essay notes distinctive patternings within discourses of guilt and power, which find their cathexis in the form of the white woman. I would like to suggest a reading of these marks and ciphers which is not a denial of fluid, layered identity but which nonetheless argues that the corporeal figure of the white, postcolonial woman in these texts is indelibly etched textually with guilt, and that her “place” in the “system” would seem to be crucial to the effecting of reparation.

White South Africans should be confronted with (black) history […] white South Africans must not be allowed to forget.3

At the heart of Grant Farred’s article “Bulletproof Settlers” lies an accusation leveled directly at J.M. Coetzee. Farred, relying on an oral report of a paper delivered at Yale University by Coetzee, asks some hard questions about the novelist’s stance, following his reported statement that he “could not take offence” at the political maxim “One Settler, One Bullet.” Reading this comment (not repeated in Coetzee’s book on the same subject as his Yale address4) as an offensive dismissal of the efficacy of the maxim – either as ideological or as political statement – Farred asks whether Coetzee is “trying to exceed or possibly even eliminate whiteness as a category of historical privilege and oppression.”5 This position is deplored by Farred, who asserts that “One Settler, One Bullet” is a necessary and desirable call for the “abolition of whiteness in South Africa,” a “pointed reminder that the white community’s origins are non-African.”6 Coetzee should take note – and remember.

In Disgrace, written after the publication of Farred’s critique, Coetzee explores the position of the white South African within the post-apartheid space, with less unfettered optimism and blithe disregard than Farred’s article would seem to suggest. To the contrary, it would seem that he is all too aware of the restrictions and the imprisoning grip that the past continues to have, even (and perhaps most especially) on ‘liberal’ whites. In an interview with David Atwell, Coetzee earlier declared that he regarded himself as “historically com-

6 “Bulletproof Settlers,” 72.