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## The Reader's Complicity: Universality in *Waiting for the Barbarians*, *The Laramie Project*, and *The Laramie Project: Ten Years Later*

### Keywords

universality, J.M. Coetzee, Moisés Kaufman

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The Reader's Complicity: Universality in *Waiting for the Barbarians*, *The Laramie Project*, and  
*The Laramie Project: Ten Years Later*

In an interview with *Djurens Ratt*, J. M. Coetzee said that “In order to be cruel we have to close our hearts to the suffering of the other” (Coetzee “Animals”). Over and over, we see societies act in unbelievably cruel ways towards those they have placed outside their community. Three works that demonstrate societies that are violent and cruel towards the “Other,” those outside the normal community, are Coetzee’s *Waiting for the Barbarians* (hereafter referred to as *WB*) and Moisés Kaufman’s *The Laramie Project* and *The Laramie Project: Ten Years Later* (hereafter referred to as *LP* and *LPTYL*, respectively). The latter two works are entirely specific, rooted in the murder of Matthew Shepard in Laramie, Wyoming—based on real events and scripted from interviews with actual residents of Laramie. The members of Kaufman’s Tectonic Theatre Project interviewed residents of Laramie in the immediate aftermath of the Matthew Shepard hate crime and again ten years later for the second play, *LP-TYL*. The plays include both recaps of the night when Matthew Shepard was tied to a fence and beaten by Aaron McKinney and Russell Henderson, two long-time Laramie residents, and the reflections of all those interviewed by Kaufman and his team. On the opposite end of the fiction spectrum from *LP* and *LPTYL*, *WB* is an almost allegorical tale of an Empire colony that has suppressed the native “barbarians.” Although the novel is clearly reflecting on colonizing practices of some kind, the protagonist is an unnamed magistrate in an unspecified location. The entire novel refrains from naming specific people or places, although it is often hypothesized to be an allegory for the oppression in South Africa where Coetzee grew up. The novel, maintaining complete universality with the lack of naming, follows the magistrate as he slowly realizes the inhumanity of the Empire in the face of the increasingly evident humanity of the barbarians. At the end of the novel, the magistrate, having been left in a colonial outpost that has destroyed itself while defending against fictitious barbarian raids, is uncertain if there is hope for a renewed society.

In all three works, those who are considered the “Other” or outside of the community are dehumanized by the community or society that they belong to: the “barbarians” in *WB* and Matthew Shepard as a homosexual male in *LP* and *LPTYL*. By dehumanizing the “Other,” the colonizing or dominant group is able to maintain its distance and humanity in opposition to what it considers the savagery or inhumanity of the “Other.” As critical theorist Abdul R. JanMohamed writes about the literature of colonization: “the fact that this overt aim, embedded as an assumption in all colonialist literature, is accompanied in colonialist texts by a more vociferous insistence, indeed by a fixation, upon the savagery and the evilness of the native should alert us to the real function of these texts: to justify imperial occupation and exploitation” (62). Dehumanization becomes a way for the societies in the works to justify the violence they show towards the “Other,” although certain members of the community in each work respectively begin to develop a recognition of the humanity of those the society as a whole has sentenced to be the “Other.” For example, select residents of Laramie refer to Matthew Shepard in more humane terms, and in *WB*, the magistrate attempts to connect with and understand the barbarians. However, the residents of Laramie take no action towards truly understanding Matthew, and the magistrate fails in his attempts to understand and speak for the barbarians. Linda Alcoff claims that one of the problems in trying to speak for others from a privileged position is that it could further marginalize them (7). That seems to be the problem that the magistrate faces as he attempts to understand the barbarian woman he has taken into his bed. Although the reader’s initial reaction to the dehumanization of the “Other” through language is horror and disbelief, the narrative structures in all three works draw the reader along the same path as the magistrate follows in *WB*: a path that slowly leads to the realization of one’s own resemblance to the barbarians’ colonizers and one’s own complicity in the dehumanization of the “Other.” The realization that the readers themselves are complicit in the violent narratives told by societies brings about a sense of helplessness, rendering a passive reaction as readers realize their ultimate failure in attempting to speak for the “Other.”

### **Dehumanizing Language**

One way those who belong to the privileged community (in *LP*, the long-time, typically heterosexual residents of Laramie) distance themselves from those outside the community, considered to be the “Other,” is by implicitly dehumanizing them through language. In the first “moment” or section of *LP*, the writers present Sergeant Hing’s description of the case: “the incident happened with that boy” (Kaufman *LP* 6). Hing uses very general terms (“incident” and “that boy”) to refer to what happened to Matthew, which creates distance and gives Hing the ability to separate himself from the crime completely. In a later moment, titled “Live and Let Live,” university student Aaron Kreifels expresses that he feels “bad that it happened to Matthew Shepard, you know, as a human, but (*pause*) [he doesn’t] feel like more sympathetic toward the gay community because of it” (55). The distinction between Matthew as “human” and as part of the “gay community,” emphasized by the pause, implies that being a part of the gay community does not fall under the human label. The distinction between the gay community and the rest of Laramie is reiterated on the very next page, as Murdock Cooper, a rancher in a nearby town, comments: “You don’t pick up regular people,” in reference to the possibility of Matthew’s being partially to blame for the crimes against him (56). By saying that those in the gay community should not try to “pick up regular people,” Cooper places “regular people” in opposition to those in the gay community. This implies that the gay community is an abnormality, and reduces its members to being less than human. As performance theorist Stephen Bottoms puts it, “the play . . . reminds audiences of the need to question the assumptions buried in disarmingly ‘everyday’ turns of phrase, which lie at the root of very real violence” (66). The dehumanization of Matthew Shepard may seem harmless enough, but that distance between the Laramie residents and those considered the “Other” has real consequences.

The dehumanization of Matthew Shepard is even explicitly pointed out by Romaine Patterson, a gay activist friend of Matthew, at the end of *LPTYL*: “There’s Matt who I knew and the good friend that I had, and then there’s Matthew Shepard . . . and Matthew Shepard is not necessarily about Matt, it’s about a community’s reaction” (Kaufman *LPTYL* 187). Here, Patterson is pointing out that the incident has taken a life of its own in the name of Matthew Shepard, rather than reflecting Matt’s unique humanity. People hear Matthew Shepard and think about the homosexual hate crime or the

alleged drug crime, but very few can picture the individual person who Matt was. However easily Laramie residents are able to distance themselves from Matthew, the victim, they have a much harder time creating the same distance from those they consider to be their own: Aaron McKinney and Russell Henderson, the two men convicted of Matthew's murder. Former lawyer and critical theorist Casey Charles asserts that "though the 'natives' try to distance themselves from Aaron and Russell, they pity them, bursting into tears when they come to court for arraignment" (241). The residents of Laramie have known the two defendants since they were kids: it becomes incredibly hard to separate themselves from two heterosexual members of the community, those not considered to be the "Other." As Marge Murray, the mother of one of the responding police officers, reflects, "I think about Henderson. And you know two absolutely human beings cause so much grief for so many people" (Kaufman *LP* 52). By referencing McKinney and Henderson as "absolutely human beings," Marge closes the gap between them and the rest of Laramie, acknowledging their humanity in a way that very few of the residents will do for Matthew Shepard. The dehumanizing effects of the language that Laramie residents use to talk about Matthew have further aligned them with the defendants, the executors of violence.

In the same way that the very language the residents of Laramie use in *LP* when talking about the Matthew Shepherd case lends itself to the dehumanizing view the town takes towards homosexual individuals, the title the barbarians are given in Coetzee's *WB* dehumanizes them and distances them from the citizens of the Empire. As JanMohamed argues, "In the manichean world of the colonizer and the colonized, of the master and the slave, distance tends to become absolute and qualitative . . . . The world is perceived in terms of ultimate, fixed differences" (70). There can be no similarity between the suppressor and the suppressed in order to maintain distance between the two groups and the superiority of the suppressor. As the Colonel prepares to publicly beat some of the barbarian prisoners, he "steps forward. Stooping over each prisoner in turn he rubs a handful of dust into his naked back and writes a word with a stick of charcoal. [The magistrate reads] the words upside down: *ENEMY*" (Coetzee *WB* 105). The connotation of the word "enemy" invokes an image of violent people who must be beaten down, lest they bring harm to those in the community. The black charcoal it is written in only adds to the image of dark, dirty, and savage people, leaving little room for identifying with the barbarian

prisoners as anything except pure enemy, certainly not as fellow humans.

Even very early in *WB*, before much of the violence has taken place, the colonized people are seen as the “Other.” As the magistrate remembers, “last year stories began to reach us from the capital of unrest among the barbarians . . . . The barbarian tribes were arming” (8). Those who are not a part of the Empire are always referred to as “barbarian,” which connotes a savage, violent image. Calling their group a “tribe” also places them in stark opposition to any sort of civilization, as they live more in nature than the citizens of the Empire. In fact, the only time that the barbarians are referenced as human is when the magistrate attempts to defend the prisoners that the Colonel has just beaten and cries out, “Look at these men! . . . *Men!*” (107). The repetition of the word “men” is meant to emphasize the humanity of the prisoners, to negate the inhuman image of the barbarian. The magistrate’s recognition stands in stark opposition to the rest of the Empire’s view of the barbarians. As JanMohamed describes the normal stance of those in the Empire, “The potentiality and even the humanity of the native are considered momentary aberrations that will inevitably subside and return him to his innate, inhuman barbarity” (69). Citizens of the Empire will always choose to ignore the humanity of those they wish to suppress, even with momentary glimpses of that humanity.

### **Justification and Recognition**

As the respective communities in the three works are inadvertently dehumanizing the “Other,” that dehumanizing language creates a distance between the community and the “Other,” and feeds into the preexisting prejudice in society against the “Other.” JanMohamed argues that “the relation between imperial ideology and fiction is not unidirectional: the ideology does not simply determine the fiction. Rather, through a process of symbiosis, the fictions *forms* the ideology by articulating and justifying the position and aims of the colonist” (83). In *Laramie*, the residents create a fiction about the existing culture that lends itself directly to the suppression of the homosexual community. While the very words that come out of the residents’ mouths dehumanize and separate the gay community from the rest of *Laramie*, the residents simultaneously deny that the culture of *Laramie* is anything but accepting to all people. Another one of Aaron McKinney’s friends, Jen, states that Aaron had

no problem with members of the gay community, “As long as it didn’t come up” (Kaufman *LP* 59). Although perhaps Jen’s statement might appear to be supporting Aaron’s supposed tolerance for the gay community, she is really saying that Aaron had no problems with something he did not know about. That denial of existence is far closer to ignorance than any form of acceptance. Looking at the ways in which the law itself justifies violence, Charles writes that the law “allow[s] the victim’s sexual orientation to justify violence, in part through the sanction of insanity defenses as well as its official condemnation of same-sex desire in sodomy laws” (233). While the law may not blatantly outlaw same-sex desire, it allows violence in response to expression of that desire, essentially repeating exactly what McKinney says: there is no problem with same-sex desire as long as no one knows about it or sees it. Not only does that sentiment display Laramie’s denial of a prejudiced culture, but it also denies that the “Other” even exists.

Even an officer of the law in Laramie, Sergeant Hing, promotes the same ignorance ideal, declaring that Laramie is “pretty much: Live and let live” (Kaufman *LP* 43). The phrase “Live and let live” may give off a positive connotation of peaceful interaction and acceptance, but what it boils down to is that everyone remains at peace if no one is forced to confront or even acknowledge the existence of those considered to be “Others.” As long as everyone appears to be a typical member of the Laramie community, there will be no problems. In a later ABC *20/20* story, the show “recasts Laramie as a town with a drug, not a hate problem . . . . ABC’s story, whether by design or not, participates in a larger movement toward cultural suppression of the homosexual agenda, as its opponents call it” (Charles 229). Despite years passing, which might allow for potential reflection on the causes of the Matthew Shepard incident, residents support the hypothesis that it was a drug crime rather than a crime supported by a deep-seated societal prejudice—a view that leaves the integrity of Laramie intact. Even the head of the University of Wyoming theater department, Rebecca Hilliker, buys into the picture perfect view of Laramie. Near the beginning of the first moment in the play, the writers present Hilliker’s reflection on Laramie: “people here were nicer . . . because they were happy. They were glad the sun was shining. And it shines a lot here” (Kaufman *LP* 4). The image of the sun shining over Laramie connotes the happiness and kindness Hilliker sees in the town. Placing that impression at the



beginning of the play immediately shows the audience what the residents of Laramie choose to see when they examine their culture. The fact that it is a university professor, an educated individual, enabling this view expresses just how deep-seated the denial in Laramie remains. As Charles claims, “If panic finds its motivation in groundless ‘fictions’ about the aggressive, recruiting gay male, then the law’s legitimization of that fiction reveals the serious dangers behind these narratives of prejudice”—especially the denial of those narratives, which allows Laramie to maintain its sense of humanity in the face of the violent actions its societal prejudice has legitimized for McKinney and Henderson (236).

Just as Laramie residents create a narrative that denies the existence of prejudice in their culture, servants of the Empire living in denial of the barbarians’ humanity in *WB* are able to justify their violence against the “Other.” Susan VanZanten Gallagher argues that the “magistrate sees both Joll and Mandel [the Empire’s representatives in the novel] as types of Pilate, who must somehow absolve themselves of the responsibility for their dreadful acts” (282). By turning a blind eye to the Empire’s atrocities against the barbarians, they are able to maintain a semblance of humanity in the midst of what are actually quite barbaric actions. In the first paragraph of the novel, the reader is introduced to the Colonel’s symbolic blindness. As the Colonel approaches, the magistrate observes his sunglasses, noting “The discs are dark, they look opaque from the outside, but he can see through them” (Coetzee *WB* 1). Calling the lenses “dark” and “opaque” implies that, while the Colonel can still see with these glasses, he sees with a dark and clouded vision, one that may not be completely accurate. Gallagher argues that the Colonel “represent[s] some kind of moral vacuum, an absence that is reflected in [his] eyes” (283). However, the symbolic blindness of the Colonel seems to be more of a way to ignore or justify his violent actions than a complete absence of a moral compass. The magistrate goes on to say “We do not discuss the reason for his being here . . . Instead we talk about hunting” (Coetzee *WB* 1). While avoiding deeper topics of discussion is not literal blindness, that avoidance can be seen as, rather, a symbolic blindness as neither man is willing to address anything more serious than hunting in their pursuit of denial.

The magistrate brings up the sunglasses again not two pages later when the Colonel is addressing a barbarian boy: “He must think you are a blind man” (Coetzee *WB* 3). The potential for the

Colonel being confused for a blind man within the first few pages of the novel solidifies the association for the reader between servants of the Empire and blindness. The same association of the Colonel's dark lenses with blindness surfaces again much later in the novel. When the Colonel takes over and calls him into his office, the magistrate relates that "I stare into the black lenses. He goes on" (110). This reference to "black lenses" is immediately followed by the Colonel's theory about the magistrate's communication through wooden slips with the barbarians, which the reader knows is not true. The immediacy of the falsehood after an image of "black lenses" implies that the Colonel is still hiding behind his constantly clouded vision, choosing to see what he wants to see.

Although the Colonel, the main character, is presented as blind, the reader can see the inevitability of others following his lead on his stance towards the barbarians. As the guards are riding out to defend against the barbarians in the bright sun, one of the guards "looks sternly ahead through a strip of smoked glass glued to a stick which he holds up before his eyes in imitation of his leader" (Coetzee *WB* 13-14). The "smoked glass" suggests the same kind of clouded vision that the Colonel has embraced; his vision is spreading. Even the magistrate himself indirectly admits to succumbing to the temptation to turn a blind eye like the other servants of the Empire. When he orders the prisoners to be released near the beginning of the novel, he says "I last saw them five days ago (if I can claim ever to have seen them, if I ever did more than pass my gaze over their surface absently, with reluctance)" (24). The parallel structure of the magistrate's sentence suggests the habitual nature of the Empire's servants refusing to truly look at the prisoners and the atrocities that are happening on the frontier.

The perpetual blindness that the servants of the Empire exhibit throughout the novel is what enables them to preserve a sense of their humanity while they are hunting and torturing the barbarian "Others." In the first paragraph of the novel, the Colonel suggests that his sunglasses prevent headaches and wrinkles, and the magistrate observes "It is true. He has the skin of a younger man" (Coetzee *WB* 1). The wrinkles of an older person suggests that he or she has lived through trials and bears the wisdom that comes from facing those trials. Therefore, the lack of wrinkles on the Colonel's face implies that he lacks the wisdom and clarity that he should have with his experience and age. While he may present himself as a perfectly civilized servant of the Empire, that status is based on an intentional ignorance.

The choice to remain blind and uninformed about the reality of the frontier situation is represented again later in the novel as the Colonel is questioning the magistrate about the wooden slips. The magistrate walks into his old office and observes that “There are no books or files; the room is starkly empty save for a vase of fresh flowers” (110). The books that the magistrate once kept in that office become symbolic of the truths that the Colonel does not choose to see. Instead, there is only a vase of flowers. While those flowers are aesthetically pleasing in their association with culture and finery, they do nothing to access the truths of the situation.

While the Colonel may be in denial of the ramifications of the violence taken against the barbarians, the magistrate tells the story in a way that “highlights the on-going nature of his ethical awakening and his increasing recognition of his own complicity” in that violence, according to narrative theorist Matthew Delconte (438). While the magistrate may have initially aligned himself fully with the Empire, he appears to be making attempts to understand the barbarians as the novel goes on. As the magistrate talks about excavating the barbarian ruins as his pastime, he describes one of the things they recurrently come across in excavations: “I also found a cache of wooden slips on which are painted characters in a script I have not seen the like of . . . Now, in the hope of deciphering the script, I have set about collecting all the slips I can” (Coetzee *WB* 15). The slips with what can only be assumed to be barbarian writing on them become symbolic of the barbarian culture as a whole—the first instance of the magistrate’s attempt to understand or possibly even connect with the barbarians. JanMohamed writes that, in a Manichean world, the “world is perceived in terms of ultimate, fixed differences,” one of which is literate versus illiterate in typical colonial discourse (70). The introduction of the idea that the barbarians might be literate after all forms a small thread of connection between them and the magistrate, planting the seed for recognition of the barbarians’ humanity.

Although the magistrate approaches his attempt at understanding with good intentions, Alcoff argues that no one can transcend his or her social position to neutrally speak for the other (14). For the magistrate, who at least was privileged in the beginning of the novel, trying to understand the barbarians from his position could serve to further marginalize them. Take, for example, his relationship with the barbarian woman and his attempts to understand her. Much as with the slips of barbarian

writing, the magistrate has made it his mission to come to an understanding of the barbarian woman: “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” (Coetzee *WB* 31). The magistrate uses the same word “decipher” in reference to both the slips of writing and the woman, reducing her to the rest of the barbarians he is trying to decipher when he should recognize her humanity most of all. In associating the barbarian woman with the wooden slips, he is also reducing her to the equivalent of an inanimate object, entirely inhuman and in need of interpretation. As Michael Valdez Moses so aptly points out, “during the time that he keeps the barbarian woman in his house and bed, he never takes the time to learn her tongue” (120). Perhaps learning the barbarian woman’s tongue would have given him a greater potential for transcending his position and understanding or speaking for her people, but he fails to do so, and thus fails in his repeated attempts at understanding.

While the magistrate in *WB* embarks on a slow, more solitary journey to see the barbarians as more human than enemy, the recognition of Matthew Shepard’s humanity in *LP* comes much more painfully. Despite the inadvertent denial of the community regarding the role of Laramie’s culture in the Matthew Shepherd crimes, the writers provide the audience with moments where certain individuals possess a glimmer of recognition of the destructive dehumanization that continues to exist in Laramie. As Russell Henderson’s landlord, Sherry Aanenson, contemplates his actions, she tells the interviewers, “I just want to shake him, you know, what were you thinking? What in the hell were you thinking?” (32). The repetition of the last phrase paired with the addition of the expletive “hell,” reveals Aanenson’s escalating emotions as she realizes her lack of understanding. Her confusion and distress are representative of the way many Laramie residents must feel under the surface, as they outwardly engage in denial for some relief from the kind of emotion Aanenson displays.

Another member of the community who reflects the confusion about and the recognition of the gravity of what McKinney and Henderson have done is Aaron Kreifels, the one who found Matthew at the fence. As Kreifels remembers, “But when I saw hair, well I knew it was a human being” (Kaufman *LP* 33). It is very significant that Kreifels labels Matthew as a human being. It points out that lying there, dying in the dirt, Matthew was indistinguishable from the other members of the human

race. The doctor who treated Matthew, Dr. Cantway, reiterates this affirmation of Matthew's humanity immediately afterwards, describing his injuries as ones that "you don't expect to see . . . from someone doing this to another person" (34). Dr. Cantway's use of the word "person" again emphasizes that Matthew is indeed human, like every other member of the Laramie community, and by saying, "another person," he points out the common humanity of Matthew and Aaron McKinney specifically.

### **Anywhere, Anytime**

After seeing the majority of the characters in the three works justify the violence they commit, in contrast to the magistrate's and certain Laramie residents' recognition of their own complicity, readers would normally be able to distance themselves from the story and condemn the atrocities from a morally superior vantage point. However, the narrative structures that promote universality in the works prevent the reader from achieving a more distant view of what is happening in the stories. The readers are drawn into the works, as if they were a part of the story, and slowly come to realize their own complicity in the process of dehumanizing the "Other," just like the magistrate and many Laramie residents. As Charles puts it, "*The Laramie Project* at certain moments establishes a model that understands the murder of Matt Shepard as a crime not of a flawed individual but of a social fabric" (247). In resisting the urge to portray only a specific story, the Tectonic Theater Project presents the story of a society that allowed this crime to occur in the first place. As a journalist in Laramie reveals, "People would like to think that what happened to Matthew was an exception to the rule, but it was an extreme version of what happens in our schools on a daily basis" (Kaufman *LP* 45). In a rare admittance of the town's complicity in the Matthew Shepard incident, the journalist brings to light the daily violence that gets ignored as it builds up to something like what happened with Matthew.

Although *LP* could not get much more specific with setting and characters, it creates a sense of universal thematic content by resisting telling the story of Matthew Shepard in chronological order. Instead, the authors choose to tell the story in a series of moments, which can be defined as "short sequences of action, based on raw interview text, that have been isolated and developed in rehearsal so as to foreground theatrical imagery as a complementary means of storytelling, on par with verbal

content” (Bottoms 64). Rather than dividing the sections of the play by location and set, the moments divide the action of the play by theme. Some of the moment titles include: “A Scarf,” “The Fence,” and “Live and Let Live” (Kaufman *LP* 24, 32, 55). The titles of the moments are not necessarily specific to Laramie. The scarf, fence, or phrase could be found in any place, at any time, shedding light on the universal nature of what happened to Matthew Shepard. While the audience might want to think the crimes can be contained to Laramie, structuring the play with universally applicable moment titles extends the hate behind the crime beyond Laramie and into the world at large.

Not only does the play opt for a story told through moments rather than in chronological order, but it also includes material that recognizes the artistic choices that influence even a realistic play like *LP*, calling into question the legitimacy and truth of history filtered through words and time. In an early moment of the play, “Journal Entries,” Tectonic Theater Company member Amanda Gronich admits that “I’ve never done anything remotely like this in my life. How do you get people to talk to you?” (Kaufman *LP* 8). Her admission of uncertainty undermines her authority as one of the playwrights to a certain extent, revealing the company members’ hesitations going into the project. Bottoms posits that “The inclusion of such material invites audiences to question the role and assumptions of the interviewer-actors and writer-director in making the piece, just as they are asked to scrutinize the words of their interviewees” (65) and is a “way of reminding audiences that history itself is necessarily complex, uncertain, and always already theatricalized” (67). The authors’ admittance of uncertainty reminds the audience that, although the words they are hearing are certainly not made up since they came from real interviews, they are absolutely artistically tainted, both by the interviewees themselves filtering their thoughts for the members of the Tectonic Theatre Project, and by the interviewer-actors, who arranged the words in a specific order to present to an audience. It again brings up Alcott’s question of being able to speak for others and her assertion that one always has to be careful when representing others. For example, at the very end of *LP*, the Catholic priest in Laramie, Father Roger Schmit, appeals to the Tectonic Theater Members: “I will trust that if you write a play of this, that you will say it right. You need to do your best to say it correct” (Kaufman *LP* 98). The repetition of the phrase “say it right” with the shift to “correct” the second time emphasizes the importance of

accurate representation when conveying the words of another, which Father Roger Schmit can recognize and acknowledge, even without being an artist himself.

While *LP* sheds light on the incomplete accuracy of historical representation, *WB* appears to ignore history completely in favor of a nonspecific, entirely universal setting and characters. As Lynn Meskell and Lindsay Weiss argue, “It is not that Coetzee refuses historical responsibility (contra JanMohamed 1985), because his lead character takes personal responsibility and suffers the same injustices as the supposed barbarians” (91). The idea here is that Coetzee was not trying to avoid history or bypass any responsibility for atrocities in the novel, but rather to universalize it for a purpose. Meskell and Weiss go on to say that “the author’s refusal to historicize the suffering of the dispossessed is a refusal to allow the reader to digest this suffering and then forget it” (91). Because the story is not located in a specific place or time, the reader cannot observe the atrocities and then leave them behind in their specified setting: there is nowhere for the reader to let them go. The magistrate demonstrates this aspect of narration late in the novel when he debates writing down the history of the barbarians. He reflects, “I wanted to live outside history. I wanted to live outside the history that Empire imposes on its subjects, even its lost subjects. I never wished it for the barbarians that they should have the history of Empire laid upon them” (Coetzee *WB* 154). The magistrate is refusing to write down the history of the barbarians lest it limit their story to the view of the Empire, to their specific situation in history that would become fixed and inapplicable in the future were it to be written down in concrete terms when truly the violence spans throughout time.

In creating a more universal tale with *WB*, “Coetzee conveniently sidesteps the political in favor of a moral stance, in which the heart of darkness is possible in all societies” (Meskell & Weiss 91). Many have hypothesized that the novel is an allegory for atrocities committed in South Africa, but the allegory seems to be more for societies in general, one of the reasons this novel is still a classic today. Anne Waldron Neumann describes Coetzee’s narrative as being “couched in the present tense rather than the historic past (the historic past that figuratively washes its hands of events because they are over and done with, because they are *history*)” (76). The magistrate acknowledges the problem of creating a history for the barbarians in some of his later reflections in the novel: “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 rise and fall, of beginning and end . . . . Empire dooms itself to live in history” (Coetzee *WB* 133). The parallel structure of “rise and fall, of beginning and end” reflects the repetitive nature of history, even as the Empire tries to contain it in a historical setting. Therefore, Coetzee universalizing his work gets at the truth of history more than any specific setting ever could.

Another advantage to using present tense narration rather than a historical past tense is that it draws the reader into the story. As Delconte explains, “I term this phenomenon particular to simultaneous present tense narration the *absentee narratee*: the illusion (maintained by both narrator and author) that someone within the story world is listening to the narrative even though the narrative structure does not accommodate that someone” (433). For example, as the magistrate is sitting in his cell alone, he says, “I lie in the reek of old vomit obsessed with the thought of water” (Coetzee *WB* 115). Obviously, since he is alone in his cell, there is no one else within the novel to whom he is telling his story. However, the use of present tense insists that the magistrate is saying these things in the moment they are happening and is not talking to himself. The absence of a listener forces the reader to become that listener as there is “nothing within the fictional construct to buffer us (the authorial audience)... [We are] made complicit ourselves in a large part because of our role as audience, because ‘we listened’” (Delconte 443, 440). Readers find themselves active participants in the story, pulled into the barbaric actions of the Empire by being listeners for the magistrate rather than observing him telling the story to another listener—one less degree of separation for the reader.

An additional effect is that “The magistrate’s present tense also records his ongoing struggle to narrate oppression, to discover how—*if*—one can speak for those with no voice of their own without imposing a voice on them” (Neumann 77). Alcoff would argue that there is no neutral position; therefore, it is impossible to speak for the “Other” without imposing some portion of one’s own position on them (6-7). The magistrate seems to agree with Alcoff. After he has written out a plea for the barbarians, he says, “For a long while I stare at the plea I have written. It would be disappointing to know that the poplar slips I have spent so much time on contain a message as devious, as equivocal, as reprehensible as this” (Coetzee *WB* 154). While the poplar slips of the barbarians are literally written



in a different language, that interpretable writing becomes symbolic of the uncertainty with which we must hear history and stories told by those speaking for the “Other.” The parallel structure of “as devious, as equivocal, as reprehensible” again suggests the repetitive universality of history, tainted in its telling and retelling over time.

While realizing his own failures to accurately communicate the history of the barbarians, the magistrate also begins to associate himself with the Empire and its atrocities. As he reflects, “For I was not, as I liked to think, the indulgent pleasure-loving opposite of the cold, rigid Colonel. I was the lie that Empire tells itself when times are easy, he the truth that Empire tells when harsh winds blow. Two sides of imperial rule, no more, no less” (Coetzee *WB* 135). The magistrate has a desire to be different from the Colonel, to gain a moral superiority and understanding of the people the Empire has suppressed. However, in this moment, he realizes his own complicity in the suppression of the barbarians. Gallagher asserts that “Those who passively allow torture and oppression to take place are just as much Barbarians as the torturers” (285). Although the magistrate makes half-hearted attempts to understand the barbarians and identify their humanity, he never truly takes successful action against the Empire, becoming partially responsible for the suppression and torture of the barbarians. The reader is then drawn into his complicity by being his active listener throughout the entire work. However, the magistrate does not place blame or guilt on either himself or the reader. As he says, “in this farthest outpost of the Empire of light there existed one man who in his heart was not a barbarian” (Coetzee *WB* 104). The inclusion of the phrase “in his heart” suggests that, even if the magistrate and the readers are complicit in the suppression of the “Other,” their intentions were never harmful. Despite that bit of relief, the realization of their own complicity has an effect on the readers. Moses comments on the gravity of the realizations: “Were the complicity of the magistrate in the history of Empire merely a matter of his personal culpability, or more broadly, an indictment of his particular caste, class, or faction—the liberal element within a repressive regime—Coetzee’s novel would be significantly less disturbing, and I think, less profound” (122). It is not the mere atrocities that sit with the reader, but the universality and the inclusion of his or her own contributions to the story that linger in the reader’s mind.

### Conclusions

In all three works, even the realization of the reader's inclusion in the story and complicity fail to bring about significant change and the end of each piece is left in an ambiguous state—the reader is uncertain if there is hope for the future in either Laramie or the Empire's outpost. As Jonas Slonaker, gay resident of Laramie, so pointedly asks, "What's come out of it? What's come out of this that's concrete or lasting?" (Kaufman *LP* 97). The repetition of the initial question gives off an almost desperate and hopeless tone, shoving the lack of response in Laramie at the audience members, who are left with no answer following that question. Moses writes that after reading *WB* "we must take an extremely dim view of the possibility of historical progress, of the development of a genuinely just and humane society" (123). Gallagher agrees, concluding that "Coetzee also points to the moral vacuum that allows torture to exist in the contemporary world" (278). But if the messages in the works are only that the world is a hopeless place doomed to subjugate the "Other" forever, then what would be the point? What would be the benefit of such a bleak realization?

Although the works certainly do paint a bleak picture of the human capacity for violence and dehumanization of the "Other," that is not all that the works have to offer. Moses posits that "the magistrate intends to represent for posterity both the enlightened hope at which his civilization aimed and its failure to fulfill those hopes" (119). The magistrate does demonstrate the failure of trying to speak for the "Other," but *WB* does not leave it at that. At the very end of the novel, the magistrate observes that "The wind has dropped, and now the snowflakes come floating down, the first fall of the year, flecking the rooftiles with white . . . . In the middle of the square there are children at play building a snowman. Anxious not to alarm them, but inexplicably joyful, I approach them across the snow" (155). The connotation of the white snow is of a fresh start, and the magistrate's inexplicable joy implies that all is well at the outpost. That fresh, clean slate of an image promises hope for the Empire's outpost. Some contend that this final scene of the novel is just a dream, but whether it is a dream or not makes no difference. The important thing is that, through the recognition by certain individuals of their own complicity in dehumanizing the "Other," change may be possible. As Father Roger Schmit so aptly points out in *LP*, "Dyke! Yeah, dyke! Do you realize that is violence? That is the seed of violence"

(63). Words are the beginning of violence. The language of a culture and a community's views hold more power than any society cares to admit, providing dangerous incentives and grounding for the hate crimes and atrocities that were done against the barbarians, Matthew Shepard, and any other group or individual seen as the "Other" in the world today. ❧

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