

# Losing Touch

## Disembodiment and the Impossibility of Feeling for the “Other” in J. M. Coetzee’s *Dusklands*

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*Abstract: The paper discusses J. M. Coetzee’s first novel, Dusklands (1974), which comprises two novellas. “The Vietnam Project” is narrated by Eugene Dawn, an American mythographer, who works on a report facilitating psychological warfare in the Vietnam War. The second novella, “The Narrative of Jacobus Coetzee,” tells the story of an eighteenth-century Dutch explorer’s journey and encounter with the Namaqua people in Southern Africa. Following the author Coetzee’s perspective, the paper does not focus on the figure of the oppressed, but on the oppressor instead, and the way he, specifically his relation to his body, is affected by either twentieth-century American imperialism or eighteenth-century colonisation. This paper argues that both Eugene Dawn and Jacobus Coetzee are trapped in their respective vicious dehumanising circle of imperialism/colonialism where they wish to become “disembodied.” In Dusklands, disembodiment appears in the form of fantasies and feverish dreams; nevertheless, it has a sustained effect on the way Dawn and Jacobus interact with others. The paper draws on theories of dehumanisation, Matthew Ratcliffe’s view on the relation of touch and reality, and the concept of vulnerability as investigated by Judith Butler and Adriana Cavarero.*

J. M. Coetzee’s earliest novel, *Dusklands* (1974), comprises two novellas. “The Vietnam Project” is narrated by Eugene Dawn, an American mythographer, who works on a report facilitating psychological warfare in the Vietnam War using photographs of the war as sources. Dawn admits that, since he started working on the report, his relationship with others—more specifically, with their

bodies—has changed. In his personal life, this appears most prominently in his relationship with his wife, Marilyn, with whom he is unable to live a satisfying sexual life. Marilyn is convinced that Dawn's changed behaviour is the dehumanising consequence of his work. After finishing the report, Dawn becomes even more paranoid than before and runs away, kidnapping his child, Martin. When Marilyn and the police arrive at the motel where Dawn and his son are staying, Dawn panics, hides behind Martin, and stabs the boy with a fruit knife. The story ends at the mental institution where Dawn is placed after almost killing his son.

The second novella, "The Narrative of Jacobus Coetzee," tells the story of an eighteenth-century Dutch explorer's journey and encounter with the Namaqua people in Southern Africa.<sup>1</sup> Jacobus, travelling with his Khoikhoi servants, pays a short and unfruitful visit to the Namaqua people's village after which he wants to proceed northwards. However, he falls sick during the journey and his servants have to carry him back to the village. He resents the way he is treated and after getting better he leaves the village with Klawer, the most loyal of his servants. Jacobus returns to the village with soldiers and while they rape and kill the villagers and burn down their huts, Jacobus exterminates his disloyal servants who remained in the village.

Following Coetzee's perspective, the paper does not focus on the figure of the oppressed, but on the oppressor, and the way he—specifically his relation to his body—is affected by either twentieth-century American imperialism or eighteenth-century colonisation. It is argued that both Eugene Dawn and Jacobus Coetzee are trapped in their respective vicious dehumanising circle of imperialism/colonialism where they wish to become "disembodied." In this context, disembodiment can be defined as one's disengagement from their body, experienced as a restraining burden for the self, in the hope of getting rid of corporeal vulnerability. In *Dusklands*, disembodiment appears in the form of fantasies and feverish dreams; nevertheless, it has a sustained effect on the way Dawn and Jacobus interact with others. As they lose touch with their bodies, they become unable to feel for others, which leads to further dehumanisation and violence.

The paper draws mainly on theories of dehumanisation, Matthew Ratcliffe's view on the relation of touch and reality, and the concept of vulnerability as investigated by Judith Butler and Adriana Cavarero. It begins with a short introduction

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1 The paper refers to Jacobus Coetzee (the character) as "Jacobus" and uses "Coetzee" to refer to J. M. Coetzee, the author.

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to the literature on *Dusklands* and continues with the Cartesian view on soul and body. The Cartesian division of the self and the Other is a topic elaborated on in some analyses of the novel; however, I will argue that Descartes's thoughts on body and soul are equally relevant here. Disembodiment, the wish to get rid of an essential part of a human being, is construed as a kind of self-dehumanisation on the part of Dawn and Jacobus. This detachment implies the loss of vulnerability, which may be perceived as beneficial by Dawn and Jacobus, as it renders reciprocal relationships, touch, and feeling for the Other impossible. The only way the two perpetrators can interact with the world is through violence, and they reach out towards the Other with weapons instead of hands.

### THE ENEMY BODY

It is conspicuous that former analyses of the novel are mostly concerned with the narrator characters' relation to the Other and the world, but it is equally evident that the physical body and corporeal vulnerability are not in the focus of these studies. The first full-length book dedicated to the works of Coetzee was Teresa Dovey's *The Novels of J. M. Coetzee: Lacanian Allegories* (1988), which, as the subtitle suggests, provides a reading of Coetzee's earlier works through Lacanian psychoanalysis. David Attwell criticised Dovey for overstating the relevance of Lacan and pointed out that Descartes, Hegel, or Sartre would be equally valid references for interpretation ("Review" 517). Indeed, Coetzee's novels are often read through a Hegelian lens, in which the master and slave (or lord and bondsman) dialectic is in focus.<sup>2</sup> Though it might be tempting to draw an equal sign between the Hegelian master and the coloniser and the Hegelian slave and the colonised, the situation is much more complicated than that in the colonial condition and one has to be cautious not to interpret the master–slave dialectic as a concrete colonial encounter.<sup>3</sup> This complexity is reflected in Coetzee's novels as well. According to Mike Marais, Coetzee invokes the master–slave relationship in his works exactly

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2 See, for instance, Dominic Head's *The Cambridge Introduction to J. M. Coetzee*, Mike Marais's *Secretary of the Invisible: The Idea of Hospitality in the Fiction of J. M. Coetzee*, or Ottília Veres's PhD dissertation, *Colonial Encounters in J. M. Coetzee's Early Fiction: Two Tropes of Intersubjectivity*.

3 For a more detailed description on the disparity between the Hegelian thought and postcolonial cultural studies, see, for instance, Frantz Fanon's *Black Skin, White Masks* (1952). Fanon claims that the black man cannot be identified as the Hegelian slave, nor are the white masters identical to the Hegelian master, for the colonial situation lacks the reciprocity that is present in the Hegelian

to highlight the failure of this dialectic in the colonial scenario. Reciprocal recognition, which is the aim of the struggle of master and slave, is missing from Coetzee's novels (7).

David Attwell couples *Dusklands* with *In the Heart of the Country* (1977), and identifies both as “attack[s] on the rationalist, dominating self of colonialism and imperialism” (*Politics of Writing* 5). This “colonial self,” writes Attwell, fails “to enter reciprocal relationships with the new landscape and its people” (“Problem of History” 113). He refers to this continuously re-emerging question of the “I” and “You” in Coetzee's works as “the poetics of reciprocity” in an interview with the novelist (*Doubling* 58).<sup>4</sup> In a 1978 interview with Stephen Watson, Coetzee himself talked about reciprocity in relation to his first two novels, saying that they are both about “living among people without reciprocity, so that there's only an ‘I’ and a ‘You’ is not on the same basis, the ‘You’ is a debased ‘You’” (qtd. in Gallagher 98–99). Coetzee's words, concerning originally his first novels, have preserved their relevance, for lack of reciprocity has remained a general condition in his later fiction as well. Except for Magda and Michael K, Coetzee's characters do not live in isolation in the physical sense of the word, still, they seem incapable of maintaining reciprocal relationships. While the physical closeness of others would suggest that non-reciprocity is present only on a mental and/or an emotional plain, it is important to point out that it has a corporeal dimension as well. Eugene Dawn and Jacobus Coetzee are disengaged both mentally, emotionally, and physically from the world surrounding them.

The figures of the master and the slave also emerge in Allen Richard Penner's reading of Coetzee; however, he sees this dialectic and all colonial thought as a result of “the Cartesian division of the self and others” (13–14). In what follows, I will argue in accordance with Attwell and Penner that Descartes's relevance is equal to that of Hegel in *Dusklands*, and that the base of the division between the self and others is a division within the self between body and soul.

In *A Discourse on the Method*, René Descartes proposes the following thought experiment: “I saw that I could pretend that I had no body and that there was no world or place for me to be in, but that I could not for all that pretend that I did

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master–slave dialectic. In addition, the black man is less independent than the slave, while the white man demands work and not recognition from the black man (168–173).

4 Attwell also mentions Coetzee's 1977 essay “Achterberg's ‘Ballade van de Gasfitter’: The Mystery of I and You” and his 1987 Jerusalem Prize Acceptance Speech as non-fiction examples.

not exist" (29). From which he drew the conclusion: "I was a substance whose whole essence or nature resides only in thinking, ... [which] has no need of place and is not dependent on any material thing. ... [T]he Soul ... is entirely distinct from the body ... and would not stop being everything it is, even if the body were not to exist" (29). The Cartesian division of body and soul appears distinctly in the first novella of *Dusklands*. Dawn begins his narrative by complaining about his superior, Coetzee, who has asked him to revise his report. Dawn perceives this request as a threat, and presumes that Coetzee wants to get rid of him. He cannot bear conflicts, and describes himself as follows: "I am an egg that must lie in the downiest of nests under the most coaxing of nurses before my bald, unpromising shell cracks and my shy secret life emerges" (10). The metaphor of the fragile egg highlights the paradox of Dawn's simultaneous precariousness and solipsism. According to Judith Butler, "lives are by definition precarious," because "precariousness is coextensive with birth itself" (*Frames* xiv, 25). Though the egg with its connotations of birth and fragility would fit into Butler's definition of precariousness, its absolute closedness to the world makes it incapable of reciprocal connections. Dawn as an egg is indifferent to the precariousness of other lives, his "shell-body" prevents him from "being impinged upon by the exposure and dependency of others" (Butler, *Frames* xiv). Penner sees Dawn's eventual mental breakdown as a result of this "extreme Cartesian isolation of 'I' from the 'other'" (32). The confined inner world of Dawn appears later in a somewhat similar image of fragile embryonic crystals enclosed in a membrane of amnion: "I am living a crystal life nowadays. Exorbitant formations flower in my head, that sealed airless world. First the enveloping skull. Then a sac, an amnion" (55).

A similar duality is observable in the case of Jacobus. Describing his happiness upon the revenge attack on the Namaqua people's village he says: "My mind bobbed in my body like a bottle on the sea" (157). Earlier in the story, Jacobus had already referred to these two separate parts of himself, though in a less explicit way: "I carried my secret buried within me. I could not be touched" (115). This supposed untouchability is, on the one hand, similar to Dawn's "egg" existence, which makes both characters callous to the outside world. On the other hand, untouchability also foreshadows invulnerability, or rather the fantasy of invulnerability, which has significance in Jacobus's narrative.

In his report, Dawn claims that the failure of American propaganda is due to the voice used in radio programmes which is neither the voice of the "father nor

[that of the] brother. It is the voice of the doubting self, the voice of René Descartes driving his wedge between the self in the world and the self who contemplates that self” (39–40). The programmes “have failed because they speak out of an alienated *doppelgänger* rationality for which there is no precedent in Vietnamese thought” (40).<sup>5</sup> Though he claims that the Cartesian approach is unprofitable in an imperial context, in his own work, Dawn follows Descartes’s method. He refuses the offered familiarisation tour to Vietnam. Instead of first-hand experiences, he relies entirely on thinking: “I discovered all the truths in my Vietnam report, by introspection. Vietnam, like everything else, is inside me” (30). The body seems not only to be irrelevant from the point of the soul’s existence (as Descartes claimed), but it becomes an albatross around Dawn’s and Jacobus’s neck. Or, as Noémi Doktorcsik puts it, “the inner and the outer parts are not in line; moreover, they contradict each other” (28).

The first signs of Dawn’s conflict with his body emerge during the meeting with his supervisor, Coetzee. He tries desperately to stop his fidgeting fingers, to subdue “spasms in the various parts of [his] body” (16). The involuntary movements of his body annoy him because, as a reader of Charlotte Wolf’s *A Psychology of Gesture* (1972) (which he incorrectly refers to as *The Psychology of Gesture*—evidence of his absolute belief in its truth and authority), Dawn knows that these gestures betray his depression and anxiety, making him look weak before Coetzee (15). In his annoyance, he bursts out: “I am vexed by the indiscipline of my body. I have often wished I had another one” (16). What makes Dawn even more displeased with his body is that it prevents him from enjoying his work by acting exhausted and suffering from watering eyes, headaches, and backache. Sitting at his desk in his grey carrel, he complains: “I should be in paradise. But my body betrays me. ... From head to foot I am the subject of a revolting body” (19–20). Dawn perceives his body as an enemy, a restraining weight, like the old man sitting on Sinbad’s neck.<sup>6</sup> Although Butler notes that the *Phenomenology of Spirit* is not much concerned with the body since it is “only referred to indirectly as the encasement, location, or specificity of consciousness” (*Psychic* 34), it is still important to mention the Hegelian thread (invoked at the beginning of this segment) in connection with the figures of Sinbad

5 Like the Hegelian master–slave dialectic, Cartesian thought has its limits in the imperial/colonial context (see footnote 3).

6 The fable of Sinbad and the Old Man of the sea is a recurring element in Coetzee’s *oeuvre*. In *Dusklands*, it is the body that acts as a tyrant over Dawn’s spirit, while in *Foe* (1986), Susan feels it is Friday who weighs on her like the Old Man on Sinbad. However, the fable appears most prominently in *Slow Man* (2005), where the novelist Elizabeth Costello evokes the story when Paul wants to get rid of her.

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and the Old Man. Veres, who, in accordance with Marais, sees the relationships in *Dusklands* as instances of the failed Hegelian dialectic, claims that the recurring tale of Sinbad and the Old Man in the fiction of Coetzee is a “motif and trope of intersubjectivity” (19, 30). Dawn says:

I have an exploring temperament. Had I lived two hundred years ago I would have had a continent to explore, to map, to open to colonisation. In that vertiginous freedom I might have expanded to my true potential. If I feel cramped nowadays it is because I have no space to beat my wings. That is a good explanation for the trouble I have with my back, and a mythic one too. My spirit should soar into the endless interior distances, but dragging it back, alas, is this tyrant body. Sinbad’s story of the old man of the sea is also apposite. (57)

Though it might be argued that Dawn sees himself as Sinbad and his superior, Coetzee, as the cruel Old Man from the tale, turning this situation into an example of intersubjectivity, the text clearly refers to the body as the tyrant and the spirit as the enslaved. Veres acknowledges that in some cases the tale stands for subjectivity instead of intersubjectivity, like in Dawn’s account where it is a “metaphor for the split within the subject” (33). Thus, just like the egg metaphor, the reference to the Sinbad tale is the sign of split within Dawn himself. The explanation he finds for his backache, hence his clip-winged spirit restrained from exploration, is in line with Jacobus’s thoughts. In the case of the latter, it is the fever accompanying his illness that frees his mind/soul/spirit from the body’s prison:

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. I inhabited the past again, meditating upon my life as tamer of the wild. I meditated upon the acres of new ground I had eaten up with my eyes. (119)

Thus, Dawn’s eighteenth-century explorer counterpart carries out the same Cartesian experiment of pretending away his body while lying sick in a menstruation hut of the Namaquas. During one of his fevers, Jacobus meditates on the effects of space and solitude:

... the five senses stretch out from the body they inhabit, but four stretch into a vacuum. The ear cannot hear, the nose cannot smell, the tongue cannot taste, *the skin cannot feel. The skin cannot feel*: the sun bears down on the body, flesh and skin move in a pocket of heat, the skin stretches vainly around, everything is sun. *Only the eyes have power*. The eyes are free, they reach out to the horizon all around. Nothing is hidden from the eyes. As the other senses grow numb or dumb my eyes flex and extend themselves. I become a spherical reflecting eye moving through the wilderness and ingesting it. Destroyer of the wilderness, I move through the land cutting a devouring path from horizon to horizon. There is nothing from which my eye turns, 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. (121, emphases added)

As a self-proclaimed explorer, it is not surprising that Jacobus accepts sight as the only sense that retains its might, while the skin, thus touch, is doubly deprived of its power. However, “explorer” is merely a euphemism for “coloniser” here, part of the strategy Mary Louise Pratt calls “anti-conquest.”<sup>7</sup> Pratt’s term refers to the “strategies of representation whereby European bourgeois subjects seek to secure their innocence in the same moment as they assert European hegemony” (7). This image of innocence is reinforced in the afterword attached to Jacobus’s narrative where he is portrayed as a hero, “discoverer of the Orange River and the giraffe”, the latter of which “in his innocence he conceived to be a variety of camel” (165, 185).<sup>8</sup> Eighteenth-century travel writers styled themselves as the innocent “main protagonist[s] of anti-conquest,” the “seeing-m[e]n’ ... whose imperial eyes passively look out and possess” (Pratt 7). Jacobus is constructed more or less along these lines: he calls himself an explorer, he makes discoveries and imagines himself as the “disembodied eye” that Pratt identifies with the scientific

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7 Mary Louise Pratt draws on Coetzee’s *White Writing: On the Culture of Letters in South Africa* (1988), and uses the study as a model for her chapter on Spanish America.

8 The afterword is part of the Jacobus novella. Here, Coetzee is writing from the perspective of the invented persona of the late Dr. S. J. Coetzee, an expert and admirer of Jacobus Coetzee, the explorer.



subject of anti-conquest (78).<sup>9</sup> However, Jacobus's gun protrudes visibly from this idealised scene of anti-conquest and points directly at conquest. In other words, the all-seeing domineering eye equipped with a gun alludes to colonisation. Jacobus does not only passively observe the landscape but makes it his own, he conquers the land as he "devours" or "ingests" it with his eyes. It is as if he became the disembodied "mode of consciousness" Michael Vaughan describes as the "Northern European Protestant type, with its project of world-colonisation" (123). In his narrative, Jacobus's encounter with the giraffe appears in the following form: "I move through the wilderness with my gun at the shoulder of my eye and slay elephants, hip-popotami, 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" (122). Thus, seeing, "the innocent act of the anti-conquest," turns into the invasion and destruction of the African land by the use of guns, that is, "tool[s] of conquest" (Pratt 66).

The lack of reciprocity Coetzee talked about appears in this feverish fantasy of the eye as well, since Jacobus's relation to the African landscape is one-directional. The eyeball's transparency is in sharp contrast with its all-seeing ability. In an essay in *White Writing*, Coetzee deals again with this dominance of sight when writing about Sydney Clouts's landscape poetry. In that essay, he quotes Wordsworth's "The Prelude":

I speak in recollection of a time  
When the bodily eye, in every stage of life  
The most despotic of our senses, gained  
Such strength in "me" as often held my mind  
In absolute dominion. (*White Writing* 177; "The Prelude,"  
bk. 12, ll. 127–131)

Wordsworth's poem goes on to describe how Nature calls upon the other senses and thus "thwart[s] / This tyranny" of the eye ("The Prelude," bk. 12, ll. 134–135). Unlike Jacobus, whose senses go "numb or dumb," the speaker of Wordsworth's poem is undoubtedly in a reciprocal relationship with nature, because the landscape affects him (121). Moreover, the image of the "transparent sac" is an allusion

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9 Pratt defines two types of eighteenth-century anti-conquest protagonists, the sentimental and the scientific. The latter one moves on the periphery of his writing and his main aim is to systematise nature.

to Ralph Waldo Emerson's metaphor of the transparent eyeball, which he introduced in his essay "Nature," published in 1836 (López 72). Despite the apparent connection, the two transparent eyes differ in a crucial aspect, namely, the direction of the one-sided relationship to the landscape. The passivity of the transcendentalist contemplating eye is juxtaposed with the violent activity of the colonial gaze. While Emerson's unification with nature is harmonious, and the eye accepts the sight of the wilderness as it is, Jacobus's eye is a predatory black hole equipped with a gun that hunts down and engulfs everything from stones to animals.

This self-image of Jacobus as an eye with a gun strengthens his fantasy of invulnerability already mentioned above. He develops this fantasy to the degree that he can rely on sight only because, as he puts it, "the skin cannot feel," and indeed, he does not seem to feel pain (121). This way, Jacobus becomes disembodied, or rather he "disembodies" himself. When the villagers attack him for mutilating a child, he does not describe his torture with his own bodily sensations but can only invoke witnesses who might be able to see how badly he is being treated:

A claustal despair came. Someone was sitting on my head, I could move not even my jaw. The pain became trivial. It occurred to me that I could suffocate and die and these people would not care. They were tormenting me excessively. Surely they were tormenting me excessively, surely anyone could see that. ... *"That which is not felt by the criminal is his crime. I am nothing to them, nothing but an occasion."* Beyond rage, beyond pain, beyond fear I withdrew inside myself and in my womb of ice totted up the profit and the loss. (140, emphasis added)

The irony of the words in italics is revealed when Jacobus, watching, listening to, and carrying out the massacre in the village of the Namaqua people, feels only boredom (155–156).

Both Dawn and Jacobus disengage themselves from the body which only generates conflict and annoyance and exposes them to pain. They become their thoughts and live in their mind instead: "I am my work. For a year now the Vietnam Project has been the centre of my existence," says Dawn proudly (11). This seems to be an advantageous step for Dawn and Jacobus who perceive the liberation

from the body as a “triumphant disembodiment” (Wolfe xv).<sup>10</sup> However, in reality, the loss of corporeal vulnerability entails the loss of “humanity.” For Butler, bodily needs and dependency as well as “vulnerability to injury” are “clearly political issues,” and “precarity only makes sense” if they are identified as such (*Notes* 117). According to Butler, “everyone is precarious, and this follows from our social existence as bodily beings,” to which she adds: “No one escapes the precarious dimension of social life—it is, we might say, the joint of our nonfoundation” (*Notes* 118–119). Thus, in a Butlerian vein, it can be claimed that the two narrators of Coetzee’s novel deprive themselves of “a primary vulnerability to others, one that one cannot will away without ceasing to be human” (*Precarious* xiv). Disembodiment can, therefore, be seen as a kind of self-dehumanisation in *Dusklands*.

It is important to point out that despite the usually negative connotation of the expression, dehumanisation is, in general, a neutral concept (Kronfeldner 10). Dawn and Jacobus’s self-dehumanisation does not imply negative emotions, for instance, hatred for themselves. Stéphanie Demoulin et al. identify two main catalysts of self-dehumanisation: meta-dehumanisation (when one dehumanises oneself as a reaction to being dehumanised by someone else) and “immoral acts performed by the self” (265–266). Or, as Maria Kronfeldner puts it referring to the latter, perpetrators may dehumanise themselves “in reaction to their own dehumanising attitudes or actions toward others” (10). At first glance, this explanation seems plausible in the case of Jacobus, who views and treats the natives as animals, as well as Dawn, who does not see the Vietnamese as fully human beings either. However, Demoulin et al. add that self-dehumanisation can “arise as a consequence of one’s immoral act at least to the extent that the target recognises the immoral qualification of her behaviour” (270). In other words, self-dehumanisation presupposes an acknowledgement or recognition of the immorality of one’s actions (Demoulin et al. 265–267). Jacobus never comes to this realisation: at the end of his narrative he still thinks of killing the Namaqua people as a heroic “sacrifice” (163).

Dawn’s case is more complex. Though Coetzee offers a solution in the form of the doctors’ diagnosis, it is evident from the tone that this explanation is ironic rather than definitive. At the mental institution, Dawn is sorry for having stabbed Martin, but he also claims he is not guilty, not having been himself when he hurt

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10 Wolfe uses “triumphant disembodiment” in reference to N. Katherine Hayles’s *How We Became Posthuman: Virtual Bodies in Cybernetics, Literature, and Informatics* (1999). He claims that the term posthuman is used by Hayles as the opposite of embodiment.

his child (76). Nevertheless, the Vietnam Project's inhumanity does not dawn on him. Neither Marilyn nor her friends can make Dawn see that the report and the whole Vietnam war are morally questionable and that the hours writing the report have affected him adversely. He mocks his wife's notion: "She lives in the hope that what her friends call my psychic brutalisation will end with the end of the war and the Vietnam Project, that reinsertion into civilisation will tame and eventually humanise me" (23). Dawn believes in the legitimacy and importance of his work as a mythographer and is not aware of its questionable morality. However, the resistance he experiences in his body might be a sign of the unconscious realisation of the inhumanity of the Vietnam Project. Eventually, the doctors at the mental institution come to a conclusion about which Dawn is rather sceptical: "The hypothesis they test 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" (82).

Therefore, to a degree, the repressed realisation of the immorality of his acts contributes to his mental breakdown as well as to his disengagement with his own body. Jacobus's self-dehumanisation can be explained by a more abstract view of dehumanisation. According to Kronfeldner, an ever-present aspect of dehumanisation seems to be the fact that it "*establishes difference and distance* between human beings" (9). Jacobus's narrative begins with a lamentation on the vanishing dividing line between the white settlers and the Khoikhoi, whom he refers to as Hottentots: "Everywhere differences grow smaller as they come up and we go down. ... In hard times how can differences be maintained?" (88). The only vague difference Jacobus can devise is "true" Christianity, because, though the Khoikhoi took up Christianity as well, theirs is only "an empty word" (89). On the other hand, he has no difficulty in establishing difference and distance between white men and the San people, whom he calls the Bushmen and who live outside the white settlements. These native people become the targets of Jacobus's dehumanisation, more precisely, animalistic dehumanisation according to Nick Haslam's dual model.<sup>11</sup> Jacobus proclaims that "[t]he Bushman is a different creature, a wild animal with an animal's soul" (89). Besides the tendency to steal, mutilate and kill white men's stock, Jacobus finds the most obvious sign of inhumanity in the way the natives supposedly treat their sick and elderly. While elaborating on the apprehension and killing

11 See Nick Haslam's "Dehumanisation: An Integrative Review" (2006).

of the San, he mentions that the one he was able to capture on foot was a sick, old woman left behind by her people because she could not walk. “For they are not like us,” states Jacobus, “they don’t look after their aged, when you cannot keep up with the troop they put down a little food and water and abandon you to the animals” (91). The response to vulnerability is marked by Jacobus as a difference that distinguishes humans and non-humans.<sup>12</sup>

Adriana Cavarero identifies caring and wounding as the two alternative responses “inscribed in the condition of vulnerability” to which the body, being exposed to others, is open (*Horrorism* 20). Caring, in this case, is clearly a sign of humanity, while wounding is associated with the San people’s animality. Wounding, of course, does not only refer to physical violence. Writing about the primary vulnerability of newborns, Butler argues that besides violence, abandonment and starvation are equally harmful, hence qualify as wounding, because, instead of support or care, their “bodies [are] given over to nothing, or to brutality, or to no sustenance” (*Precarious* 31). The reassuring distance between the European colonists and the Africans established by the opposition between caring and wounding decreases suddenly when Jacobus visits the chieftain of the Namaquas. Arriving at the village, Jacobus is told that the old man is sick, but he is not abandoned, in fact, he is being taken care of conscientiously: a girl sits with him, waving away flies; he is covered with and lies on animal skins, he is washed and given medicine. The comforting distance vanishes completely when Jacobus himself falls sick and, instead of abandoning him, his servants bring him back to the village with the help of the Namaquas. Jacobus’s way back to the village is marked by hands, mostly the caring hands of the supposedly inhuman African people: “I was handled roughly,” Jacobus tells us; “Rough men were lifting me, wrapped in blankets like a corpse. My hands were locked at my sides” (116). On top of being sick, Jacobus’s hands are restrained, and his vulnerable body is entirely exposed to the others’ will, just like a newborn’s, whose “survival is dependent on what we might call a social network of hands” (Butler, *Precarious* 14). Jacobus continues: “Gentle hands raised me till I was sitting. ... I realised that, sick with who knows what fever, I had fallen into the hands of callous thieves ignorant of the very rudiments of medicine” (117). Yet, however hard he tries to portray the Namaquas

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12 Ironically, Jacobus will similarly abandon the ill Klawer on the way back home. He leaves food and water for his servant, just like, according to him, the San did in the case of the old woman. Although Jacobus promises Klawer that he will come back for him on horseback, he never actually tries to find the man afterwards.

as ignorant barbarians, Jacobus cannot deny the fact that caring, which he had thought to be the privileged attribute of white Christians, is also valued and practised by the natives of Namaqualand.

Moreover, it is Jacobus's own body that betrays him. A visible manifestation of his vulnerability is the carbuncle that appears on his left buttock in the last phase of his illness. Though the fever has gone, Jacobus seems to experience himself still as the all-seeing but unfeeling eyeball. Sight remains the only trustworthy sense, thus, to examine the carbuncle, Jacobus longs for a mirror and says: "I was teased by my inability to see it. How large was it? Only eyes could be trusted, for my fingertips refused to distinguish between their own sensation and the sensation of the skin they touched" (133, 137). Since the boil makes walking painful and riding impossible, Jacobus goes to the stream and, after a struggle, he succeeds in lancing it. Jacobus repeats his wish for a mirror later with the very same words, "I longed for a mirror" (133). This time, short of a stream, he dreams of a pool of water (149). Jacobus's tendency for boasting, his lack of empathy and his craving for a mirror all point towards the myth of Narcissus. The myth is relevant even more so since the carbuncle on his buttocks can be seen as a narcissistic wound. According to Butler, such a wound can open when one's physical vulnerability is put on public display (*Precarious* 7).

The body's illness uncovers the vulnerability shared by every living being, by the coloniser as well as the colonised. Jacobus's disembodiment can, therefore, be explained as a result of this uncomfortable realisation of similarity. By becoming the soul with wings or the spherical transparent eye, Jacobus disengages from his traitorous and confining body. Like Dawn, Jacobus does not perceive this disengagement or self-dehumanisation as a loss, but rather as a positive, liberating experience.

Nick Haslam's dual model of dehumanisation is a relevant source with regard to the self-dehumanisation as well as the dehumanisation of others in *Dusklands*, as mentioned before in the case of Jacobus and the San people. Although Haslam's work does not deal with corporeal characteristics, the body has a place in his concept of the human and may be listed among the HN (human nature—inborn) characteristics as defined by Haslam. This would mean that in Haslam's model, both Dawn and Jacobus are the subjects of mechanistic self-dehumanisation, since they wish to deprive themselves of their body, an inborn human characteristic. This is significant since Haslam points out that mechanistic dehumanisation is closely linked with empathy deficits and that it "may therefore index the extent to which people see no relatedness to others" (261–262). Research conducted by Demoulin

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et al. confirms that mechanistic self-dehumanisation is characterised, for instance, by coldness, numbness and “lack of emotional reaction” (270). Furthermore, I will argue that this mechanistic undercurrent is significant in the way the two narrators are trying to connect with others.

### RELATION TO THE OTHER

The rather positive attitude of Dawn and Jacobus towards losing their bodily vulnerability implies a negative influence on their relationships with the Other. By losing their supposed vulnerability, both Dawn and Jacobus become the “I” who lives among the others without reciprocity. The node where *Dusklands*, the body, and reciprocity meet is touch. The sense of touch has been the subject of debate since Aristotle, who wrote in *De Anima* that it is the most basic of the senses (373). French Enlightenment philosopher Étienne Bonnot de Condillac thought that touch is the most superior sense that is able to teach the other senses “to judge external objects” (283, 296, 449). Though Aristotle ranked touch at the lowest level in the hierarchy of the senses, he admitted that it is this sense that is most refined in the case of humans (*De Anima* 372, 428). Unlike Condillac, Aristotle did not identify the hand as the organ of touch, he argued instead that it is the flesh, “the most corporeal of all the sense-organs” (*Parts* 115), which is responsible for touch. The delicacy of human touch is, therefore, explained by the softness of human flesh which is, according to Aristotle, “the softest kind of flesh there is” (*Parts* 199). This view of the human flesh propounds an interesting correlation highlighted by Pascal Masie, namely, that “intelligence is proportioned to the degree of tactile sensibility in such a way that it is our *vulnerability* that accounts for our alleged superiority” (84, emphasis added). That touch is labelled as the most basic and primitive sense by Aristotle also means that it is the most necessary of all the senses, without which no animal can exist (*De Anima* 376, 533, 535).

Matthew Ratcliffe’s writings on touch, situatedness, and reality offer an approach in which both Aristotle’s and Condillac’s thoughts are reiterated to a certain degree. First, Ratcliffe acknowledges that the hand is often regarded as “the fovea of touch”; nevertheless, he cautions that its “tactical significance” should not be overstated (“Reality” 142).<sup>13</sup> In an Aristotelean vein, the essentiality of touch is stated as fol-

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13 The fovea is the region of the retina where the acuity of vision is the greatest (Lackie 1123). By borrowing a term from the eye’s anatomy, Ratcliffe points to and simultaneously questions the view that

lows: “Without vision or hearing, one would inhabit a very different experiential world, whereas one would not have a world at all without touch” (“Reality” 132). In addition, Ratcliffe comes to the same conclusion concerning the importance of touch in realising the outside world as Condillac did:

I want to maintain that tactual possibilities, along with the tactual background, are indispensable to a sense of reality and belonging—they connect us to things. The sense of reality presupposed by sight depends on them; without our experience of potential touch, what we see would not appear as “there.” (“Reality” 148)

In light of the relationship between touch and reality, Jacobus’s question during his transparent eye fantasy—“What is there that is not me?”—gains new meaning. It is not simply the haughty statement of the coloniser, but the ontological question of the self who only relies on sight. As Susan Gallagher sees it, the two novellas are connected by their exploration of “the common psychology of colonisation and oppression” and by the “ontological problem” Dawn and Jacobus share (51, 60). Touch is particularly undesirable for Jacobus since it presupposes belonging and closeness, while by sight, he can keep his distance. While he is waiting for Klauer to pack for the homeward journey, standing among the villagers, he says: “I am among you but I am not of you” (142).

Dawn expresses a similar condition: “during the past year relations between my own and other human bodies have changed” (24). Yet again, reciprocity, which, according to Ratcliffe, is “integral to touch” (“Reality” 134), is broken between Dawn, Jacobus, and their respective surroundings. One example of this brokenness is Dawn’s sexual relationship with his wife, or, as he calls it, his “sad connection with Marilyn” (20). Dawn says that, though he and Marilyn make love following the instructions of marriage manuals to the letter, the bliss described in the books eludes them (20). The reference to manuals evokes an image of machines being operated rather than bodies embracing. This image is reinforced by the use of mechanistic terms such as iron spine, sewer, or ducts. There is no mention of touching or sensations at all, Dawn withdraws into his mind and blames Marilyn’s disengagement for the failure. It does not cross Dawn’s mind that it might be his disengagement from his body that causes the problem; instead, he thinks: “The word which

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defines the hands as the sense organs of touch, similarly to the eyes being the sense organs of sight.



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at such moments flashes its tail across the heavens of my never quite extinguished consciousness is evacuation” (20). What really happens between Dawn and Marilyn is not touch, but “one object colliding with another” (Ratcliffe, “Situatedness”). It is Dawn’s disembodiment that prevents him from realising Marilyn’s body as a body through touch instead of perceiving it as a kind of mechanistic reproductive system. He is unable to connect, as his egg metaphor revealed at the very beginning of his narrative. Ratcliffe’s thoughts on the body as a “bounded object,” an egg, for instance, are especially relevant here:

Perception of the body as a discrete object with clear boundaries is, at the same time, a failure to perceive and engage with the world, a loss of connectedness. ... Many phenomenologically-minded psychiatrists have pointed out that this kind of predicament is characteristic of experiential pathologies such as schizophrenia ..., where diminished bodily affect is, at the same time, an object-like conspicuousness of the body. In conjunction with this, there is a lack of relatedness to the world, a failure of the body as a “feeling,” rather than “felt” entity and a consequent sense of unreality, estrangement and lack of practical belonging that pervades all experience. (“Situatedness”)

Dawn may not be diagnosed with schizophrenia in the end, but Ratcliffe’s thoughts add an interesting psychiatric layer to Dawn’s disembodiment, nonetheless. In light of his lack of connection with Marilyn, it is ironic that Dawn believes himself to be “a specialist of relations” just “like so many people of an intellectual cast” (63). It is Marilyn who realises connections, such as the one between the changes in Dawn’s attitude towards other human bodies and the twenty-four photographs of human bodies he carries in a paranoid manner with him everywhere. These pictures of Vietnamese people subjected to rape, starvation, imprisonment, or decapitation, and the consequent dreams and fantasies that haunt Dawn throughout the novella are the only actual link between him and Vietnam. What Dawn achieves by refusing the familiarisation tour to Vietnam and writing his report relying merely on the basis of the photos and introspection is the convenient distance from the Other and the fantasy of invulnerability. Watching a film about tiger cages on Hon Tre Island, Dawn praises his own prudence:

I applaud myself for having kept 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 ... these things belong to an irredeemable Vietnam in the world which only embarrasses and alienates me. (32–33)

The distance Dawn keeps from Vietnam protects him from being touched, both physically and emotionally, by the Vietnamese Other. In other words, Dawn is not exposed to the Other, he is invulnerable in a physical and emotional sense. By watching the film and constantly looking at the twenty-four photos, Dawn hovers over Vietnam like an all-seeing but unfeeling transparent eye. It is this imbalance in vulnerability, or lack of shared corporeal reality, that causes Dawn's indifference. According to Butler, "to be injured means that one has the chance to reflect upon injury, to find out the mechanisms of its distribution, to find out who else suffers from permeable borders, unexpected violence, dispossession, and fear, and in what ways" (*Precarious* xii). Dawn refuses this chance by refusing the journey to Vietnam. He is utterly unable to feel for the Other simply by looking at photos of rape or torture. To realise the vulnerability of the Other, a shared corporeal reality is needed that implies the ensemble of the senses working in concert. Sight alone is insufficient, as Butler puts it: "It is not only or exclusively the visual apprehension of a life that forms a necessary precondition for an understanding of the precariousness of life. Another life is taken in through all the senses" (*Frames* 51). Consequently, a "photo cannot restore integrity to the body it registers" (Butler, *Frames* 78).

The absence of the sense of bodily integrity is most prominent in the case of Dawn's second photograph, which depicts two American soldiers posing with three severed Vietnamese heads. These "trophies," says Dawn, were "taken from corpses or near-corpses" (32). Due, on the one hand, to the photo's insufficiency and, on the other, to his disengagement from his body, Dawn does not perceive the heads as body parts that belonged to a living human being. Bodily integrity is key to Cavarero's concept of horror: "for the being that knows itself irremediably singular," horror has to do with the unwatchability of disfigurement of the body and can best be described as an "instinctive disgust for a violence that, not content merely to kill because killing would be too little, aims to destroy uniqueness of the body, tearing at its constitutive vulnerability" (*Horrorism* 8). About decapitation, Cavarero writes: "it is not so much killing that is in question here but rather dehumanising and

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savaging the body as body, destroying it in its figural unity, sullyng it" (*Horrorism* 9). It is, however, not horror that the photograph evokes in Dawn but rather a perverse happiness. He finds severed heads ridiculous, and giggles at the picture (32). His reaction shows clearly that he lacks the precondition, namely, the sense of singularity and unity of his body, of apprehending horror. For the same reason, Jacobus is completely clueless as to why his biting off a child's ear is considered mutilation and such an unforgivable crime that he is banned from the village.

Interestingly, Dawn does not only enjoy looking at the photos but feels an irresistible urge to touch them as well: "On evenings when the sober edge of reality is sharpest, when my assembled props feel most like notions out of books ..., I find my hand creeping toward the briefcase" (31). Here, Dawn's hand seems to have its own will, proving again that his relation to his body is disconcerted. In addition, though it is a failed attempt, he tries asserting reality by touch. It is important to note that this kind of touch lacks reciprocity and is aggressive in nature. Dawn attempts to touch, or rather to penetrate the third photo in his collection (which is a still from the film already mentioned above), portraying a man in a tiger cage:

I close my eyes and pass my fingertips over the cool, odourless surface of the print. ... Everywhere its surface is the same. The glint in the eye, which in a moment luckily never to arrive will through the camera look into my eyes, is bland and opaque under my fingers, yielding no passage into the interior of this obscure but indubitable man. I keep exploring. Under the persistent pressure of my imagination, acute and morbid in the night, it may yet yield. (34)

Dominic Head calls this wish to touch "penetrative desire" that "plainly parallels the penetrative (yet paradoxical) desire of colonial domination" (40). Since the aim of this penetration has to do with domination and not reciprocal connection, it cannot be successful through touch. Dawn wants to touch the man in the picture without being touched himself. Drawing on Husserl, Richard Kearney notes that it is sight that "promises domination," while touch is the intersection "between me and all that is not me" (47). There are two other instances of failed touch in Dawn's story, and the key to both of them lies in domination and the inability to feel for the Other. Dawn is convinced that Marilyn cheats on him, which is why he spies on her through their bedroom window. The scene evokes the earlier

scene of Dawn flipping through his photographs: Dawn sees but is not seen, and Marilyn is framed by the window, the glass being the “cool, odourless surface.” He says: “My heart went out to her. I longed to stretch a hand through the glass” (60). Mentioning his heart, Dawn tries to stage this situation as an attempt for a feeling connection. However, when he goes on describing his dreams about people from his photographs, it becomes clear that he does not feel for the Other:

In euphoric gestures of liberation I stretch out my right hand. My fingers, expressive, full of meaning, full of love, close on their narrow shoulders, but close empty, as clutches have a way of doing in the empty dream-space of one’s head. I repeat the movement many times, the movement of love (open the chest, reach the arm) and discouragement (*empty hand, empty heart*). Grateful for the simple honesty of this dream but bored all the same by its moral treadmill, I drift in and out, drowning and waking. (60–61, emphasis added)

Though he finds the dream boring, Dawn realises that touch and empathy are related. Kearney summarises this as follows: “touch serves as the indispensable agency of intercorporality—and, by moral extension, empathy” (47).

Considering how stubbornly Jacobus wants to maintain the distance between himself and others and how uncomfortable Dawn feels when he has to be among other people, the question arises as to why they would want to be among and to interact with others at all. Dawn seems to be the happiest in the mornings when he is not disturbed by Marilyn or his son and can be creative; yet, when he runs away, he brings his son Martin along. Jacobus states proudly on the journey back home that he “was casting off attachments” (144). When he eventually leaves Klauer behind, he performs a dance, hugs and kicks the earth, and sings in his joy to be alone: “Every possible copula was enacted that could link the world to an elephant hunter armed with a bow and crazed with freedom after seventy days of watching eyes and listening ears” (147). He exclaims his love for God and everything in the world, but adds a strange request: “But God, don’t let them love me. I don’t like accomplices, God, I want to be alone” (147).

Jacobus’s monologue, besides being another instance of non-reciprocity in the novel, foreshadows Coetzee’s thoughts expressed in his Jerusalem Prize Acceptance Speech. In the speech, Coetzee claimed that the masters, that is, the white

settlers in Africa, had always expressed their excessive love only for the land—“what is least likely to respond to love”—but never for its people (*Doubling* 97). However, after the joyous speech about freedom and being alone, Jacobus says: “I longed for a mirror. Perhaps I would find a pool, a small limpid pool with a dark bed, in which I might stand, framed by the recomposing clouds, *see myself as others had seen me*” (149, emphasis added).<sup>14</sup> Eventually, he turns into the transparent eyeball wandering alone in the desert. Although this lonely state seems ideal for Jacobus, the absence of others results in self-doubt. What Jacobus really becomes is a “disembodied desire for self-reflection” (Butler, *Psychic* 35).<sup>15</sup> It is as Cavarero claims, that “already on the corporeal level, in so far as a unique being is concerned, identity depends upon the presence of others” (*Relating* 21). Lacking human relations, Jacobus needs a mirror to resolve his ontological uncertainty and assert himself.

Domination over the Other overrules reciprocal connection with the Other in terms of self-assertion. Neither Dawn nor Jacobus is capable of establishing reciprocal relationships, and for this reason, their only option remains dominance. Attwell argues that the two novellas are “coextensive in their quest for self-realisation through dominance” (*Politics* 35). According to Dawn, the Americans wanted to “love” the Vietnamese people, but due to the others’ disengagement, these hopes of the Americans were broken. Dawn’s explanation for the failure in his personal life (his unhappy connection to Marilyn) is repeated, now in a larger, political context. For their love, the Americans only asked for their recognition in return, but since the Vietnamese failed to provide them with that, the Americans had to extort acknowledgement from them: “We brought them our pliable selves, trembling on the edge of existence, and asked only that they acknowledge us. We brought with us weapons, the gun and its metaphors, the only copulas we knew between ourselves and our objects” (35). Similarly, Jacobus is convinced “that imperial violence is a desperate quest for ontological reassurance” (Head 40). Or, as Peter Knox-Shaw puts it, Jacobus views “his identity coterminous with that of the external world,” so that he needs violence as a means of “demonstrating his separateness” (117). After the massacre in the Namaqua village, Jacobus makes this claim: “through

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14 This is the second time Jacobus longs for a mirror to see himself. It can be seen as yet another sign of his narcissistic personality mentioned before.

15 The Hegelian thread emerges once again here. In Butler’s reading of Hegel, the master and slave have different relations to bodily life. While the slave “appears as an instrumental body,” the master “postures as a disembodied desire for self-reflection” (*Psychic* 35).

their deaths I, who after they had expelled me had wandered the desert like a pallid symbol, again asserted my reality” (163). Dawn and Jacobus both have the same selfish desire of obtaining self-reassurance behind their interactions with the Other. As a result, violence becomes the only way to get in touch with the Other, meaning that touch is reduced to violence—“surely a touch of the worst order” (Butler, *Precarious* 28)—in asserting reality.

It is telling that Jacobus, as a transparent eyeball deprived of all senses except sight, carries with himself a gun: “The gun stands for the hope that there exists that which is other than oneself. The gun is our last defence against isolation within the travelling sphere. The gun is our mediator with the world and therefore our saviour” (122). On the one hand, the gun can be seen as a metaphor for violence, thus the only way for Jacobus to reach out towards the world. On the other hand, it bars the chance of reciprocity. As a mechanical device, the gun is an ideal mediator for Jacobus, since, unlike a hand (generally a mediator), it does not expose its holder. The gun, in Dawn’s description quoted above, plays the same role. Furthermore, weapons are more successful in satisfying his penetrative desire than his fingertips. The bullets—“probes of reality” (35)—fired from the guns penetrate the bodies of the Vietnamese people. Another manifestation of this penetrative desire realised with a weapon is Dawn’s heinous crime of stabbing his son. This scene parallels the scene of Dawn’s failed attempt to penetrate the photograph: “Holding it like a pencil, I push the knife in. The child kicks and flails. ... The ball of my thumb still carries the memory of the skin popping. At first it resists the orthogonal pressure, even this child-skin. Then: pop” (73).

In both novellas, the reduction of touch to violence entails the replacement of hands with weapons. This replacement can be seen as an aftermath of Dawn’s and Jacobus’s mechanistic self-dehumanisation. Their hands, capable of touching but implying exposure and thus potential injury, are replaced with mechanistic devices ensuring invulnerability.

## CONCLUSION

The soul and body division is present in both novellas. While the soul, or spirit as it is sometimes referred to, is cherished, the body is perceived by the two main characters as burdensome and it exposes Dawn and Jacobus to pain. In the latter’s case, it reveals the uncomfortable truth about the similarity between European

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and African peoples. Therefore, both narrator characters are eager to escape their traitorous bodies in feverish dreams and fantasies. Since the body is undoubtedly an inborn characteristic of human beings, this disengagement from the body is interpreted as a particular type of mechanistic self-dehumanisation on the part of Dawn and Jacobus.

Given that this disembodiment grants the fantasy of invulnerability, Dawn and Jacobus experience it as something positive, even beneficial. However, this disengagement from their bodies affects their relationships with others and the world surrounding them significantly and negatively. Most importantly, neither Dawn nor Jacobus can develop reciprocal relationships with other people. They both realise, nevertheless, that the Other is necessary in asserting themselves. Hence, they establish one-directional, dominating relationships. Violence remains the only way for the twentieth-century mythographer and the eighteenth-century explorer to interact with others. Unlike the Namaqua people, who reach out with caring hands to cure Jacobus, the two narrators reach out with weapons towards the Other.

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