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The Politics of Gardening in J.M. Coetzee's *Life & Times of Michael K*

by
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In J.M. Coetzee's novel, *Life & Times of Michael K*, the main character, Michael K (shortened to K), identifies himself as a gardener. K is a simple man. He's belittled by his family for his cleft lip and slowness. He's a rather queer character and is also a person of color living in South Africa during a civil war. Needless to say, K is a marginalized person. It is imperative to view K's status and the state of unrest he's surrounded by as important context for K's gardening. So why does K garden and why is it so important? In this thesis, I investigate how K's gardening in *Life & Times of Michael K* acts as an intersectional form of political resistance to oppression, showing how its reflection of real world gardening serves as a political tactic. By using other creative texts and postcolonial ecocriticism, I position gardening as an act of resistance against social oppression through its fostering of beauty, hope, and culture. Gardening bridges the landscape with society; therefore gardening is a unique and profound vehicle for creating social and ecological change.

There are many texts that address garden-making, especially amongst marginalized communities. The phenomenon of gardening amongst marginalized communities is what this thesis is most engaged with. First, the character of K, as mentioned beforehand, is a disenfranchised character; he lacks class, able-bodied, race privilege. He had to get alternative education at Huis Norenus instead of at a normal public school which suggests he has an intellectual disability. A text that this thesis will return to is Rob Nixon's *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor*. In the introduction of this book, Nixon defines slow violence as "violence that occurs gradually and out of sight, a violence of delayed destruction" (2). Some examples of this are climate change, deforestation, and the toxic aftermaths of war. Nixon argues that slow violence is most prominently suffered by the poor (4). This thesis claims that gardening,

and K's gardening, counters slow violence in a form of slow resistance. If slow violence occurs "gradually out of sight," so does gardening, especially in a political context.

While slow violence directly targets land, this violence against the landscape then affects the people who live in areas with deforestation and soil erosion. Poverty is cyclical; it's both a symptom and a cause of environmental degradation. When thinking about land loss, poverty, and environmental degradation, it seems imperative to discuss the effects that colonialism has on a landscape. Gardening and cultivating distressed land works perfectly as a means to resist the violence perpetrated on land and people by colonialism. Gardening functions as a reclamation of land and resists the deeper narrative of violent territorial theft brought on by colonialism.

To locate slow resistance in a garden implies that there is a push against an alienated landscape. Gardening is synonymous with cultivation. What a gardener chooses to cultivate, whether it be indigenous plants, a vegetable garden, or a community garden, allows for that gardener to cultivate, grow, and create a relationship with plants and a landscape. In *Postcolonial Ecologies*, Elizabeth DeLoughrey and George B. Handley situate the common ground between postcolonialism and ecocriticism in the search for a different relationship to nature besides possession. DeLoughrey and Handley explain "we need to establish another relationship to alterity itself. Demanding an imagination of a totality and an otherness that nevertheless cannot be possessed marks the central common ground between ecocritical and postcolonial critique" (8). The attempt to possess 'others' in turn results in alienation.

Gardening rejects the notion of possession and preference. A garden necessitates collaboration between humans and nonhumans. DeLoughrey and Handley suggest that the central concern of postcolonial ecology is "the question of who can 'speak for nature' or speak for the subaltern subject in a narrative mode that does not privilege dualist thought or naturalize

the hierarchies between human and nonhuman” (25). For anyone who has attempted a garden, it’s evident that there exists no hierarchy between nonhuman and human in the garden.

Gardening is no simple task. Plants are not subordinate therefore in the garden there is a constant pull and push between gardener and garden. There exists no hierarchy since the nature of gardening requires the gardener to work with the plants, what they prefer, and what they need in order to produce the garden they desire.

In *Life & Times of Michael K*, Coetzee depicts different landscapes that suggest different relationships to the landscape and the nonhuman world. At the beginning of *Life & Times of Michael K*, K works as a gardener in Wynberg Park in Cape Town, South Africa. He works for the city and gardens within the confines of Wynberg Park, keeping the grounds looking good and polished for visitors of the park. This garden, or city park, contrasts a lot with the garden K creates later in the novel at the Visagies’ farm and the kind of garden K wants to live by. Wynberg Park has borders; it’s a park within confines. On the sidewalk, it’s a sidewalk, and where the grass grows, it’s a park. When K is beginning to grow his pumpkins, he thinks back on his time at Wynberg Park. K realizes that “he was no longer sure that he would choose green lawns and oak-trees to live among” (67). A New York Times article written by South African journalist Rose Moss titled “A World of Gardens in Cape Town” explains how oak trees and green lawns were both brought over by the Dutch during the time of the Dutch East India Company in South Africa. It makes sense that K, as an indigenous person of South Africa, wouldn’t feel a connection to the plants and lawns that were brought over by the early colonists of South Africa. Instead of living among oak trees and lawns, K thinks, “It is no longer the green and the brown that I want but the yellow and the red; not the wet but the dry; not the dark but the light; not the soft but the hard” (67). Here, K is letting readers know that he is becoming more

interested in the arid areas of the South African landscape, the dryness and hardness of it, instead of the lush and contrived landscape of Wynberg Park. Instead of separating the plants and wildlife from the day to day like at Wynberg Park, K is planning to integrate into the hard landscape of where he's living.

The concept of Wynberg Park in *Life & Times of Michael K* harkens back to the English pastoral. Wynberg Park is a mowed, cut, clean, and shaped to make humans feel comfortable and welcome in its 'natural' setting. However, this grooming of the landscape in no way makes for a 'natural' piece of land. Nixon suggests, "at the heart of English pastoral lies the idea of the nation as garden idyll, where neither labor nor violence intrudes" (245). The English pastoral then becomes a dangerous idea when thinking about the landscape. The pastoral blocks out violence and labor while simultaneously relying on the labor of individuals to remain an idyllic space for visitors. This seems similar to the concept of fences, borders, and Wynberg Park in the novel. The land of Wynberg Park is idyllic and forced; in K's words, the wetness of Wynberg Park is a forced ecosystem in South Africa, which is mainly desert. Wynberg Park features "green lawns and oak trees" (67), and these two plants, in their form deflect the violent past of colonialism that brought them over to Wynberg Park. Nixon calls this "environmental double-consciousness" (245), where the violent past of colonialism is shadowed by the tranquility of the English pastoral landscape. In turn, K doesn't embrace the environmental double-consciousness that Nixon suggests but instead creates his own environment, such as the 'hard' environment that he envisions for himself. If K were to embrace environmental double-consciousness, he would enjoy the oak trees and the grass of Wynberg Park but K's subconscious steers him away from the English pastoral aesthetic and towards the hard and dry landscape of South Africa.

K's lean towards the indigenous South African landscape reflects in the aesthetics of his garden. Unlike Wynberg Park, the pumpkins K grows are not in an enclosed area but growing free beneath and above the ground. They are straggly. When the pumpkins and their leaves begin to grow larger, L "spread[s] [veld] grass painstakingly over the vines" (105), which aids in their straggly aesthetic. This look is very different to the look of Wynberg Park, where all of the plants are manicured. K's garden by the dam is covered in prickly grasses and is messy. The messiness of his garden in comparison to Wynberg Park tells us that K that K's garden is not for spectacle but for something more political.

The messy garden for K is political because it exhibits no borders or boundaries. He's not dictating where the plants can grow and where they can't. Art historian Jill Casid wrote on gardening aesthetics in her book *Sowing Empire: Landscape and Colonization*. In this book, her chapter "Countercolonial Landscapes," mentions the importance of geometry and aesthetics is creating a garden that evokes resistance. This chapter focuses on the creole gardens of Caribbean slaves however these gardens have many similarities with K's garden. Casid suggests that "fluid, natural lines, assemblage, and intermixture characterize slave gardening...The planting of long avenues of trees and enclosing boundary lines materially imposed and signified imperial power in shaping patterns most immediately associated with European design" (201). Thus, the messy aesthetic of K's garden resists the lines and boundaries of European style gardens and on a microcosmic level resists European colonialism.

It may seem odd to view gardening as a political act. Perhaps the first thing that pops into one's head when they think of activism or social change is a protest. However, joining a protest requires a certain amount of privilege. A protest may imply a lot of different things that require privilege, such as taking work off, getting a babysitter, or able-bodiedness. There are other ways

to engage in activist behavior besides joining a protest. One example of this is creating socially engaged artwork. Another example of this, according to Alice Walker, is making a garden.

In Walker's essay, "In Search of Our Mother's Gardens," Walker discusses the problem of materials in creating artwork. Walker likens her mother's garden to a quilt she found in the Smithsonian Institution in Washington D.C. The quilt was made of rags and followed no particular pattern of quilting. The plaque next to the quilt read, "anonymous Black woman in Alabama, a hundred years ago" (407). Walker states that this 'anonymous Black woman' is a woman with a powerful imagination "who left her mark in the only materials she could afford, and in the only medium her position on society allowed her to use" (407). In this case, the quilt this woman made transcends gender roles, class privilege, and race privilege, and is a beautiful work of art that's now in a museum.

The same thing goes for the gardens that Walker's ancestors have created. Walker writes, "my mother adorned with flowers whatever shabby house we were forced to live in" (408). Even through displacement, poverty, racism, and sexism, Walker's mother was able to garden and create something beautiful. Although this may not seem like political activism at first, Walker's mother was resisting the systemic oppression that was placed upon her as a black woman living in the South. Walker describes that "even my memories of poverty are seen through a screen of blooms" (408), meaning that their poverty is transforming into something else. For Walker, the problems of being a marginalized member of society were, in a way, combatted or at least decentralized by the flowers and blooms that her mother grew outside of their house.

This garden that Walker describes is very similar to the garden we see in *Life & Times of Michael K*. Walker details the fact that although they perhaps couldn't read or write, they couldn't go out and leave the house to protest, they could in fact plant flowers and create beauty.

The same goes for K. Amidst the political climate present in the novel, is able to continue gardening at the Visagies' farm. Walker even says, "whatever rocky soil [her mother] landed on, she turned into a garden" (408). The rocky soil here reminds us of the rocky and hard soil that K talks about in comparison to Wynberg Park. This becomes a form of political resistance because although Walker's family and K alike are people of marginalized status, they are still able to create something. K and Walker's mothers are holding onto their creativity and their ability to foster life and hope through their gardens.

In Walker's *In Search of Our Mother's Gardens*, she emphasizes the intersectionality of gardening and the importance of materiality in creating memory. Her mother was able to garden even though they were women of color in the US South and very poor. It was the garden that attracted visitors to their house and it was the garden, or the 'screen of blooms,' that remains in Walker's memory when she was living in poverty. The notion of memory and intersectionality is very important when considering gardening as a political act. To return to K, he's a passive, weak, and queer character. He struggles to carry his mother, he's quiet, he's not aggressive at all, and doesn't have sexual or romantic feelings until the very end of the novel. Similar to the gardens of Walker's mother, K is able to foster an aesthetic that reflects himself; he's able to express himself through his garden. For Walker's mother, the aesthetic is a bountiful garden of flowers. For K, the aesthetic is rough, hard, and messy. Both of these gardens provide a voice, an aesthetic, and memory for otherwise silenced people.

In her Master's thesis, Meghan M. Posey similarly connects gardening to resistance, memory, and community-building in marginalized communities. For her thesis work, Posey traveled to Khayelitsha, the largest township in South Africa, where the aftermaths of apartheid still affect daily life and explored the different agencies of gardens here. Amid tensions of

violence, HIV/AIDS, poverty, and racial segregation, Posey found that in townships people tend to create gardens. This thesis explores what garden making in these townships provides for the residents and the positive effects of gardening on people.

Towards the end of Posey's thesis, she identifies five types of gardens. These five types are archetypal, subsistence, artisan, momentary, and imaginary. While all of these garden types are interesting, the imaginary garden seems most important and manifests in all the other types of gardens. In Posey's words, the imaginary garden is "evoked from memories of past gardens or hopes for future gardens" (97). We can also see that there were imaginary gardens mentioned in both Coetzee's *Life & Times of Michael K* and Walker's *In Search of Our Mother's Gardens*. K dreams of creating the 'dry' garden which exists in his imagination while Walker's mother's beautiful garden remains in her memory from her childhood. Posey explains that these imaginary gardens "promote forthcoming spaces [hope] and sustain cultural identity [home]" (97). In other words, by having gardens remain in people's minds as hopeful for something in the future or as a past experience and connection to the landscape, these imaginary gardens are promoting cultural identity from family and community and therefore resisting a landscape that is created by colonialism or violence. These gardens are working symbolically in the imagination as a beacon of hope or a positive memory for communities like the residents of Khayelitsha who are the victims of systemic violence.

Posey also discusses what it means to cultivate a garden. A garden, as mentioned before, isn't the work of just one factor or just one human planting seeds and fertilizing. To cultivate a garden implies planning, developing, nurturing, and dedicating time to the garden. Posey notes that the garden is a "tactic that township residents use to negotiate negative circumstances and promote the positive" (98). This relates back to the imaginary garden because even if the garden

doesn't exist tangibly, these imaginings of gardens are still actively promoting a positive landscape and life.

Khayelitsha, like many townships in South Africa, faces extreme environmental conditions. Most people don't have food security, the area doesn't have standard sanitation, and crime rates are very high. These exacerbated environmental conditions make it challenging for residents of Khayelitsha to live a healthy life, both physically and emotionally. Posey states in her thesis that "the creation of a garden—one that contains biotic life or symbols of life—has the capacity to address this void" (99). Since the township is so densely populated there isn't room for the natural landscape to grow around the residents. The apartheid state also deliberately avoided supplying trees, plants, and other greenery during the initial planning and construction of black townships. These gardens then substitute for the lack of a natural landscape and allow for the residents of Khayelitsha to connect with something living and that they created themselves.

In Khayelitsha, displacement is still problematic. While the South African government attempts to benefit the residents by moving them from shacks to government housing, they are still drawing people away from their neighborhoods and plopping them down somewhere new and unfamiliar. The constant moving and displacement of people in Khayelitsha is reflected in the way they create their gardens. According to Posey, the gardens are "constructed ad hoc, as space is available and materials and time allow" (107). Posey compares this style of gardening to gardening that is government-funded; she uses the example of Kirstenbosch Botanical Gardens. The botanical gardens are constructed from proper funding, land tenure, and long-term planning. All of the facets that go into creating the Kirstenbosch Botanical Gardens are not available to people gardening in Khayelitsha. The Khayelitsha gardens are tactical, not planned out and not

institutional while the Kirstenbosch Botanical Gardens are government approved and proper. The residents have no other choice because of their environment and uncertain political climate to pursue their daily life through tactics and the gardens that they create are tactical. They are tactically laying claim to the land by cultivating it and thus resisting displacement, violence, and environmental degradation through gardening.

Posey draws a similar comparison between the government funded Kirstenbosch Botanical Gardens and the gardens of Khayelitsha that Coetzee does in *Life & Times of Michael K*. However, Coetzee uses Wynberg Park as an example of properly funded, institutional, and planned out garden. The gardens that the disenfranchised residents of Khayelitsha create and the gardens of Michael K are both tactical gardens and political gardens because they are resisting oppressive structures by reclaiming the land and cultivating it into something that expresses culture. K's garden and the gardens of Khayelitsha are also both using the limited resources readily available to them to create their gardens which contributes to their tactical nature.

The displacement that the residents of Khayelitsha face is also mirrored in *Life & Times of Michael K* through K's constant displacement in the novel. K begins living in Cape Town and tries to leave to return his dying mother to her hometown of Prince Albert although he's detained along the way after his mother dies since he doesn't have a travel permit. K is forced to live in a work camp laying track for the railroad. After this, K heads to the farm his mother spoke of living on in Prince Albert and lives here until the real owner comes and starts to treat him like a servant, forcing him to run away and go live in the mountains. While living on his own, K wanders into a town and is then picked up again by the police to live at a work camp. These workers are exploited for cheap labor and K decides to escape this camp. He leaves to go live back on the farm in hiding, and restart his secret garden, but is discovered by soldiers who

hospitalize him. At the hospital, he has to escape again. We can see that same displacement that the people of Khayelitsha face in how K's life plays out over the course of the novel. This similar displacement allows for us to view K's garden as tactical just like the residents of Khayelitsha's gardens.

K cultivates a garden at the farm his mother claims to have grown up at. He grows pumpkins and mealies and covers them in the coarse grass he finds around them. This garden is not planned out, there are no borders or straight lines, and is not pristine or clean in any way. Although K grows these pumpkins and mealies, he doesn't eat them. This diverts our attention from gardening as cultivation or gardening as an affordable way to survive since K isn't interested in gardening as food or fuel. Instead, this brings us to the complex take on futurity that K explores throughout the novel. If someone else was in K's position, they might take up gardening to produce food so they can survive and be nourished by the food. Survival and sustenance in this case is the futurity of many gardens. For K, the simple notion of gardening to feed oneself is complicated by his refusal to eat the pumpkins and mealies he grows. And not only does K complicate futurity in his refusal to eat, but he also says early on in the novel that he's uninterested in having children (104). Here, the future of his family line ends. Until the very last line of the novel, K is uninterested in having any future at all.

The notion of futurity is linked to K's ideas regarding property and possession. K is always searching for the nomadic lifestyle of living off the land. While he's away laying track for the railways, he rejects the food the company provides for him, then finally steals some food from a feeding trough by a dam. K crosses over a fence in order to enter a veld and sleeps here overnight after finishing up laying track. After sleeping overnight in this veld, he's rudely awakened by an old man in an army coat. The novel states that "with strange vehemence the old

man warned him off the land” (46). Since *Life & Times of Michael K* is written in a free indirect style we know that this is coming from K’s perspective even though it’s in third person.

Therefore, in K’s mind, the old man exhibits a “strange vehemence” for someone intruding on ‘his’ land. Also, note, that this line above doesn’t say “his land” but instead says “the land.” This line here shows us a lot about how K doesn’t understand the notion of land ownership. Not only does K disregard the fence at first to enter the veld and sleep there, but after the old man directs him away from the area, he reenters later and takes some food from a feeding trough in the veld. This means that not only does possession of land not apply to K but it also means that possession of food also doesn’t adhere to K.

Fences, ownership, property, and possession all tend to come along with violent imagery in *Life & Times of Michael K*. When K crossed the fence into the veld, K was “awoken roughly” (46) and the old man “waved him off” (46). A few pages later, K is walking around Prince Albert and details what he sees; “he passed fenced gardens. A pair of liver-coloured dogs galloped up and down inside a fence baying, eager to get at him” (49). Here, the fence serves as a direct reminder of apartheid, since these aggressive dogs on the other side were likely bred during apartheid to attack people of color and rebels of apartheid while the system was still institutionalized. These dogs are eager to eat K because he’s a man of color—and a potential trespasser.

This scene of K noticing the dogs on the other side of the fence brings his colored status into the discussion of fences. What do fences do? They simultaneously create borders for land ownership and keep the unwanted things out of their land. This is problematic for K since he doesn’t own land but identifies as a gardener; a role that’s embedded in land. K claims, “I am a gardener...because that is my nature” (59). Now if we remember the land that K eventually does

cultivate on, it's not his land either. It's on the Visagies' farm that he illegally begins to grow pumpkins and mealies. K is constantly trespassing and reclaiming space and time by gardening on land that is owned by either individuals or the South African government. He states, "It is God's earth...I am not a thief" (39). Again, this means that K's gardens are tactical in a way that he's not even given land to cultivate but instead decides that it's his duty, nature, and divine right to cultivate the land.

Fences have a particular significance for white settlers in South Africa. In Sally-Ann Murray's essay, "The Idea of Gardening," Murray discusses how white settlers in South Africa are flung into a landscape that is completely alienating to them. In her paper, she mentions some of Coetzee's early writing, emphasizing anxieties of belonging in settler culture:

Coetzee draws attention to settler identifications with indigeneity as a "projection of consciousness into the alien: into the African himself, into the African fauna or landscape" (1984, 74). While the idea is meant to be that settlers struggle to compensate for the alienation of their environment, the term 'projection' awkwardly represents the colonizers' cultural authority as coherent and assertive, with none of the gaps, inconsistencies, failures, and clumsy splices of situation, action, and belief that scholars have come to acknowledge as the unexpressed underside of colonialism. (57)

This quote unpacks a lot that the man behind the fence may be experiencing in *Life & Times of Michael K*. Here, Murray calls attention to Coetzee's struggles in the alienating landscape of South Africa but shows how his lexicon still evokes a colonialist mentality, "projecting" ideas

and consciousness onto a landscape. Later, in Coetzee's *White Writing* (1988) he would redefine this role of a settler in South Africa in less colonial terms suggesting that as a white man in South Africa, Coetzee searches for more of a reciprocity and dialogue with Africa that will allow him a better identity than stranger or transient (57). In *Life & Times of Michael K*, the man behind the fence is projecting his own consciousness onto the landscape. His consciousness is defined by his fear that something unwanted—something “out of place”—will stumble onto his land and ruin it in some way. K, obviously, doesn't feel this way at all and skips over the fence whimsically. K resists the projections of settler consciousness onto the South African landscape by disregarding symbols and markers of their consciousness, like fences, and continuing on with his own treatment of his landscape.

K's rejection of fences and property ownership is not a conscious decision that he makes. K dismisses fences by trespassing through them throughout the novel as mentioned before. There is another scene where K is starting to rebuild his garden near the dam and before getting started he must pull fenceposts out of the ground (100). A farmer tells K, “There will always be a need for good fencers in this country, no matter what” (95). In other words, South Africa in the novel will always need to keep certain things out of certain places. K's resistance to fences occurs instinctively for him. We never read about him thinking about a fence but simply see the action of K hopping over a fence or pulling fenceposts out of the ground.

K doesn't actively resist his marginalization or systems of oppression through the novel. K seems to have a small sense of his social status but never discusses it. K also doesn't know much about the political climate of South Africa throughout the novel or historically. While being kept a prisoner in the labor camp Jakkalsdrif, K asks a nurse, “Tell me, I have always wanted to know, who is Prince Albert?...And who is Prince Alfred? Isn't there a Prince Alfred

too?" (70-71). These questions that K asks the nurse tell us that K is ignorant to the English colonization of South Africa. If K doesn't know who Prince Albert is then we may also assume that he doesn't know the history of how oak trees came over to South Africa as well. Since K is so unaware of the why's and how's of the violence perpetrated against him throughout the novel, we may also assume that K isn't conscious of how his gardening resists the powers of colonialism and land theft.

Although K doesn't view his gardening and role as a gardener as something that actively resists systems of oppression and the oppressive South African government, he views gardening as a necessary duty. When soldiers have arrived at the farm where K gardens towards the end of the novel, K remains in hiding. While K is in hiding, he thinks to himself,

K knew that he would not crawl out and stand up and cross from darkness into firelight to announce himself. He even knew the reason why: because enough men had gone off to war saying the time for gardening was when the war was over; whereas there must be men to stay behind and keep gardening alive, or at least the idea of gardening; because once that cord was broken, the earth would grow hard and forget her children. That was why. (109)

In this passage, K informs us that he is tactically gardening. He's gardening to 'keep gardening alive' and make sure that the earth doesn't become completely dry and forget that the earth has created so much. The soldiers whom K is hiding from have forgotten that they are the earth's children since they're participating in the civil war. War being one of Nixon's main examples of what causes environmental degradation. Also, the soldiers allow their donkeys to ruin K's crops while he's gardening by the dam and the soldiers are trying to find him (106). The donkeys destroying the crops demonstrates that the soldiers have forgotten that plants are necessary for a

thriving environment, ecosystem, and economy. K understands the affiliation that humans have with land and fights to keep the attachment to earth. The use of “cord” in this passage reinstates the mother/child imagery of this passage. This cord, reminiscent of an umbilical cord, suggests that once we break that cord we will be out alone on the earth without her protection anymore, much like when the umbilical cord is broken after giving birth to a child.

The soldiers, in this case, view culture and nature as mutually exclusive, whereas to K, culture and nature are indistinguishable. K criticizes the white soldiers and their culture of hunting when soldiers are looking for him near the dam. As K is being looked for, he thinks to himself of the people looking for and questions what if they’re the kind of soldiers who came “to shoot the goats for sport, hefty men who would hold their sides laughing at my pathetic tricks” (106). Here, the soldiers culture is killing the goats and laughing at K’s garden, while K’s culture is cultivating the earth and letting the goat roam free. As environmental historian and philosopher Carolyn Merchant shows, “at the root of the identification of women and animality with a lower form of human life lies the distinction between nature and culture” (143). In this case, ‘culture’ to Merchant is dominant, masculine culture. In *Life & Times of Michael K*, this normative culture is represented by the white soldiers. Merchant continues, “nature-culture dualism is a key factor in Western civilization’s advance at the expense of nature...European culture increasingly set itself above and apart from all that was symbolized as nature” (143). Merchant describes how European ideology puts itself above nature or anything that may represent nature. This ideology then allowed for Europeans to view nature as something that can be ordered. The passage above from *Life & Times of Michael K* acts as a warning to this ideological approach. For example, if we continue to order nature, then we will have no more resources to thrive off of.

K never conquers nature but instead works alongside nature. As we've discussed earlier, K's work with nature comes out in the aesthetics of his gardens versus the aesthetics of Wynberg Park. For K, his garden lets nature take its toll in whatever shape or form nature desires. K's lack of ability to separate nature from culture also reflects in his queerness. K queers many societal norms throughout the novel: he prefers to be homeless to living in a camp, he doesn't eat the food he grows in his garden, and he doesn't want children. K seems to have no connection with or idea about normative social culture brought over and instated by the white settlers to South Africa. British culture would ideally have homeless people living and working for the government in a place like Jakkalsdrif instead of living off the land. And British culture promotes having children with a spouse. K ignores all of these societal constraints brought on by the British and his ignorance of these social restrictions surface in the treatment of his garden. K is able to not only resist the marginalization of his status brought on to him by birth by gardening, but he is also able to resist normative culture by gardening and living on the land instead of in government housing or back in Cape Town.

The fact that K resists this culture that oppresses him and creates his own queer culture against it points in the direction of queer futurity. Throughout the novel, especially in the beginning, K doesn't see his life having a future but at the end, he does. He sees his future as gardening and living simultaneously with the South African landscape. Perhaps, at the beginning of *Life & Times of Michael K*, K hadn't figured out his future yet, or realized that he has a future even if it's not the same as everyone else's. K's queer mentality and queer future demonstrate his nonconformity to British colonialism. By refusing to have children and refusing purchase land, K creates his own queer future. He will not be producing children to work in the camps for when

he's too old and he won't be taxed for the land he owns. Instead, he finds a way to live without government interference and without oppression from the government.

K's queer futurity lends itself to a different kind of sense. He isn't contributing to the community or to the economy but he's satisfying his own personal needs on a more spiritual and emotional level rather than physical. His ideal way of living his life doesn't benefit anyone on a larger scale. He's not only living for himself, but he's also living in disorder. Disorderly life is quite the antithesis of British colonialism and culture. In Jamaica Kincaid's gardening book, *My Garden (Book)*, Kincaid discusses how Christopher Columbus came over to the Americas. She writes, "If only he had really reached Japan or China—for him places like that already had an established narrative" (156). Here, Kincaid is discussing how at the time when Columbus came over to the Americas, Japan and China had already been visited by Marco Polo and Marco Polo established a narrative that was comforting to Columbus about that region. When Columbus reached the Americas, he wasn't comforted with a narrative. Without that narrative, the place had no order to Columbus. This reminds me of the DeLoughrey quote from the Introduction to *Postcolonial Ecologies* mentioned earlier in this essay where we learn that Western civilization needs to rethink the notion of human and nonhuman as being mutually exclusive. To Columbus, nature needed to be conquered and possessed. K has discovered through his gardening practice that nature can't be possessed but instead, K develops another relationship to his garden that trying to control it. K lets his garden unfurl and dominate the area it's given as K stands by passively watering the garden. Columbus on the other hand didn't allow the Americas to unfurl around him but instead found it necessary to possess the land he arrived on. To Columbus, possessing land is a practical way of going about creating a relationship to land. K doesn't see the potential benefits it has for him economically to commodify his garden and mass produce

pumpkins, for example. Columbus does see the benefits for bringing home to his sponsors a bunch of natural resources from the Americas.

Life & Times of Michael K uniquely addresses gardening and its role and relationship in human life. Coetzee masterfully gives this role of gardener to the fascinating character of Michael K and allows readers the possibility to wonder what Michael K's motives are or if he has any. Michael K seems to be a perfect vehicle for this novel and its multiplicity because Michael K is such a simple man that readers are able to hypothesize many different ideas and concepts regarding why K goes about his life the way he does. K is clearly marginalized in his society, which makes for an interesting story of someone coming from not much but deciding to stay living a very simple life without things or even a house.

K is able to resist the systems of oppression that oppressed him throughout his whole life by gardening. K may or may not be conscious of his resistance but he's doing it no matter what. K's political resistance is demonstrated in the novel by his refusal to allow resources to go to waste. He combats Rob Nixon's definition of slow violence of environmental degradation by gardening and giving back to the earth that's been a stage for a civil war for an unknown amount of years through his own form of slow resistance. K is also a political figure because of his tactical gardens. He gardens even though he's constantly pushed out of his own space and gardens on other people's land as well. His sense of resourcefulness also allows his gardens to be seen as tactical spaces. K doesn't adhere to fences or other borders that keep him out of his own landscape. Fences create borders and possession of land and K refuses to believe that land can be possessed by any one human being. Gardening also resists intersectionalities that are road blocks for many other people to go out and create. K is able to garden even though he is a marginalized figure in society because it is accessible.

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