In a contentious article in South Africa’s *Sunday Times*, Colin Bower, a publisher in Cape Town, tried to argue that J.M. Coetzee is not as good a writer as everyone says he is: ‘I have searched in vain for evidence of literary craftsmanship in Coetzee’, he boldly wrote.1 His timing could not have been worse: a week or so later, Coetzee was awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature. It was October 2003. Bower’s article particularly highlights a local feature of Coetzee reception, for, mixed with great acclaim for the author and his work, there is also great displeasure. In the press, there is at least as much attention given to complaints about Coetzee’s elusiveness and the inaccessibility of his prose as there is to the achievement of his novels. And despite Coetzee’s quiet insistence on privacy, there are still those who persist in seeing the author as a public figure.

All of this has been magnified in the wake of the scandal and success of *Disgrace* (1999). Winning Coetzee an unprecedented second Booker Prize that year, the first of his novels to be set in the new South Africa is just as complex as his previous fiction and closer in its contemporaneity to his 1990 novel *Age of Iron*, but with a difference: it provokes with a gesture to headline news – a Cape Town professor’s scandalous affair with a student; a horrific attack on the professor – and the gang-rape of his lesbian daughter. Published five years into democracy, and nearly a decade after the dismantling of official censorship, *Disgrace* challenges readers with its many-layered plot, its choice of landscape, its preoccupation with Byron, the Romantics, animals, and ethics. So why would an author known for more obvious dislocations of time and place in his previous work, for his reluctance to enter into public debate, also choose to bring in the ‘topical’ and ‘shocking’? Why, if the book is otherwise so intertextually rich, would he write to invite the possibility of a ‘realist’ reading focusing on the controversial material only?

This landmark text has only a very short history, but its influence in the public sphere has already been significant. ‘Is this the right image of our nation?’ asked the esteemed professor of literature and Director-General...
under Mandela, Jakes Gerwel, in an article for the Afrikaans weekly Rapport.2 ‘Feeding national paranoia?’ was the headline of another article, questioning Coetzee’s fictional portrayal of gender and race.3 Similarly, the late Aggrey Klaaste, who said he found the novel ‘gloomy’ and ‘unhappy’, wrote in The Sowetan:

It is the end of Disgrace that gives me serious problems. In sum the story of black men raping a white woman, who accepts this serious abuse as something like a badge of courage, is in my view quite offensive.

At the political level it depicts a white male fear about black male sexual potency and the black males’ inability to deal with power.4

Two days after Klaaste’s critique of Disgrace, the ANC’s submission was presented to the South African Human Rights Commission (SAHRC) hearings on racism and the media by then Public Enterprises Minister and ANC policy spokesperson Jeff Radebe. In the report, Disgrace was cited and Coetzee was accused of ‘making the point’ that

... five years after liberation white South African society continues to believe in a particular stereotype of the African which defines the latter as immoral and amoral, a savage, violent, disrespectful of private property, incapable of refinement through education and driven by... dark satanic impulses.5

The SAHRC had originally received specific complaints against two newspapers in 1998. It was their decision to investigate the prevalence of racism in the media more broadly. The hearings which, they made clear, ‘should not be turned into a court process’6 (here we have echoes of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) – echoes too of David Lurie’s hearing)7 nevertheless had great implications for Coetzee’s novel. Though the Commission claimed that ‘it is not the purpose of the inquiry to find any individual journalist, publisher or title guilty of racism’,8 Coetzee’s novel was certainly singled out.

As David Attwell has documented, the authorship of the report is complex, since there are two versions – one under the ANC banner and one somewhat distancing itself from its status as an ANC document. What seems likely, however, is that ‘the guiding hand behind the report’ was Thabo Mbeki.9 While the incoherency of the submission (since it is an unedited transcription, with awkward phrasing and paraphrasing of the novel) means that charges of racism against Coetzee, or against his novel, are rather ambiguous,10 what does not appear to have been asked in any of the coverage so far is why was Disgrace, a fiction, selected for an inquiry on racism and the media? How does the report – which confuses Coetzee with his character David Lurie, and other characters and events with real life – contribute to