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Political Queerness against Reproductive Futurism in J. M. Coetzee's

*Life and Times of Michael K.*¹

J. M. Coetzee won the Booker Prize for the novel *Life and Times of Michael K.* Written in 1983, heaps of literary analyses have been produced on Coetzee's text. A sizeable chunk of this analysis has been written by Derek Attridge, who asks the question about *Life and Times* that this paper will explore: "what it is that grips and compels us as we read, producing an experience, disturbing and pleasurable at the same time, of new possibilities at the very limits of our habitual thoughts and feelings" (49). In other words, this novel is strange, and how can our analysis of it respond to this? On the face of it, the novel is relatively simple; Michael is a "coloured male" living in the riotous South Africa of Apartheid when the riots turn to civil war. Michael takes his mother out of Cape Town to the veld where she dies, and he wanders in and out of camps designed to imprison possible enemies of the state (non-Afrikaners). The end of the novel is anti-climactic – he returns to his mother's apartment in Cape Town to die. Simple, circuitous, mundane even if we shed our abhorrence of war. In fact, the futility and simplicity of the plot reflects precisely what is interesting about the novel.

To ask another exegetical question: what is queer about the novel? South African social critique Tim Trengrove Jones notes the puzzling lack of attention to the queerness in Coetzee's

¹ This work would not have been possible without the patient and insightful advising of Dr. Sarah L. Lincoln. Special thanks to Brenna "Blaze" White for her writerly insights, Marshall Scheider for his thoughts, Dr. Brenda Glascott and the community at Portland State's Honors College for their support, and Amber Manning for everything else.

novels in South Africa. He critiques the reception of one of Coetzee's later novels *Disgrace*, "not one of the reviewers for the major South African newspapers thought it necessary to mention that the protagonist's daughter in J. M. Coetzee's latest novel and last year's Booker Prize winner, *Disgrace* (1999), is a lesbian. Equally telling--and cultural and economic reasons are no doubt responsible--there is virtually no writing by or about Black gays and lesbians" (Jones 119). Michael may not be clearly "gay" or "black" under the racializing schema of apartheid, but Jones's critique of the response to *Disgrace* also applies to *Life and Times of Michael K.* Few notice in the heaps of analyses of *Life and Times* that Michael may be queer (Sarah L. Lincoln is the only one I know of). And back to Attridge's question, how does thinking of Michael as queer explore new possibilities of thought outside our habitual thinking? Queerness is, I argue, an overlooked but foundational concept which Michael should be understood. After all, Michael contemplates sleeping with a man--"They could share a bed tonight, it had been done before" (Coetzee 183). Scholarly inquiry into the novel leaves this question by the wayside, and certainly reviews of the novel left Michael's propositional physical intimacy with a man safely in their blind spots. The interesting issue is not whether Michael is "gay" (how could we prove it?), but how his proposed queer intimacy marks other salient features of the novel for revised thinking and insight.

All this said, *Life and Times* is a novel intensely interested in politics, so Michael's queerness must be made political. Lee Edelman in *No Future* (2004) and Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri's *Commonwealth* will lay the theoretical groundwork required to understand Michael as queer and radical. Michael's characterization in *Life and Times of Michael K.* as queer before heteropatriarchal ideologies figures a resistance to forms of state power that function via what Edelman formulates as "reproductive futurism." Meanwhile, as Michael

interacts with bureaucrats and others, his incomprehensibility to those characters conjures momentary, *à la* Hardt and Negri, “biopolitical event[s]” while his unclassifiable sexual identity undermines the logic that the biopolitical event must assail. Special attention will be given to this theoretical foundation before a close reading of the text will find these theoretical concepts in the text. Further, Achille Mbembe’s theories on state power specify the logics of biopolitics in the postcolonial state portrayed in the novel, and reveal that Michael’s queerness conjures the biopolitical event in spaces designed to produce docility.

The Queer Biopolitical Event

The politics espoused by bureaucrats in the novel reveal a bias towards what Lee Edelman in *No Future* calls “reproductive futurity.” This model for interpreting *Life and Times* requires much thought to explain and make meaningful in the historical context of South Africa. Edelman, at this point in his career, argues that reproductive futurity contours and underwrites American political discourse and thus enshrines heteronormativity in its politics and policy. The important character in this story is the unassailable figure of the child, herself the product of heterosexual desire. He writes that, “the Child invariably shapes the logic within which the political itself must be thought” (Edelman 2). The “Child,” then, is the stand-in for the future for which political debate makes its implicit resolution: make a better world for them. This becomes a bias for Edelman, specifically a bias towards heterosexual relations. He continues, and coins reproductive futurism, “That logic compels us [...] to submit to the framing of the political debate – and, indeed, of the political field – as defined by the terms of what this book describes as reproductive futurism” (Edelman 2). Reproductive futurism is the frame by which political thought is ordered. Edelman problematizes reproductive futurism for its implicit affirmation of

reproductive forms of desire. Since only heterosexual intercourse can produce a child (can produce a “future”), the political frame has no space for queer sexual practices.

Edelman, writing from a Lacanian foundation, sees desire in politics as a desire for the future which privileges heteronormativity. This desire arises out of a constitutive lack. That is, they both are determined by the disconnect between our signification and what we hope to signify, or the Imaginary. Edelman describes this disconnect as “this structural inability of the subject to merge with the self for which it sees itself as a signifier in the eyes of the Other [...]” (8). In other words, we always lack ourselves. This process is ongoing and demonstrates why individuals who feel this disconnect between signification and selfhood (everyone) have formed a politics with a bias towards the future. The future is where the self-will, finally, become signified. Though this is futile, this political investment makes heteronormativity its guiding star, because the Child signifies the “telos of the social order.” Politics treats the Child as “the one for whom that order is held in perpetual trust” (11). All political action, then, strives for self-actualization for future individuals. The consequent of this situation, fine as it sounds, is that queer individuals come to signify “the negativity opposed to every form of social viability” (9). That is, what is queer signifies the death drive. Politics, then is always negating the death drive and “preserving in the process the absolute privilege of heteronormativity by rendering unthinkable, [...] the possibility of a queer resistance to this organizing principle of communal relations” (Edelman 2). Political anxiety towards the queer as against the future self-actualization, signified by the Child and the community’s responsibilities towards it, means that heteronormative modes of thinking are preserved ad infinitum.

In *Life and Times*, such heteronormative bias in politics is present as reproductive futurism. As both queer sexually, and queer in that he elicits a persistent opposition to the

political bias towards reproductive futurism, Michael figures a radical possibility of resistance that must firstly be queer. Michael's radical, political potential – his “queer resistance” – lies in his resistance not merely to institutions that commit violence, but to the foundation of traditional politics upon which its violent actions are perpetrated. He struggles against the confines of traditional political discourse. As Laura Wright puts it when speaking about the main character in Coetzee's *Waiting for the Barbarians* as well as Michael, “They are held against their wills, within a framework that [...] will not allow for either character to exist outside of the binary structures that designate acts of refusal as subversive, dangerous, and deeply suspicious” (74). In these binary structures, hope would need to be fabricated by individuals and authors with no hope in reality. Rather than fabricate a hope-filled narrative, the novel presents an individual resistant to these binary structures. These binary structures are as follows: passive defeat and active resistance, passive indifference to ecological destruction and active disruption, passive non-queerness and active queerness. Michael's radicality presents as *passive* resistance, *passive* disruption of ecological destruction, and *passive* queerness. If politics, generally, places action into one side of all three binaries, K innovates on this tendency by exploding and imploding the binary terminology that sets the terms of a politics that fails to succeed at the goals of active politics. And these goals are the traditional, utopian goals of active resistance, active ecological protection and active queerness. Hopeful politics falls squarely in the realm of active politics, and a politics invested in the future or the Utopia of dreamy activism rests on faulty footing. As far as politics uses the confines of these binaries to perpetuate itself as it is, a political system's power (its apparatus and techniques) exerts controls to bring the eventual reality that these binaries rest upon to perpetuity. Thus when Michael resists power, he disregards or overcomes the political system's exertion of power, at least insofar as this power utilizes heteronormativity.

And this normativity includes an investment in a utopian future; Michael cannot articulate or defend a utopian vision without curtailing precisely what makes him radical.

Though reproductive futurity provides the conceptual basis upon which Michael disrupts and his actions may be better understood as meaningful, Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri shed light on the radicality of queerness to this political situation. Lee Edelman, to reiterate, argues along psychoanalytical lines that “the possibility of a queer resistance” is rendered unthinkable by an endemic “reproductive futurism” (Edelman 2). In his formulation, the unrecognized bias of politics is its investment in the figure of the child (what Wright would call “hope”). Hardt and Negri theorize what this can do to heteronormative political systems. They begin by identifying a “minor current” in Foucault’s writing on biopower, which “insists on life as resistance, an other power of life that strives toward an alternate existence” (Hardt and Negri 57). Of note for our purposes is that they go on to metastasize this power of life into the “biopolitical event.” Understanding this requires understanding the relation of this “event” to history and truth – also identity and subjectivity’s relation to biopolitics. By event, Hardt and Negri differentiate their concept from Alain Badiou’s conception of the “event” in that their event is productive rather than a looking backwards towards history (60). This “event” is not merely an occurrence – like the French Revolution for example – that drastically changed the ways that (Western in this example) people lived their lives in retrospect. Rather, it is a productive happening that links truth to living in history, and therein gives history its (true) meaning while also revealing history to be anything but linear and determinate (60). This is significant in and of itself, but the biopolitical event must also be queer since biopolitics requires identities and their known brands of subjectivities to exert itself: “The biopolitical event, *is always a queer event*, a subversive process of subjectivization that, shattering ruling identities and norms, reveals the link between

power and freedom, and thereby inaugurates an alternative production of subjectivity” (62-63; my emphasis). The queer event, then, is truth-making phenomenon that pivots away from the falsehoods by which Foucauldian biopolitics controls the individuals and populations under its control. The subject is exposed to truth.

Hardt and Negri go on to hone-in their conception of “queer politics” as incorporating a radical critique of identity. This radical critique of identity is necessary because the subjectivity of individuals in a biopolitical regime is another way in which control is exerted. As such,

Queer politics may be, from this perspective, the most clearly revolutionary form of identity politics since, in the work of its most significant proponents [...] it links identity politics inextricably to a critique of identity. Queer politics, in other words, reveals the violences and subordinations of heteronormativity and homophobia along with other gender hierarchies, proposes projects to struggle against them, but at the same time seeks, often through processes of what Jose Munoz calls “disidentification,” to abolish (or at least destabilize or problematize) “the homosexual” as identity, as well as women, man, and other gender identities. (*Commonwealth* 335)

As the catalyst for the political event, queer politics allows for new subjectivities to form by resisting the gender hierarchies of traditional politics without pigeonholing these subjectivities into a known entity such as “the homosexual.” This pigeonholing, a form of identity production, is the link between freedom and power that Edelman underscores in his analysis of the gay, liberal response to the homosexual threat (Edelman 157n18). In other words, it is no freedom to have the United States government tell someone it is okay for a subject to have sex with a man or woman. It is an example of the government’s power to sanction sexual relations, tied with a reproductive argument (e.g. gay parents are just as good as straight parents) that neutralizes the

threat of queer sexual practice. Edelman, and Hardt and Negri, think that queerness reveals the violence inherent to heteronormativity as it underwrites this government's power, even if it allows individuals to practice sexuality how they might otherwise choose. This is because queerness, as Hardt and Negri deploy the term, can never be sanctioned by a heteronormative government or state.

Fleshing this out, Hardt and Negri drive the point home by tying the queering of identity to the biopolitical event. Quoting Jagose, they go on,

“Queer . . . is an identity category,” Annamarie Jagose argues, “that has no interest in consolidating or even stabilizing itself . . . [Q]ueer is less an identity than a critique of identity.” [...] Just as we have noted conceptual (and political) splits in other identity domains between nonrevolutionary and revolutionary streams, so too the fields of queer theory and queer politics are divided between advocacy projects that affirm queer as identity and propositions that wield queer as an anti-identity to undermine and abolish all gender identities and set in motion a series of becomings. (*Commonwealth* 335)

These becomings, simultaneous with the “biopolitical event,” are always a problem for traditional politics. In fact, traditional politics, at least insofar as it requires stable sexual and gender identities, cannot coexist with the biopolitical event. Thus it is always queer, and reproductive futurism, evidently tied to heteronormative biopolitical governmental power, is a marker for radicality wherever it is undermined.

Michael as Queer

Turning, now, to the novel, Michael is radically against the future in reproductive futurism. The biggest signifier for this reading of Michael is his death at the end of the novel, a consequent of his endemic fasting and idleness (Coezee 184). The significance of his death at the end of the

novel presents his political potential as what Edelman dubs “[...] unthinkable: the space outside the framework within politics as we know it appears and so outside the conflict of visions that share as their presupposition that the body politic must survive” (3). In other words, the radical alterity of queerness to traditional politics lies in its acceptance of social death (the death of the body politics). The child might die – or never be born. As such, the allegorical reading of Michael, were it queer, would remove the expectation that Michael must persist, but be willing to affirm social formations outside – and antithetical – to normal politics with its investments of futurity for the body politic.

Another explicit rejection of reproductive futurism in the novel comes earlier when Michael is in the rehabilitation center. The Medical Officer’s questions Michael after his intake, “Where is your stake in the future?” to which Michael replies with “a silence so dense that [the Medical Officer] heard it as a ringing in [his] ears” (140). This question is especially telling in that the Officer feels that such a question should, via its self-evident importance, spur Michael into action of some kind. Part of what makes Michael so perplexing to the Officer (which I will delve into momentarily), is his inability to be moved by such a monumental question. In the dearth of critical engagement with *Life and Times* as queer, Sarah L. Lincoln is one of few who note his queerness. She ascribes a negative potential to Michael’s death at the end of the novel (Lincoln 142). Figuring what she describes as Michael’s “fugitive ecology,” in keeping with Edelman’s insights on futurism and reproduction in politics, “Michael K’s association of reproduction with violence, accumulation, and environmental destruction marks him as a queer figure, an antisocial force of negativity, in Edelman’s terms” (140). I agree that Michael is a negative figure to socio-political norms often materialized as an investment in reproduction and

environmental destruction². He, presumably, does not know where his stake in the future is. At the same time, this does not mean that K is antisocial in all cases, and, rather, K figures a queer sociality. This in opposition to heteropatriarchal terms of the society he lives in, and endemic to the camps and Huis Norenius.

Michael engages in homosocial relationships, and imagines another, suggesting his hope for queer relationships (themselves forms of sociality), though he is unwilling to engage in normative relationships. By the end of the novel, K imagines forming an intimate social bond with “a little old man with a stoop and a bottle in his side pocket who muttered all the time into his beard” (Coetzee 183). Likewise he forms a passive bond with Robert in Jakkalsdrif and, though not social in the conventional sense, his mother; “he had been brought into the world to look after his mother” (Coetzee 7). Confoundingly, I admit, he seems ready to lend himself to the protection of children – when the police raid Jakkalsdrif, K tells a small girl to sit with him and she “stepped over his legs and stood within the protective circle of his arms sucking their thumbs [...] K closed his eyes” (90-91). He closes his eyes as if resigned to be the “protective” barrier between the children (the kid’s sister joins her next to K). This scene may seem to weaken my reading of Michael so far, but K does not ascribe any special importance to the children. Indeed his pumpkins are definitively more important for him later in the novel (113). Rather what this, and the other examples show, is Michael’s antisociality on the terms of heteropatriarchy. He is ready to engage in social relations, but not on normative terms. He does not comfort the children. He refuses to form a homosocial bond with the Visagie grandson “who had tried to turn him into

² The compatibility of an investment in reproductive futurism and masculine destruction of the environment is, admittedly, paradoxical.

a body-servant” (65). This because the proposed relation is traditional (hierarchical, racially inflected) rather than queer. But this requires more explanation.

Queer Biopolitics

Michael’s queerness attests to the social domain of power in *Life and Times*. As I discuss the camps, I argue that since biopower takes life as its object, it instantiates as a language of power in the postcolony. Thus queerness is necessary to resistance as Hardt and Negri argue. Indeed “when power becomes entirely biopolitical, the whole social body is comprised by power’s machine and developed in its virtuality [...] Power is thus expressed as a control that extends through the depths of the consciousnesses and bodies of the population – and at the same time across the entirety of social relations” (217). As far as the state apparatuses that Michael interacts with are biopolitical, his allegorical anti-futurity on Edelman’s terms, his non-heterosexual and non-heterosocial proclivities disrupt the power that expresses across social relations. In other words, the social implications of Michael’s sexual activity informs the body politic he, so I will argue, is queer to. Parallel to this is the persistent stupidity that Michael brings to interactions with individuals who exert power over him. The political power in the novel is biopolitical and necropolitical according to Michel Foucault and Achille Mbembe’s thinking. As such, his dumbness demonstrates the radical potential of queerness in the face of these forms of power – i.e. as uncomprehending or incomprehensible to the function of biopower/necropower.

Lingering on homosexuality, Michael exhibits a queerness in that he is potentially homosexual. Through Michael’s troubled relation to women on sexual terms, and in his imagination of a homosocial if not homosexual bond with the gruff old man, he occupies a *sexual* queerness antithetical to heteropatriarchy. When it comes to state and governmental power, heteropatriarchy appears in Mbembe’s conception of postcolonial power, a power he

dubs “phallocratic” (*On the Postcolony* 110). He clarifies this term regarding sexual practices of postcolonial rulers, “To exercise authority [in the postcolony] is, above all, to tire out the bodies of those under it [...] The male ruler’s pride in possessing an active penis has to be dramatized through sexual rights over subordinates, the keeping of concubines, and so on” (110). So, the normativities and ontologies belied by the coercive, heterosexual act reflect a heteropatriarchal foundation of power. This power is also biopolitical. Thus in Michael’s postcolonial context, his queer sexual orientation (loosely speaking) suggests that queerness is a modality of destabilizing the normativities of South African state power, and by extension that power itself.

There is good reason to think that heterosexuality and heteronormativity are enshrined in the laws of apartheid South Africa. From 1950 to 1970 there are clear legal markers that seek to police homosexual acts. The Immorality Amendment Act of 1950 amended the Immorality Act of 1927 “so as to prohibit illicit carnal intercourse between Europeans and non-Europeans” (Union of South Africa, No. 21 of 1950). Section 3 redefines “illicit carnal intercourse” for section 7, subsection (ii) of the Immortality Act of 1927: “‘illicit carnal intercourse’ means carnal intercourse other than between *husband and wife*” (Union of South Africa, Act 21 of 1950; *my emphasis*). Apartheid laws are always racially motivated, and the proscription against miscegenation should come as no surprise. As *South African History Online* (SAHO) write of a later version of the Act, “The Immorality Act of 1957 was one of the first pieces of legislation that tried to curb relationships between people; however the Immorality Act was only a component of a much larger, more oppressive scheme” (SOHA). But the near interjection of so broad a redefinition of illegal sex as any sex outside of marriage suggests the anxiety arising in the 1940s and 50s around homosexuality. Of course, the principle law is a prohibition against inter-race sex, but heteronormative conception of sex, here, bleed into the letter of the law. Later,

in 1957, the well known ‘Men at a party’ statute became law, of which SAHO write. This provision of the Act made it illegal for two men to be sexually intimate when another is present (Vincent and Howell 473). Meanwhile, in the Immorality Amendment Act of 1969, section 1 outlaws “unlawful [unmarried] carnal intercourse with a girl under the age of sixteen years” (Union of South Africa, Act No. 57 of 1969). At the same time, section 3 of that same act says that, “A male person who commits with another male person at a party an act which is calculated to stimulate sexual passion or to give sexual gratification, shall be guilty of an offence” (Union of South Africa, Act No. 57 of 1969). Apartheid lawmakers seem very preoccupied with sex. There is also a clear link between sexual predation and molestation with homosexual practices in the minds of the legislators. This is homophobic and, through the policing that this law is meant to affect, enshrines heterosexuality as the legal and just form of sex.

Michael’s only sexual encounter in the novel reveals a link between the sexual practice of December’s Cape Town and the heteropatriarchy evident in apartheid laws. Though including fellatio, the encounter is far from a phallogocentric act³ and Michael does little to participate in it. Rather the scene is staged as a way for heteropatriarchy (in the form of December) to introduce an economy of pleasure that seeks to take advantage of K’s sexual appetites. When he returns to Sea Point, Michael meets a man, December, himself a fugitive, and December gives Michael alcohol. A woman with December performs fellatio on Michael which he tries to prevent, “she was kneeling beside him fondling his penis. He pushed her hand away and tried to struggle to his feet [...]” (Coetzee 178). He is drunk and he “struggles” through his intoxication but ultimately resigns himself to the act. This does not mean he is exactly passive. Upon the beginning of the act, he wants to push her away but he will not touch “the stiff dead hair of the wig” on the young

³ Though fellatio is, admittedly, a traditionally phallogocentric act.

woman's head (178-179). K's lackluster endeavors to prevent their sexual intercourse are such in part because of the wig, uncanny not in its dead-ness exactly, but more because it is stiff and artificial. The hair is like the act itself, stiff and artificial, which is why it leaves him feeling ashamed – “the shame of the episode with the girl waiting like a shadow at the edge of his thoughts” (179). This shame comes from both tacitly accepting something he does not want and accepting something he will not repay. Indeed this scene seems like December's attempt to introduce Michael to an illicit community – which no doubt trades on women's bodies as well as expects Michael to do work in exchange for booze, sex, or whatever Michael desires. December attempts to sell Michael on the community, “Tonight I will come back and fetch you for the party I promised, where there will be plenty to eat and you will see how Sea Point lives” (179). The “plenty” and auspicious claim to membership in the “Sea Point” community are invitations for Michael to join it – and be subject to its rules. Rules that December evidently decides - already that word “fetch” which implies Michael is at December's behest. And this functions on an economy of desire, “You must not be afraid to say what you want, then you will get it” (179). The consumerist language “want” and “get” demonstrates the economy. K vehemently refuses this invitation, though in a characteristically non-confrontational way. He leaves the beach when he is December and the woman leave. This “Sea Point” community mirrors the heterosexual and heteronormative underpinnings of the larger political structure through which the war in the novel plays out. Sea Point is an example of the way in which biopolitical forms of power require normative sexual practice to function. Further, in this example, he is passive, and lacks a sexual appetite, so is queer to December's assumption that Michael desires phallogentric sex (literal in this scene).

Michael does not have heterosexual desire, partly evident from his shame upon receiving fellatio. K's persistent avoidance of women further evidences his intractability to power. If power in the postcolony requires a ruler to, spectacularly, display their (hetero)sexual activity, K is the opposite – he shies from this kind of sexuality, even, heterosocial relations in general. Throughout the novel he does not interact meaningfully with women (except his mother). Early in the novel, this is evident; “[b]ecause of his face K did not have women friends” (4). If friendship with women is out of the question, then sexual relations is as well (at least for K who does not demonstrate patriarchal attitudes towards women or misogyny in its sexual instantiations). Later he embraces this condition telling the Medical Officer “I am what I am. I was never a great one for the girls” (130). This pattern is no doubt due to his cleft palate, a condition that the Officer offers to correct, eliciting the above response from Michael. The Medical Officer wants to say, “never mind the girls, he would find it easier to get along if he could talk like everyone else” (130-131). Though he does not voice this thought to K, it demonstrates the relationship between sociality and heterosocial (if not heterosexual) expectations that underscores reproductive futurism. In other words, it is telling that Michael and the Medical Officer converge on the cleft palate from Michael's understanding of it in relation to women and the Medical Officer's understanding of it in relation to “get[ing] along,” living in the society. K's attitude towards women, in danger of being misinterpreted as misogyny, speaks further to K's queerness to the normativity he encounters.

Returning to the fantasy with the gruff old man, this fantasy imagines queer intimacy and queer sociality, and demonstrates Michael's productive queerness. This intimacy is closeness to a, presumably houseless, old man. Crucially, his fantasy is an attempt to “escape” control: “I have escaped the camps; perhaps, if I lie low, I will escape the charity too” (182). By charity,

Michael recalls December's "sister" who gives K fellatio – again, a commodity. The parallelism of the camps and the charity referred to imply they are similarly coercive (and of course both politics and sexuality are imbricated in each other). So, as K lays dying, he dares to imagine a situation away from both. He equivocates,

It did not seem impossible that whoever it was who disregarded the curfew and came when it suited him to sleep in this smelly corner (K imagined him as a little old man with a stoop and a bottle in his side pocket who muttered all the time into his beard, the kind of old man the police ignored) might be tired of life at the seaside and want to take a holiday in the country if he could find a guide who knew the roads. They could share a bed tonight, it had been done before. (183)

I quote at length to reveal the trepidation with which Michael approaches the idea of something he would like. "Not" and "impossible" construct a double negative. The "imagined" man "might" want a change, and only "if" Michael would come along. And not Michael exactly, but anyone who happened to have his knowledge, a contingent knowledge that Michael could not always boast. From his experience with December, and the biopolitical conscription to desire, he knows better than to want things. In addition, Michael welcomes an intimate experience with an old man with similar trepidation; he says they "could" sleep together and follows it up the defense "it had been done before." Through his imagination and desire for a non-patriarchal social arrangement, partly homosexual, Michael cautiously imagines an alternative relationship to intimate relations invested with reproductive futurism.

Queer Resistance to Biopolitics and War

I turn now to the more explicit ways that power exerts itself on Michael to suggest the ways he conjures biopolitical event(s). He experiences the camps as spaces where his life is made to be

productive, separated from (white) lives, and disposable. This can happen to him because of his racial category. Foucauldian biopolitics argues: power in the modern ages is a demographic power, a power that makes live and lets die through its dispositifs and knowledge/powers, what Foucault calls “mechanisms, techniques, and technologies of power” in “Society Must be Defended” (63). In that same March 17, 1997 lecture, Foucault goes on to argue that race creates caesuras in a population to expose one group to death (74). When it comes to the biopolitics of the novel, K is a victim of his racialization. Michael’s sporadic relegation to camp life is at least partially because he is a “CM,” i.e. a “Coloured Male” (Coetzee 70). Michael is a useful body in the eyes of the mechanisms of power that Foucault enumerates. For example, on the train work-gang and in Jakkalsdrif, Michael is expected to work in return for food and shelter as if he is a life machine that produces labor with the right input (Coetzee 42-43;86).

The primary focus of this power is life, and it targets the body. En face, Michael moves through a state at war, or a failed state if a state’s primary focus is to prevent civil war. Indeed, the camps – techniques of the political group in power – are generally spaces in which three things are made to happen to the population and individuals that reside there. The first is the creation of a docile group of physical laborers. In addition to the creation of this docile life, biopower also pushes K to a space in which “disposable” peoples are housed so they might be separate from the privileged population. Finally biopower (what others might call “necropower”) exposes those in these camps to death in the separate space. All these in tandem with the reproductive futurism of heterosexual biopolitics that Hardt and Negri articulate.

In one instance, the rehabilitation center is paradigmatic of the techniques enacted by the government. It emphasizes the capacity of the state to make live for its benefit – to make an individual a useful and docile body. Michael’s doctor envisions a plan for him after he is found

near his garden and forcibly relocated (and beaten): “He needs a graduated diet, gentle exercise, and physiotherapy, so that one day soon he can rejoin camp *life* and have a chance to march back and forth across the racetrack and shout slogans and salute the flag and practice digging holes and filling them again” (Coetzee 133; my emphasis). The doctor’s goal is to get Michael in fit enough shape to work and live accordingly in the space that it wants him (the camp), though the Medical officer seems less than sold on this plan. Foucault links such productivity to the dictates of biopower, “it centers on the body [...] and manipulates the body as a source of forces that have to be rendered both useful and docile” (69). The Medical Officer is mandated to make Michael a useful body. We gain insight into the kind of life the doctor grants his patients generally: one of moving in repetitive motions and submitting to the political power by shouting its praises and saluting its flag. Watching a propaganda video, the Medical officer sees that his government impels people to work in “labour battalions” and to march in military parades (Coetzee 134). And so both the Medical officer’s attempts to feed K to keep him alive and K’s confinement at the medical facility are part of the mechanism of biopower.

With this in mind, Achille Mbembe’s articulation of postcolonial power in *On the Postcolony* and “Necropolitics”⁴ further reveals the more explicitly controls that biopolitical systems of power utilize in the postcolonial context. Resonant with Foucault’s biopower, power in the postcolony is a power of “banality,” meaning routinized and, differing from Foucault,

⁴ South Africa, in 2019, would best be described as a postcolonial state, but during apartheid, it was still a colonial state. Thus utilizing theories of power that take their empirical evidence from postcolonial instances risks misapplying a framework to a given country. Mbembe’s theory of necropolitics draws directly from before the ANC’s rise to political supremacy (174). In *On the Postcolony*, the ambiguity of the reigning political power in a given camp credit a reading of the entire text as potentially postcolonial. In any case, Mbembe’s theory of the signs and vocabulary of postcolonial states applies to *Life and Times* insofar as these things are present in the text, if not specifically theorized for colonial rather than postcolonial states.

grotesque (*On the Postcolony* 102). This system “is a specific system of signs, a particular way of fabricating simulacra or re-forming stereotypes” (102) which is also multifarious and hegemonic:

The signs, vocabulary, and narratives that the *commandement* produces are meant not merely to be symbols; they are officially invested with a surplus of meanings that are not negotiable and that one is officially forbidden to depart from or challenge. To ensure that no such challenge takes place, the champions of state power invent entire constellations of ideas; they adopt a distinct set of cultural repertoires and powerfully evocative concepts; but they also resort, if necessary, to the systematic application of pain. (103; original emphasis).

This language is precisely what becomes negotiable for Michael in his queerness – he acquires a productive tendency to misunderstand or irrationally disregard the implicit threat in an utterance. Even as a last resort, pain does not deter him, and not because he is brave. Further Mbembe thinks South Africa a paradigmatic example of necropower’s “capacity to define who matters and who does not, who is *disposable* and who is not,” (“Necropolitics” 174). Thus what is at stake in his capitulation (or not) to the state is both an attack on his body and a relegation to the status of disposable and the horrors that this designation entails.

The occurrences at Jakkalsdrif locate the form of power for postcolonialism writ large in Mbembe’s work squarely within *Life and Times*. In Jakkalsdrif, Michael’s friend Robert tirades against the politics at work in the camp. Robert’s observations reveal the necropolitical nature of this camp i.e. its function to make the inhabitants disposable to the point that they can die without threatening the “life” of the population of Prince Albert. He theorizes that “They prefer it that we live because we look too terrible when we get sick and die. If we just grew thin and

turned into paper and then into ash and floated away, they wouldn't give a snuff for us," (Coetzee 88). By floating away, the refugees in the camp would not impede on the space of Prince Albert and thus not violate the separation of the space for the non-disposable and disposable. The two spaces are separated and remove, or move away, the sight of the sickly people. Since the camp is a space to "die," it is necropolitical. It becomes violent because the rationale for its presence is to merely prevent the "look" of sickly death, not provide a good life. Robert's speech also implies that a less sensational progression from living body to paper to ash to nothing may be the real function of Jakkalsdrif, a slow violence, an extermination. At the same time the inhabitants labor is useful; Robert describes how Oosthuizen, the brother of the captain of police, can summon the inhabitants of Jakkalsdrif to work whenever he wishes (Coetzee 87). Their bodies are at the behest of the police and their kin, so there is a productive aspect to the camp – a biopolitical aspect.

Meanwhile, once Jakkalsdrif comes under scrutiny for (supposedly) torching the police station at Prince Albert (the bodies are not as docile as they want), the postcolonial system of signs that underwrite the structure and functionality of the camp appear. The police captain displays it violently, "A nest of criminals! Criminals and saboteurs and idlers! [...] It's a work camp, man! It's a camp to teach lazy people to work! *Work!* And if they don't work we close the camp! We close it down and chase all these vagrants away!" (Coetzee 91) The overabundance of exclamation points demonstrates the hegemony of his ideas. The idea that the inhabitants of Jakkalsdrif are lazy and need to be taught to work strikes a chord with ideas that proliferate around the poor and are unquestioned and unquestionable in the scene. This displays the stereotyping language that characterizes a postcolonial regime of power. Further, the captain turns to the refugees, "You appreciate nothing! Who builds houses for you when you have

nowhere to live? Who gives you tents and blankets when you are shivering with cold? Who nurses you, who takes care of you, who comes here day after day with food? And how do you repay us? Well, from now on you can starve!” (91-92). The culprits of the fire at the police station are unknown, and very well may not live in Jakkalsdrif – indeed they probably do not – and hence the captain scapegoats the refugees here since they are disposable and, loosely, symbolically linked with terrorists or guerilla fighters on the other side of the civil war. Evidently, the right to refuse the humanitarian aid resides in the captain and is his (and the town’s) to bestow on the residents which is to be repaid with labor and docility. This a coordinated logic in the wartime setting that subtends the three poles upon which the camp functions: to cordon the population from the rest, to make them die far from sight, and make their physical labor available for use. The application of pain is readily used to assert this logic, the people of Jakkalsdrif are beaten in addition to being forced to live in the camp in the first place.

Given places in the text such as Jakkalsdrif, many critics of *Life and Times* have searched for a viable political stance against the kinds of untoward violence and power that feature so prominently in the novel. Indeed, with apartheid on the periphery of this novel from South Africa’s most decorated novelist, we expect a decidedly political stance against the state (presumably that of apartheid). Many still, such as Nadine Gordimer, criticize the novel on the grounds that such a political stance is nowhere sufficient (Gordimer, “The Idea of Gardening”). I, of course, agree with John Bolin when he problematizes the paradigm in which we evaluate literature in the realm of the political: a paradigm that looks for lessons that serve the counter-struggle or teach maxims to bolster the ideological surety of resistance (Bolin 345). On the one hand, the novel is intensely political rather than primarily literary and, on the other, resistant to

stereotypes of effective resistance strategies. I think Bolin would agree were I to profess both of our reservations about imposing a revolutionary/counter-revolutionary binary on literary evaluation of the novel even as we wholeheartedly support resistance to apartheid – or political repression wherever it exists.

As the reading of the camps and the systemic order in K's South Africa thus far suggest, were someone to oppose the political order they would likely condemn themselves to death. To this point, when Michael comes into contact with the external forces that may or do cause him pain, he exhibits a profound lack of common sense. This has implications for a destabilization of the symbolic structure upon which the postcolonial regime in *Life and Times* supports itself; in Bolin's words "the idiot retains the power to unsettle and provoke" (Bolin 345). I would add that Michael's muteness coupled with his idiocy makes him dumb, and this further facilitates his provocative and unsettling queerness insofar as it prevents him from participating in heteropatriarchal and biopolitical calls to power. This has the potential to facilitate the biopolitical event, especially given the symbolic and linguistic aspect of biopower and necropower in the postcolonial context.

Michael misunderstands the symbols of power and by interacting with bureaucrats, though he does not level an insightful critique, he affects a destabilization of the systems of power that work on him⁵. When Michael is stopped by a soldier, and the soldier robs him at gun point, Michael does something stupid: he questions the soldier's right to rob him. After his mom has died and he meanders towards Prince Albert, a soldier finds his mother's money in his briefcase, "K licked his lips. 'That's not my money,' he said thickly [...] 'What do you think the

⁵ This side-effect of his dumbness is necessarily grounds for a political stance or argument, just as the exposure of the function of modern power does not entail radical, humanitarian change. But extrapolated as a method of destabilization, it may be useful.

war is for?’ K said. ‘For taking other people’s money?’” (37). Since the soldier had stopped Michael by “pointing an automatic rifle at his heart,” questioning the soldier could get Michael killed (36). Further, Michael is not adept at speaking throughout the novel, and his decision to speak through his cleft palate, “thickly,” in this instance demonstrates his indignation but not his bravery. He speaks “thickly,” which both implies the scant chance of success in admonishing the soldier to prevent the robbery and the stupidity in wagering his life on the soldier’s shame. The rhetorical question destabilizes the logic upon which war entails a free-for-all for soldiers. This is evidenced by the soldier’s response – an attempt to regain the symbolic high ground: “Don’t you tell me about war” (37). Their interaction may not effect profound political change – we should not expect it to. Still, something less hopeful but still meaningful happens: “His eyes met K’s” (37). Deigning to meet K on symbolically equal footing, eye to eye, momentarily levels the power dynamic between K and the soldier. The symbolic logic is destabilized. This passes but the soldier must restate his dominance, as if it is in question, by patronizing K. He throws a ten-rand note on the ground and watches K pick it up (38).

The novel goes on to suggest that K’s queer misunderstandings can be a form of resistance. I said earlier that the Medical Officer is not totally sold on the rehabilitation he provides his prisoners. He finds in Michael an original, Christlike, resistance. This first ideates when the officer is made speechless by Michael, a mirroring of Michael’s muteness throughout the novel, “There was something more I had wanted to say, but I could not speak. It seemed foolish to argue with someone who looked at you as if from beyond the grave [...] Surrender. This is how surrender will feel” (148-149). Just like his muteness, Michael’s foolishness materializes in the Medical Officer – he feels foolish. Parallel to the scene in which Michael and the soldier’s eyes meet, the Medical Officer is momentarily arrested by Michael’s idiocy, though

this time it catches more lastingly. It is worth noting that the revolution does not catch with this exchange, this is no “event,” and its political importance is questionable. This inability to speak, though, underscores the linguistic apparatus upon which the political order rests and is the lingua franca between individuals under the postcolonial system of power. Michael does not speak it and does not participate in the use of this language. Thus speechlessness is a surrender to the suspension of this language. And the Medical Officer figures this suspension as an act of resistance. He writes, in a letter to Michael, “I slowly began to see the originality of the resistance you offered” (163). Resistance to his attempts to rehabilitate Michael for manual labor, but also, effectually, resistance to the state writ large.

There is a model, in the text, for the method deployed in this analysis. The Medical Officer, in his obsession with “Michaels” imagines shouting at Michael that his stay in the rehabilitation center was allegorical; “It was an allegory – speaking at the highest level – of how scandalously, how outrageously a meaning can take up residence in a system without becoming a term in it. Did you notice how, whenever I tried to pin you down, you slipped away” (166). The Medical Officer’s reading of Michael is uncomfortably similar to my own. Still, in the reading, the Medical Officer is radicalized. On the one hand, the capacity of Michael to not be “pinned down,” even symbolically as a meaning, can have radical import and the Medical Officer is right. Michael and the Medical Officer’s, through osmosis, idiocy provides a window through which to interpret the language of the state as indispensable from its function and imagine what happens when the language is made nonsensical (perhaps when exposed to the material reality in the novel). Slipping away, the Medical Officer performs the idiocy of interpretation that allows a disruption of the postcolonial and biopolitical method of asserting power. Even if this is not what

“Michaels” intends. Indeed “Michaels” should not be pinned down as even this bare unintelligibility.

Conclusion

Many critics of Coetzee and *Life and Times* would disagree with my interest in Michael’s potential to catalyze the biopolitical event. This is because critics of Coetzee’s *oeuvre* overwhelmingly agree that *Life and Times* is a novel most interested in the relationship of literature to politics; in other words, it is a “meta” text⁶. Anthony Vital argues that “[i]f the realist dimension tracks K’s encounters with oppressive institutions and his varied attempts (with limited success) to escape their clutches, it is the metafictional dimension that situates K’s *agon* in a context of colonial history,” thereby emphasizing the novel’s discursivity over its representation of approximately realistic things (94). Similarly, David Attwell argues that *Life and Times* is a progression to the paradox of literary discursivity and its relationship to the processes of Empire from *Waiting for the Barbarians*’s preoccupation with Empire and its function (88-89). Derek Attridge argues that a crucial part of *Life and Times*’s argument is its destabilization of “*the event of the allegorizing reading*,” by which he means bringing tools of critical analysis to bear on the meaning of literal events in a text (61; original emphasis). All these readings, others too in fact, are not necessarily wrong. Literature has certainly played a role in the permutation of colonialism with Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness* emblematic of this process⁷. So reading the novel as a political treatise – which all of these preeminent scholars of Coetzee make a point to not do – may be in danger of oversimplifying. As Derek Attridge puts it baldly,

⁶ I agree with these critics who believe the novel primarily interested in politics

⁷ For a wonderfully detailed and precise investigation into the function of the “novel” in the history of modernism and colonization in Africa see “The Extroverted African Novel” by Eileen Julien.

by reading the novel allegorically, one engages a reading that “is the most basic, perhaps the most naïve, way of interacting with a literary work” (Attridge 60). Such attitudes towards the text elide the exigencies within the novel. A “naïve” or “allegorical” or “literal” reading of the text would take the representation of realistic events seriously; it would correlate Michael’s actions in the novel with necessary strategies of resistance to South African forms of power. This article disagrees and hopes to provide readings of the novel that give primacy to the representations of state power and the strategies that Michael deploys, unconsciously or in effect of his way of being, to destabilize that power.

The biopolitical in *Life and Times of Michael K.* provides the material context through which to evaluate K’s queerness as successfully disruptive. Through his dumbness, he figures as queer to this order. As such he is successful at providing a model for queerness as it might catalyze a biopolitical event, without, of course, confining Michael to the static identity of “gay.” As it interacts with him, biopolitics and necropolitics fail to order his thinking and spur him to exist within its procedure. Meanwhile, K’s homosexual tendencies place him, fruitfully, in opposition to reproductive futurism as it orders politics. While I imagine that Michael’s queerness suggests the contours of the kind of queerness that may facilitate the “biopolitical event” as Hardt and Negri theorize it, Michael’s characterization suggests the importance of queerness and unintelligibility to those interested in effacing the pervasive effects of power and politics. In the context of apartheid South Africa, this biopolitical event must efface the specific system of signs through which biopolitics functions. K.’s queer misunderstandings do precisely this. Therefore Nadine Gordimer was wrong to suggest that Michael is an inadequate figure of resistance. Rather, he is paradigmatic.

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