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Space and Identity in J.M. Coetzee's *Life & Times of Michael K*

In *Life & Times of Michael K*, Coetzee imagines the complication of establishing and maintaining a self-identity amid the strict control of space in wartime South Africa, and it is this conflict of identity which comprises the novel's subplot. Most of Coetzee's fourth novel entails K's odyssey over hundreds of miles in his quest to find the farm on which his mother was born and raised. Most of his childhood had transpired in an institution for disabled children, and after aging-out of the institution, Michael moved into a hostel for itinerant workers. The temporary, impersonal nature of these residences suggests that Michael never had the opportunity to develop a meaningful connection to a particular place, such as one's identity is often connected to locations such as 'home' and/or 'hometown' (see Proshansky et. al 60). K's travels are repeatedly thwarted by police and military who enforce a strict control of movement through spaces designated and ordered by the South African government, reflecting how oppressive state power structures impose arbitrary constructs of space which disrupt pre-existing spatial connotations within the same geography (Bernard 5, 18; Dixon et. al 277-278; Teimouri 31-32; Upstone 4-6). In her book *Spatial Politics and the Postcolonial Novel*, Sara Upstone purposes the term "overwriting" to describe this means of maintaining power through the delineation and regulation of space on a national-scale (6). Although there is almost no mention of it in the novel, it is his racial designation as "colored" which renders Michael K susceptible to internment in labor camps and frequent suspicion of being vagrant or working with guerrilla fighters. But he

is either unable or unwilling to recognize the structural barriers which beleaguer him.

Unable, at times, because of the illogicality of such spatial control based on racial designation alone. As he recognizes himself not to be a threat to the state, the denial of his passage or occupancy from one space to another is not supported by reason.

Unwilling, at other times, as his goal of establishing his self-identity rooted in his connection to place is antithetical to the State's control of space.

To support my analysis I incorporate literary theory on space, place, and identity formation which help further clarify how Michael K's process of constructing a sense of self is represented in the text. A definition of self-identity from Proshansky et. al, as the "relatively conscious, personally held beliefs, interpretations and evaluations of oneself" is useful for clarifying my particular focus (58). The terms 'sense of self,' and 'subjective self' are used interchangeably with self-identity. I draw on instances in which Michael K is engaged in establishing and protecting his self-identity as informed by the various spaces he occupies. I interpret Michael K's journey to Prince Albert as constituting what Sara Upstone terms "chaotic space," which reflects how a character's movement across boundaries effectively "relieve[s] many of the tensions of fixed locations" inherent in spatially-ordered state control (57). Upstone describes how "postcolonial authors suggest it is through movement that we forge identity," and how a character's movement through "those spaces where the chaos denied by the pressures of national institution breaks through in movements that escape its mappings" (82-83). Once the colonial state overwrites the geography to reflect the colonial sphere of control,

homogenized social groupings and hierarchies are established and consequently restricted from accessing state-defined spaces, such that “what is really being negotiated in the rewriting of space is [one’s] right to identity” (Upstone 5). Rita Barnard’s *Apartheid and Beyond: South African Writers and the Politics of Place* provides theoretical concepts and historical context relevant to spatial politics depicted in South African literature. In her first chapter Barnard describes how a focus on spatial contexts “has been especially important in the study of imperialism, colonial discourse, and postcolonial theory. After all, maps, boundaries, the naming of places— indeed, the discipline of geography itself— is scarcely separable from the imperial project (Barnard 5). She is particularly interested in J.M. Coetzee's propensity for writing about “how people inhabit, how they imagine, and how they represent the physical terrain that surrounds them,” an inclination well demonstrated in *Life & Times of Michael K* (17-18). In Chapter Four of *Transnational Discourses on Class, Gender, and Cultural Identity*, Irene Marques examines the predominant facets of Michael K’s identity. Marques suggests that Coetzee's frequent use of visual descriptors “allows the narrator to describe Michael K in a detached fashion, leaving the latter's identity barely touched by his text (his story) and interpretation open to the reader, thus creating the possibility for ambivalent (uncertain) readings of the protagonist's identity” (159-160). I argue that some of this ambivalence is no doubt attributable to the depiction of Michael K's self-identity as itself being somewhat ambiguous, even to himself, and that this is an intentional element of the protagonist’s composition. The essay “Place-identity: Physical

World Socialization of the Self” by Proshansky et. al provides a more comprehensive overview of theories related to the formation of both self-identity and place-identity. Mahdi Teimouri’s essay “Place and the Politics of Space in J.M. Coetzee’s *Life and Times of Michael K*” offers a useful reading of the novel’s engagement with spatial contexts, although Teimouri’s textural interpretations sometimes stretch into realms of reinvention. Michela Canepari-Labib’s essay “Language and Identity in the Narrative of J.M. Coetzee” explores how Coetzee’s work engages in “issues relating to language and the way language affects the human mind,” which contributes to my focus on the influence of spaces on Michael K’s formation and maintenance of his self-identity (105). In *Life & Times of Michael K*, the power of language to revoke one's agency to assert a self-identity is evident through Michael K's struggle to develop and understand who he is in various unstable spatial contexts, while evading the various false identities imposed by the state, which threaten to “imprison him in their unethical, oppressive, and restrictive philosophy of sameness” (Marques 222). The childhood demands on him to practice silence, first as a baby stationed on a blanket while his mother cleaned houses, and later in the Huis Norenius institution, compounded by the cleft lip, contribute to Michael’s lack of ability, and consequential insecurity, regarding the use of language to assert his self-identity (3, 104).

My interpretation of the text is facilitated by the novel’s utilization of a 3rd-person limited omniscient narration which shares the protagonist’s thoughts. Distinct from free indirect narration, in which thoughts of characters are implicitly integrated into the 3rd-

person narration, Michael K's interior dialog is explicitly conveyed by the narrator, leaving no doubt as to whether they are intended to represent his thoughts directly, or are merely interpretations of a character's inner dialog by the narrator. In utilizing this device the author foregrounds the protagonist's effort to formulate a self-identity as a central theme of the novel. The privileged access to the protagonist's thoughts allows readers to observe how Michael K's project is informed by the constantly shifting spatial contexts he navigates.

Early in the novel there are indications Michael K's self-identity is not yet fully realized. This can be partially attributed to his alienation throughout childhood and into early adulthood. He is introduced on the first page of the novel as a baby, born with a cleft lip, rendering his appearance so physically shocking, that upon seeing her child for the first time, his mother is horrified "to think of what had been growing in her all these months." Coetzee's choice of the particular malformation of a cleft lip, which "curled like a snail's foot," yet leaving "the palate whole," cannot be dismissed as an incidental component of the protagonist's identity (3). While remaining physically able, capable of intense labor, tasks requiring dexterity, and the long, arduous journey by foot, Michael's malformed lip interferes with both communication and consuming food. The infant's malformed mouth hinders Michael's ability to nurse or bottle feed, so that his mother, Anne K, must instead feed him milk with a teaspoon, a tedious process which provides its own difficulty, causing distress for both mother and infant. The infant Michael K is referred to as 'it', suggesting Anne K's lack of affection for her newborn son (3). The

physical deformity also compounds Michael's subaltern position and interferes with social integration. Repeatedly through the novel, medical professionals remark to Michael that it is possible to have the cleft "corrected," thus reiterating the mistake constituted in his malformed mouth. Michael's mother takes him along to her cleaning job, "even when it was no longer a baby," and because other children "smile" and "whisper" at him, Anne keeps Michael away from other children, further isolating him from opportunities for socialization. Because he is determined to be 'slow minded' by his instructors, Michael K is removed from school at an early age and sent to be raised in the Huis Norenus institution for disabled children, which simultaneously sequesters him from his mother as well as greater society, and marks him as disabled, which furthers his social alienation (3). Alicia Colbridge et. al cite results from social psychological studies which suggest that "identity can act as a protective factor and can be delayed or put on hold" if in adolescence, a degree of trauma supersedes the child's ability to develop self-identity (2). Such a delay is relevant to Michael's upbringing in the strict institution, which in Coetzee's descriptions, did not provide for the emotional needs of its young charges (2). Michela Canepari-Labib suggests that Coetzee's work illustrates theories of identity formation rooted in "structuralists and the post-structuralists [. . .] belief that identity is achieved through language and through the confrontation of the subject with the Other" (110). In addition to his propensity for silence, such a dependence on social interaction to establish one's self-identity puts Michael at a disadvantage as a result of his profound childhood alienation. Proshansky

et. al assert the importance of “the period from infancy through puberty in explaining self-identity development,” in which the physical settings of “the home, the school, and the neighborhood [. . .] have considerable impact on the development of self-identity” (75).

In terms of Michael’s upbringing in an institution, these social settings would have been consolidated into one impersonal place, the social context of which would be unrecognizable relative to more conventional ideas of home, school, and neighborhood; spaces for which individuals typically develop affinity through familiarity and associating a sense of safety. Up to the age of 31, Michael K had lived a life of impermanence, disconnected from any sense of belonging to a place, any notion of geographic affiliation. After aging out of the Huis Norenius institution, Michael K lives in a Cape Town hostel, a living arrangement that presumes temporality and an unsettled existence (16; for context on South African worker hostels, see Vosloo and Murray & Witz). From the hostel Michael K moves into his mother’s windowless room beneath the stairs, a skull-and-crossbones caution sign posted on the door. Her occupancy of the room had been conditioned on continued employment by the owners of the flat upstairs, and because Anna K has been physically unable to work for months, she consequently worries that soon she will be forced to move out. Clearly his mother's room is similarly unsuited for long-term residence (6). Some spatial theorists posit the home as “the ‘place’ of greatest personal significance in one’s life—the central reference point of human existence,” and that individuals “define who and what they are in terms of such

strong affective ties to ‘house and home’ and/or neighborhood and community” (Proshansky et. al 60, 61). Having had no such place of relative permanence contributes to Michael’s undeveloped self-identity.

Not until Michael is in his early 30’s does he recognize a purpose or meaning for his being alive, which he determines is to care for his mother. Unlike his work for the Parks and Gardens department which had been preordained by vocational training at the institution, the enormous project of seeing to his mother’s care amid her declining health appears to be Michael’s inaugural self-determined enterprise, a solution to “the problem” of trying to understand “why he had been brought into the world” (7).

Prompted by Anna’s poor health which she attributes to the coastal climate, the threat of layoffs at the Parks and Gardens department where Michael K is employed, the street violence erupting in the neighborhood surrounding Anna’s room, and the tenuous circumstances jeopardizing the continued occupancy of her room beneath the stairs, the prospect of remaining in Cape Town becomes dire. Anna K proposes they return to the farm where she had been born, and where her parents had worked, her father as a farmhand and her mother as a domestic. Rather than scrutinize the viability of her proposal, Michael immediately envisions the two of them established in a pastoral landscape he has never known, living in “a whitewashed cottage in the broad veld with smoke curling from its chimney” (9). Anna’s idyllic plan of returning to the farmlands of Prince Albert allows Michael to imagine attaining the stability associated with having a true home and the opportunity to establish a stable self-identity connected to a physical

space. Michael's fantasy of pastoral life seems to come from a revelation, his first awareness of a missing piece, a place to call home that he hadn't previously realized.

When Anna and Michael's initial plan of traveling by train is hampered by their need for permits to travel, which require both approval from someone at the destination and a reliable mailing address where permits can be mailed, Michael K devises a plan to transport his mother the 250-plus miles to Prince Albert via a cart he designs for the task. As he fabricates the cart, attaching bicycle wheels to an axle he fashions out of a length of steel bar, the presumption of Michael K's developmental disability assigned him when he was a child, is put into question (16). The reasoning and basic engineering required by the project suggests Michael K may not be the person he had been presumed by agents of the repressive state. The disparity between Michael's cognitive ability and the state's diagnosis constitutes a conflict of falsely assumed identity which repeats throughout the novel.

Having determined his life's purpose as seeing to his mother's care, Anna K's death disrupts Michael's formation of a subjective self. After only two nights on the road, the journey proves too much for Anna K, and she dies in a Stellenbosch hospital. Following her passing, Michael lingers around the hospital, sleeping in a bin of dirty hospital linens the night following her passing. Even after being told he cannot remain in the hospital, Michael stays in the vicinity for several days to a few weeks, seemingly unable to "to tear himself from the hospital," where he had last seen his mother alive, and also unsure of what he should do next, compounding the sense of destabilization

resulting from his mother's death. Upon receiving a care package of used clothing and toiletries, along with his mother's suitcase and cremated remains, Michael repeatedly asks the nurse simply, "how do I know?" (32). Although his question is ostensibly relating to the carton of his mother's cremains, the generality of his query suggests a greater unknowing has opened up. In addition to losing his mother, and consequently his self-determined purpose, Michael's self-identity is also symbolically transformed when he dons the unusual clothes provided by the hospital staff, thus occluding his own aesthetic self-representation in favor of less odorous attire (34). While the reader is offered no description of Michael's clothing previous to this, now he surely stands out as an odd figure, living rough in a white jacket with "crimson flashes on the shoulders," and black beret bearing a metal insignia of an ambulance company (32). For many days he stays close to the hospital, "stumb[ling] through the days, losing his way often," until finally, with "nothing any more to keep him," he accepts a ride out of Stellenbosch on a horse-drawn garbage cart (34). It is during his continued progress toward Prince Albert that Michael begins to establish his self-identity.

Examining Michael K's journey as a "chaotic space" illuminates his process of establishing a subjective self while simultaneously struggling to evade false, Manichean identities repeatedly imposed on him in different spatial contexts, such as on the road or in the mountains; interned in a labor camp or hiding in the veld. As he continues toward Prince Albert Michael K struggles to overcome these imposed misrepresentations which interfere with his effort to constitute his subjective self. Unlike his life before, in which

“there had usually been someone to tell him what to do next,” breaking free of the expectations of others finally facilitates Michael’s development of a subjective self (67). This new independence is soon disrupted when, a few days after leaving Stellenbosch, a soldier emerges on the road and holds Michael at gunpoint, asking “who are you? [. . .] where do you think you are going?” The soldier’s question is particularly apt given Michael’s uncertainty as to his self-identity and where he is headed. Just as Michael is about to answer, the soldier interrupts by demanding to see the contents of Michael’s suitcase. Ironically, the soldier accuses Michael of being a thief, while it is the soldier who robs Michael of the money that his mother had saved (36). This exchange is one of several instances in which an agent of the state implies interest in who Michael K truly is, but then immediately revokes the opportunity for self-representation, instead imposing false assumptions of his identity. On these occasions, Michael K’s self-identity is overwritten as he is forced into occupying identities prescribed by an authority figure, which always involves a presumption of criminality. In this instance, the soldier applies the false-identity of thief to Michael K, as a justification for laying claim to Michael’s money. The soldier’s relieving Michael of his mother’s remaining money, marks the beginning of his difficulty procuring enough calories, which fluctuates somewhat while gradually worsening through the novel. A few days further up the road, Michael is taken into custody at a police checkpoint and assigned to a railroad labor gang, in which he is made to work long into the night, to the brink of collapse. The following morning as laborers are roused to resume the work, a foreman tells them “there’s nothing special

about you [. . .], there's nothing special about any of us." While this statement might refer to the war's imposition of assumed identities on both the laborers and the police and jobsite managers, it is clearly a false equivalence, as the police and formen are in fact 'special' in that they are not forced into brutal slave labor. The next instant, Michael is told to "cheer up! [. . .] soon you'll be your own man again," as their stint of forced labor will soon conclude (41). As the concept of a "special" individual is rooted in distinct individual identities, this exchange conveys a spatial relation between camp, represented here by the railroad laborers, the railcar in which they are housed, and the project on which they are forced to work, and the assumed, homogenizing identity applied to the interned individuals. Those who live inside the confines of the camp are assumed to be units of a homogenous group of bodies, laborers. Outside the camps, these same individuals are recognized as "vagrants" at best, or thieves, "criminals and saboteurs and idlers" other times (91). But outside the camps and away from the police and army, one is free to reclaim their self-identity, to resume life as their "own [self] again." Confinement in the camps thus denies individuality and the individual's right to assert their subjective self, as one's identity is overwritten by the state's imposed designations. As the novel progresses Michael K learns, through a series of these encounters, that establishing and maintaining his subjective self requires evading agents of the state and staying out of the internment camps. Because neither movement nor remaining in-place prove entirely effective strategies for avoiding state agents, what is required is locating a "place between the fences," a place not yet governed by the state

(47). The concept of a place “between the fences,” ungoverned by such binary connotations of “inside” or “outside,” is reminiscent of social geographer Edward Soja’s concept of ‘Third space,’ which he describes as “a journey to real and imagined places” (11). Sara Upstone describes this concept as “a space [that] defies the absolute as it celebrates hybridity and difference, and refuses conventional identities” (14). The “place between the fences” Micheal longs to find is one which exists outside Manichean relationships of private and public, warzone and free territory.

Silence permeates *Life & Times of Michael K*, and sometimes manifests as its own particular spatiality. Beginning in his early years, while his mother worked cleaning houses, Michael “sat on a blanket [. . .] learning to be quiet,” connoting the blanket on which the infant Michael was expected to pass the hours while his mother cleaned, as a place where silence was expected, and perhaps enforced (3). Similarly, in the Huis Norenus institution, the first on the list of posted rules for its residents had been “there will be silence in the dormitories at all times” (104). Thus the entirety of Michael’s youth has essentially transpired in silence, impeding Michael K’s ability to establish a voice with which to assert a self-identity. As an adult, silence becomes a strategy in the constitution and preservation of Michael’s self-identity, a means of fortifying his sense of self against misinterpretation by the other. Silence is also suggested to be the anthesis or antidote to the war. Having been refused passage at one check point, interned to a railroad labor gang at another, and robbed at gunpoint by a soldier, Michael comes to recognize the risk in traveling on the road (22, 41, 36). Eventually he hops a fence and

continues making his way across the veld, paralleling the road from a distance, were “from horizon to horizon the landscape was empty,” suggesting the veld comprises a space which bears no signs of the state’s spatial overwriting relative to the road, which by its nature, constitutes a particularly literal form of colonial spatial overwriting. It is in the empty landscape of the veld that Michael thinks to himself “I could live here forever [. . .], or until I die. Nothing would happen, every day would be the same as the day before, there would be nothing to say” (46). The wide open veld with its farms cordoned-off with fences Michael recognizes as “miles and miles of silence,” where his “anxiety that belonged to the time on the road” dissipates. The specificity of this phrasing is interesting to note, as it attributes Michael’s affect from abuse experienced on the road to a temporal and thus historical relation to the spatiality of the road, rather than attributing his trauma to the road’s physical space itself, thus leaving intact the road’s potential for affective interactions other than trauma. Also depicted in this scene is the binary spatial relation between the road and the surrounding veld, the latter described as “empty,” relative to the road’s potential for threats from military convoys and checkpoints. This description of the veld as empty space is not immediately sinister, and yet it echos a sentiment of the Boers which had been historically employed to justify the Boer people’s claim to the veld. In her book *The Frightened Land*, Jennifer Beningfield offers several literary examples from Boer authors in the early 19th century who depict the veld as an empty space, “a natural void, as though the African continent was a vacuum to be abhorred rather than an already populated and governed part the

world” (Sachs xi). Thus when Michael K reflects on the relative silence and emptiness of the veld, qualities which relieve him of the tensions related to his journey on the road, are also referential to a previous campaign of brutality, suggesting the current war is merely the continuation of a war whose beginning lies so far in the past as to no longer be recognized. Michael’s experience of the veld as a physical manifestation of silence, juxtaposes the spatial context of the veld in comparison to the cacophony of the war (47). As if to challenge Michael’s perception of the veld, the war’s audial violence reasserts itself in the next instant by way of two jets that “streaked across the sky” (47). The suggested significance of silence here relates to what Canepari-Labib refers to as “the loss of identity through language,” an essential concept of French psychoanalyst Jaques Lacan’s theory that alienation arises out of “the necessary distance language interposes between reality and its linguistic substitution,” which Canepari-Labib asserts is frequently reflected in Coetzee’s early fiction (111). For it is in the absence of language, inferred in the silence Michael finds on the veld, that his self-identity is able to remain intact. Later in the novel when Michael K is first on the Visagie farm and deliriously hungry and ill, he makes a hoot sound like an owl, and thinks to himself, “here I can make any sound I like,” which adds credence to Michael K’s particular aversion to language, rather than the presences of sound itself. The distinction between the freedom to utter any sound he wishes in the fields, and his growing reticence regarding language, illustrates his aversion particularly to communicating his self-identity to others, if only as a means of evading the false identities imposed on him by the people he encounters.

The veld's description as "empty," comprised of "miles and miles of silence," is later reflected in Michael K's evolving internal universe. As the novel progresses, he is often enveloped in sleep, or finding that "when he tried to explain himself to himself, there remained gap, a hole, a darkness before which his understanding balked, into which it was useless to pour words," suggesting that Michael K has entered into a similar state of spacious, placid silence (109). In this sense, Michael K's developing identity comes to reflect the characteristics of the veld that he associates with the absence of the war, even within the war's midst. This helps explain how Michael can later claim to the medical officer, who narrates the second section of the novel, that he is "not in the war," as if he has by then managed to transcend the war's materiality (138). By this point, Michael has internalized these same qualities of silence, emptiness, and spaciousness, as perhaps his only means to evade the war, by inhabiting an internalized alternate reality to which the war cannot lay claim. The medical officer balks at Michael K's response, because what the medical officer sees is Michael's physical presence—a body within the space dominated by war—to which the State and its war indeed lays claim, by strictly regulating and interning his body in its many camps.

Although the Visagie farm provides Michael K his most likely prospect for developing place-identity, he soon learns that he has overlooked numerous obstacles to realizing the idyllic life he had fantasized. When Michael finally arrives in Prince Albert, he first asks a shopkeeper directions to the farm, although he cannot recall the name of the farmer. Rather than offer him directions to the Visagie farm, the shop clerk is

dismissive of Micheal K's inquiry. Instead, it is a child who volunteers directions to the Visagie farm; as if only a child, with their imagination intact, could entertain Michael's fantasy of making a life on the Visagie farm (51). Upon arrival he thinks to himself "now I am here [. . .] or at least I am somewhere," suggesting both K's lingering doubt, and a degree of indifference regarding whether he has found the same farm his mother had described (52). At least having arrived "somewhere" provides a respite from the turbulent time on the road. After a few days, Michael spreads his mother's ashes over a patch of the field and tills them into the soil, which is described as the "beginning of his life as a cultivator," as if by incorporating her ashes into the field, Michael plants the seeds of his mother and begins the process of cultivating a narrative of family; "from one seed a whole handful" (59, 118). With a small collection of seeds he's found, Michael soon plants a small plot of pumpkin and corn. This is the turning point in which Michael declares himself a gardener as a central component of his identity, determining that pleasure he derives from the work is "because I am a gardener [. . .] because that is my nature." His position as a gardener in the Cape Town parks having been seemingly arbitrarily determined by his training in the Huis Norenius institution, this previously dormant instinct to facilitate the growing of things, the regenerating of life, "had been reawoken in him," and this becomes the central project that occupies his waking hours (59).

It soon becomes evident that, to Michael, his identity as a gardener implies more than merely a vocation. He comes to recognize his identity as a gardener as the central

reason he won't participate in the war. In trying to identify his aversion to participating in the guerrilla resistance, Michael K concludes it is important for some "men to stay behind and keep gardening alive," so that the earth wouldn't "grow hard and forget her children" (109). In this sense, Michael begins to identify himself as a conscientious objector, although he lacks the terminology to formally name this position. Michael's growing self-awareness as a gardener, and consequently a conscious objector, presents one of a number of instances in which Michael doubts whether he truly believes himself to be of a particular nature. Previous to arriving on the Visagie farm Michael K is invited to stay at a stranger's house. During their dinner conversation, the stranger tells him "People must help each other, that's what I believe," prompting Michael to consider his own propensity for charity for the first time. Ultimately, he finds that he doesn't "seem to have a belief regarding help," and thinks, "perhaps I am the stony ground," implying a suspicion that his nature might essentially be uncaring or indifferent to the plight of others, though his assessment proves inaccurate. (47). Interned at Jakkalsdrif labor camp, Michael gives half of his earnings to a man supporting a wife and two children, simply because "there was nothing he wanted to buy" (84). When his field is visited by a band of guerrilla fighters, Michael imagines telling them "be sure to come back to the dam next time, and I will feed you" (109). It seems evident that when there is even a modest abundance, Michael is eager to share it.

Particularly following his return to the Visagie farm, Michael K improves the land through irrigating and cultivating, and this re-greening of the abandoned and neglected

fields, inadvertently poses a threat to the colonial system of order. Access to food beyond the camp fences allows Micheal to subvert the state's spatial control, to establish Sara Upstone's concept of "chaotic space" amid a landscape otherwise designated for enforced order. Michael recognizes his project in the fields breaks with the state's strict control of territories, and this becomes a source of anxiety. When a helicopter passes near the farm field, he becomes suddenly aware of the conspicuousness of his work, how from the sky, one would surely notice the green grass contrasting the muted browns of the surrounding veld, and "the green of the pumpkins. The leaves are like flags waving to them" (111). The description of the pumpkin leaves appearing "like flags" relates to how Michael has audaciously claimed this parcel as a sovereign territory carved out of the colonial ordering of space, subverting the colonial order, and refusing to recognize the Visagie family's privatized claim to the land.

Having no propensity toward marriage, Michael K comes to view gardening as an alternative expression of the desire to regenerate life. Having replanted his small plot on the Visagie farm, K begins referring to the growing plants in terms of familial relations, describing his small crop of pumpkin and melon plants as his children, and worrying over their wellbeing in his absence. Returning late in the growing season, Michael regrets having planted so late, as in doing so "he had not provided well," a worry familiar to any parent (101). Once the melons begin to ripen, Michael thinks of them as "two sisters" for whom he harbors love, and the pumpkins he considers "a band of brothers" (113). While these imagined relations provides Michael a sense of connection

to family he had not known previously, it simultaneously suggests an imagined legacy, a notion Michael repeatedly rejects (47, 100, 104). Perhaps it is fitting, then, that once the melons and pumpkins have ripened, he sinks a knife into them “without a struggle,” effectively killing off his imagined offspring (113).

Once situated in the field at the Visagie farm, Michael finally escapes the social constructs that have denied him his self-identity. In the early days on the farm Michael is described as existing in “a pocket outside of time,” as his life in “Cape Town and the war and his passage to the farm slipped further and further into forgetfulness” (60). But although he had at first entertained the idea that the Visagie farm existed as “one of those islands without an owner,” Michael recognizes with “a sense of pain,” the precarious uncertainty regarding whether he will be able to remain hidden on the farm. Soon the fantasy of stability is shattered by the arrival of “Boss Visagie’s grandson.” The grandson’s appearance at the farm sinks Michael back into “the old hopeless stupidity,” and the grandson even calls on him to “play the idiot” should anyone in town question Michael about anyone else being on the farm (59, 60). Here again Coetzee illustrates how “a full human being can be deprived of his/her ‘humanity’ and turned into a sub-human Other” (Canepari-Labib 111). Michael again finds himself assumed a subordinate and consequently expected to provide free labor. As the grandson tries to coerce Michael into assuming the role of servant in order to secure survival for both of them, Michael begins to dissociate from the words, as if unable to comprehend their meaning, and ultimately feels “the stupidity creep over him like a fog again,” as if the mere language of

subordination immediately revokes the agency Michael K has found in his time at the farm (64). Michael's aversion to being pressed into service as a "body servant" suggests a limit regarding what employment he is willing to accept. His employment as a farmhand seems suitable based on Michael's identity as a gardener, and had been an integral part of Anna K's plan for how the two would settle in Prince Albert. That Michael refuses to accept the role of "body servant," procuring, processing, and preparing food for the Visagie grandson in order to continue living on the farm, proves unacceptable to Michael, perhaps because he is expected to provide provisions for the young man, as if the young man was incapable of providing for himself. Rather than accept the imposed position as servant, when the grandson sends him into town to fetch supplies, Michael instead buries the grandson's money at the edge of the property, and returns to the chaotic-space of movement, absconding into the mountains, to a cave high above the valley (65). His decision to bury the Visagie grandson's money rather than use it to procure supplies that would have supported his retreat to the mountains signifies Michael K's moral grounding and limitations. While he is willing to lie to the Visagie grandson in order to justify his presence on the farm, he is unwilling to steal the money. By burying it, he can justify that he has not stolen the money, although buried in the ground, it provides neither fugitive any benefit.

In the mountain cave Michael K recognizes his identity has transformed from how he perceived himself in Cape Town. Reflecting on his gardening that belonged to the time in Cape Town, Michael contemplates the nature of the soil in the park he used

to garden, how the soil was "more vegetal than mineral, composed of last year's rotted leaves and the year before's and so on back till the beginning of time," and how this creates a substrate "cool and dark, [. . .] so soft that one could dig and never come to the end of the softness" (67). This description suggests a comforting sense of perpetual life, a constantly regenerating and nurturing quality of the soil. In contrast, Michael now sees himself as desiring "no longer the green and the brown, [. . .] 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). Michael describes this transformation into "a different kind of man," in a way that suggests a fundamental essence of his being has grown to prefer the color, feel, and overall character of the veld and its hardened, mineral-dense soil, and a preference for this landscape over the comparatively soft, "cool and dark," [. . .] the green and the brown" of the Cape Town parks. This transformation suggests Michael is beginning to form place-identity for the first time, an affinity for the veld which reflects ways in which he has changed since arriving in Prince Albert. His place-identity formed with the farm field is reinforced when he has been found by the soldiers, and is about to be taken away. As he contemplates the swift disappearance of any trace he had once subsisted on the field, he wonders what it is "that binds me to this spot of earth as if to a home I cannot leave? (124). For the first time in his life, Michael realizes a longing for a particular place he has imbued with meaning as a location to which his self-identity has become entwined.

Upon his return to the Visagie farm, Michael determines that "it is not for the

house” that he has come back for, recognizing the house as a private-owned space reserved for “the ghosts of all the generations of the Visagies.” Instead, it is the fields Michael has come to associate with home, where “every stone, every bush along the way he recognized” (98). Laying out in the field, Michael thinks, “I want to live here forever, where my mother and grandmother lived,” suggesting a sense of belonging which had previously eluded him (98). Unlike the Visagie farmhouse which could be “pass[ed] onto other generations,” Michael determines that his shelter should be “careless, makeshift, a shelter to be abandoned without a tugging at the heartstrings.” He thus devises a hovel between two low hills in which to sleep, which proves insufficient as a home (110). When he is flooded out of his dwelling by a torrential rain, Michael squats by the dam, “feeling like a snail without a shell,” that is, without even the most rudimentary structure of home (112).

Through the slow process of starvation, Michael K comes to recognize the impossibility of maintaining both his corporality and self-identity, as his time starving in the mountains reveals. Climbing up miles above Prince Albert, and the road cutting through the mountain pass, Michael thinks he has finally “come as far as a man can come [. . .]; surely now that in all the world only I know where I am, I can think of myself as lost” (66). But though Michael has succeeded to locate a space where he is ultimately out of reach of the state, his body complicates this success, as he becomes extremely ill with severe starvation, and in a last effort toward self-preservation, he makes his way back into town, which results in his eventual internment at the

Jakkalsdrif labor camp. Michael awakes in a building entryway and taken to a jail. The following day, when he is unable to stand on his own, two officers carry Michael's "skeletal figure" "bodily into the yard" (70). Michael struggles to work, realizing the toll his bout of starvation has had, which has "turned [him] into an old man" (81). Hints toward Michael's growing dissassociation with his body arise in the camp. At one point, too sick to work, brings his mattress outside and children, unable to rouse him from rest, integrated his body into a game, climbing and falling on him "as if he were part of the earth" (82). The function of the camp becomes equated with the management of bodies, as another inmate suggests to Michael the charity provided in the camp is merely the army's preference to avoid dealing with the bodies should they be left to die, telling him "if we just grew thin and turned into paper and then into ash and floated away, they wouldn't give a stuff for us" (88). Later Michael considers this, how "when people died they left bodies behind," and how "dead bodies could be as offensive as living bodies" (94). Upon escaping the camp, he thinks of himself "not as something heavy that let tracks behind it, but if anything as a speck upon the surface of the earth," as if already his body has already diminished and disappeared. Later Michael considers the impossibility of survival within the inhospitable constraints of the war, concluding that "a man must live so that he leaves no trace of his living," a feat which is impossible due to the physicality of the body left behind (98). As his starvation continues to worsen, Michael's corporeal dissassociation progresses. Back on the Visagie farm, Michael eats less and less, eating only "because he had not yet shaken off the belief that bodies that

do not eat die” (101). Michael’s slow process of starvation is hinted to have originated as a child in the Huis Norenius institution,

Part two of the novel brashly shifts the narrative from third-person limited-omniscient to 1st-person, which provides an account of Michael K from the perspective of another character, a medical officer, whose epistolary narration comes in the form of journal entries (129). The medical officer tries nurse Michael back to relative health after he had been close to death when soldiers discovered him in the farm field. The medical officer’s perspective illustrates the mechanics of the assumed identity of the other, how Michael K’s self-identity has been repeatedly overwritten by representatives of the repressive state. Immediately the military officers assume that Michael has been “running a staging post for guerrillas operating out of the mountains, caching arms and growing food” (129). Despite attempts to correct, Michael is referred to as “Michaels” by everyone at the rehabilitation camp in Cape Town where he is in the medical officer’s care. At first the officer reiterates Michael’s story, albeit with some doubt. The medical officer reverts to early assumptions of Michael as having a “feeble mind,” suggesting that, rather than someone capable of outfitting the guerrilla fighters, “he ought to be in a protected environment weaving baskets or stringing beads,” the former craft being one of several errands and crafts the children of Huis Norenius had been tasked with (131, 4). In a sense, Michael has reverted to his origin, though now “he looks like an old man” (130). He is back in Cape Town, the place he had escaped, and back to being presumed too “feeble minded” to have lived the life he has had. The project of the officers is not to

see to Michael's wellbeing, but to restore sufficient fitness to render him able to work. This seems to be the only possible means of existence for a subordinate subject such as Michael K.

CONCLUSION:

Ultimately, Michael K's project to establish and live by his self-identity fails in a under the conditions in which "the country is mapped and gridded in such a way that any pastoral fantasy, or just a simple rural life, is proscribed for a person who is officially classed as "coloured," or more exactly as "CM-40-NFA-Unemployed" (Bernard 30). He recognizes that he cannot live "between the fences," as such spaces have proven either nonexistent or prohibitively inhospitable. While his cave in the mountains may have provided such an "angle" between the fences, it proves to be an environment that cannot support the needs of the body. Michael's effort to subsist on gardening is dashed by the war in which his access to space is strictly controlled. Thus, his hope to find an island "without an owner" proves impossible. When he is returned to the Kenilworth camp in Cape Town, the identity he had formed in connection to the field on Visagie farm is catastrophically upended. As the medical officer anguishes over Michael's unwillingness to eat or convey his story, Michael's silence preserves what remains of his self-identity as the gardener, looking after his pumpkin and melon children on the farm where his mother was born. Michael is offered charity, by the medical officer and the three young people he meets at the Sea Point beach, that seems to be offered with an expectation that he will convey his story in exchange, which he feels incapable of, and

refuses to even try, thinking that if only he “had learned storytelling at Huis Norenius instead of potato-peeling and sums, [. . .], [he] might have known how to please them.” The story Michael thinks is wanted of him, is one “of a life passed in prisons,” but he sees his story as that of a gardener “and gardeners spend their time with their noses to the ground” (181).

In the end, having resolved the “problem” of knowing his purpose, and consequently coming to know himself, the answer he arrives at proves incompatible with the war ravaged space he occupies, resulting in a life virtually unlivable. Those spaces Michael had found in which he could evade the war’s brutality proved inhospitable to his corporeal needs. His shelter in the field between two hillocks having been flooded in a rainstorm, Michael recognizes that “one cannot live like this,” and yet “there was nowhere better to go,” eluding to the reality that life beyond the camp fences ultimately proves impossible (119). Recognizing the impossibility of maintaining both his body and self-identity within the oppressive constraints of the war, Michael acquiesces the progressing sickness caused by starvation, thinking “it is enough to be out of the camps, out of all the camps at the same time,” and that perhaps if he can “lie low, I will escape the charity too” (182). In doing so, he essentially “preserves the idea of self-affirmation through self-erasure,” the act of withholding being perhaps the last available means of protecting his truth against misinterpretation (Barnard 32). In the final moments of the novel, deathly ill and back in his mother’s room beneath the stairs, as he lays down on a bed of cardboard left by someone who had used the room his

absence, Michael returns to the image of the teaspoon with which he had been spoon fed milk as a baby, imagining how, by lowering the spoon into a hole in the ground to gather water, “one can live” (184). In the context of a life in which there was rarely sufficient resources to sustain him, starting from a baby having to take milk from a teaspoon, this final thought from Michael suggests he continues to believe that one can survive on the tiniest increment of sustenance, as if, even though the evidence has proven that he never really had a sufficient quantity of anything—food, water, love, home, agency, community—Michael refuses to recognize a need for more than this sub-minimum. The final sentence also suggests a sense of fulfillment; that having had the chance to slip away from the war and establish a degree of agency, a self-identity, and connection to physical space on an abandoned farm, even for the brief time that he was successful, somehow suffices as a life well lived, despite its having come to a premature end.

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