

Toward an African Ecocriticism: Postcolonialism, Ecology and *Life & Times of Michael K*

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ABSTRACT

Recent articles have called for postcolonial and ecology-minded criticism to engage with each other, suggesting, too, some of the points of difficulty they might encounter when they do. One point of difficulty lies in how these two forms of criticism develop differing evaluations of discourse and its relation to what counts as real. This essay proposes resolving this difficulty with a materialist apprehension of discourse and suggests that a postcolonial ecocriticism enacted this way might have value generally for African studies. The essay then examines J. M. Coetzee's *Life & Times of Michael K*, a novel that has been explored as exemplar of postcolonial ecological thinking, and argues that while *Michael K* may indeed be shaped by attitudes typical of postcolonial thinking at its inception, it is not a novel with much interest in ecology. The issue for an African ecocriticism, then, is how to grasp the novel's writing of nature. I argue that its historical juncture provides an interpretive context for how the novel subordinates its writing of nature to its postcolonial suspicion of the modern nation state.

Ecocriticism as a form of literary and cultural critique has an origin in North America, though it moved quickly to Europe, and has tended to reflect the interests and concerns of countries in the North. Yet there is no good reason not to develop an African ecocriticism, one which engages in debating what a society's assigning of significance to nature (in varieties of cultural products) reveals about both its present and past. Such debate, by opening to question the ways modernity in African contexts transforms human relations with nature and, as a result, the impact of societies on natural environments, would join the struggle to enable social worlds find more equitable, sustainable, and healthy ways of inhabiting their place—as well as strengthen historical self-understanding. In South Africa, Julia Martin began publishing her ecocritical work in 1987, but it is her 1994 essay to which I am indebted here for the way it proposes reading for nature with an awareness of colonial history. Building on her work while exploring

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how ecocriticism might fit with postcolonial critique, I consider how J. M. Coetzee's *Life & Times of Michael K*, set in South Africa, can be read ecocritically from and for South Africa. Ecocriticism, if it is to pose African questions and find African answers, will need to be rooted in local (regional, national) concern for social life and its natural environment. It will need too to work from an understanding of the complexity of African pasts, taking into account the variety in African responses to currents of modernity that reached Africa from Europe initially, but that now influence Africa from multiple centers, European, American, and now Asian, in the present form of the globalizing economy. It is this history of Africa's insertion into a globalizing modernity that indicates the need for an African ecocriticism to engage with one or other form of postcolonial critique, understood broadly to designate "critical discourses which thematize issues emerging from colonial relations and their aftermath, covering a long historical span (including the present)" (Shohat 99).

In developing this postcolonial focus, an African ecocriticism would differentiate itself from ecocriticism in the North, which has, for whatever reasons, either not felt compelled to engage with the consequences of European colonialism or found the available forms of postcolonial criticism to be inconsistent with ecocritical goals and strategies. Two recent articles by Nixon and Huggan explore how postcolonial critique and ecocriticism have developed thus far along paths distant from each other and both writers call for increased dialogue so that each can enrich the other's critical language. Rob Nixon, in his article, identifies and explores "four main schisms between the dominant concerns of postcolonialists and ecocritics" (Nixon 235). These "schisms" he defines in terms that might be called topical or value-based (for example, where ecocriticism has valued an ethic of place, which

emphasizes care for rooted communities, postcolonialism has valued perspectives deriving from displacement) and suggests, through his exploration of these schisms, forms of dialogue that might result in a "rapprochement" (Nixon 247). Graham Huggan in his article comments similarly on the lack of dialogue between postcolonial critics and ecocritics and suggests a list of "overlapping fields" in which that dialogue might usefully take place. Both essays offer much that could be fruitful in bringing together concern for both people and non-human life in the wake of European expansion from the fifteenth century on. Neither essay though, while identifying postcolonial critique's reliance on post-structuralist understandings of language, engages with the problems (epistemological, ontological) that this reliance may have for any such rapprochement. For an ecocriticism developing within African contexts, where issues of linguistic and cultural diversity have political weight, strategies that work to resolve these problems will need articulation. For this reason I turn to an article by Dominic Head, "The (Im)possibility of Ecocriticism," valuable for how it engages these epistemological and ontological questions—and which reads *Michael K* as illustrative of the thinking he offers in response.

Publication of Head's article followed his book on Coetzee by a year and it is clear that his exploration of ecocriticism's "(im)possibility" draws on the book's chapter on *Michael K*. While I will refer to both publications when I turn to the novel, for the moment I focus only on the article, in which Head points to how ecocritics have tended, in the words of the introduction to the first ecocritical anthology, *The Ecocriticism Reader*, to "condemn post-structuralism for its seeming denial of a physical ground of meaning" (Glotfelty and Fromm xxvii). Yet, Head is

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aware that postcolonial critique, since Edward Said's groundbreaking *Orientalism*, has drawn theoretical potency, as well as ethical and political value, from post-structuralist understandings of language and culture. In a globalized, diverse world, in which people struggle against cultural and economic barriers inherited from worlds influenced by European colonial activity, such understandings support a progressive quest for democratic inclusiveness. So, for Head, postcolonial thinking (which he reads as part of a larger postmodern project for how it "de-centers" the Western subject) has value precisely for the way it draws power from the idea of meaning's endless provisionality. And it is this idea of ungrounded significance that ecocritics condemn for being radically inconsistent with their defining commitment, that we attend to what can be known about the natural environment and our relation to it, that we acknowledge how (quoting Lawrence Buell) "human affairs are [...] in fundamental ways subject to regulation by the [natural] environment" ("The (Im)possibility" 33). Postcolonial thinking would of course question the claim of any "we" to "know nature." The linguistic codes in which claims would be made, the relations to power in the modern world, are too diverse to sustain uncritical use of the first-person. Moreover, non-human nature, lacking an equivalent to human linguistic codes, does not speak. It has to be spoken for by the same humans who are de-centered as speaking subjects. Non-human nature can quite obviously, in its own ways, signify (dogs growl, rising waters threaten houses and wild animals, etc.), but nature cannot either authorize or dispute a translation (though it can behave in such a way as to indicate an interpreter got it wrong). It is considerations such as these, suggesting a lack of intellectual coherence between the postcolonial and Green projects, which, together with his unwillingness to discard either of his political commitments, lead Head to conclude that ecocriticism is "(im)possible" (38).

Head reads *Michael K* as a novel that illustrates his solution for negotiating this "(im)possibility," a solution that proposes grasping the textuality of literature while simultaneously "pursu[ing] ecological issues"—which deal, by definition, with what is extra-textual (31). For Head *Michael K* is "one of those postmodernist novels which requires us to revisit the effects of textuality" by delivering, within an overall self-reflexivity, narrative elements ("the business of gardening," for example) which gesture towards a materiality elusive but impossible to ignore; it thereby serves to warn of the "dangers of over-textualization" (34, 37). K's gardening, which Head interprets as signifying "an idea of the literal," belongs, in this way of reading, to a code that the narrative's dominant code (articulating post-structuralist ideas of the linguistic construction of meaning) can gesture towards but cannot absorb (37). To this same code belongs (in significant part) the novel's central character, interpreted (following Wright) as "less a man than a spirit of ecological endurance," and so K has value for likewise representing (in part) a spirit to which the text can only allude (35, 37). By attending to these intimations of the material that the dominant code elaborating ideas of "textuality" cannot absorb, Head can then read the novel as being about ecology, necessarily extra-textual. And by reading the novel's overall self-reflexiveness as a "formal provisionality" characteristic of postcolonial literature, Head reads K's "elusiveness" and "endurance" as

challenging not only over-textualization, but a politics based on Western certitudes that have marginalized both people and ecology (37). Yet by essay's end, Head returns to admitting the limitations of this attention to

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"double-coding." Nature, for Head, has necessarily to be nature-signified, a discursive construct, and nature-as-literal is not exempt from this rule. By defining "the implications of postmodernity" the way that he does, he has to admit that they "would seem to necessitate a compromise of ecocentric values" (38).

Head's solution to the problem he outlines and his reading of *Michael K* have, I believe, real value and have influenced the thinking in this essay. But I believe it might be more fruitful to attempt reconciling ecocriticism and postcolonial critique by taking into account, more than his "focus on textuality" and reading for "double-coding" permit, the complex interplay of social history with the natural world, and how language both shapes and reveals such interactions. Discourse indeed stands in arbitrary relation to the material world, but that relation is also power-laden. As a result not all discourses are equal in guiding societies to interact well with earth's biophysical processes or to address the inequities among human populations that produce, for some, suffering and meager life-opportunities. What is needed, I suggest, is an interpretive strategy that does, for the ethical and political reasons Head alludes to, rest on the assumption that all understanding of the world (what we call "nature," "history," etc.) is always delivered through language; but it would be a strategy that qualifies this assumption with the recognition that different languages (and discourses within a language), through participating in the reproduction of different social worlds, permit varieties of understanding with unequal value. So while it would be assumed that language constructs our apprehension of the material world ("nature"), language would be recognized as always mediated by culture and society. Critical attention would thus be drawn to histories of change, which would link the discursive to cultural, social, and environmental factors, clarifying the situations through which a language has evolved.

For an African ecocriticism, such historically focused attention to language would be especially useful for how it can grasp the historicity of ecology as modern science, its discursive practices interwoven with the institutions and economies of modern societies. Historians have examined in detail the roots of modern environmental concern in European global expansion and accounts of ecology in action reveal its potential to damage (through its relation to bureaucracies which might be well-intentioned but mistaken, or insensitive to local needs, or insensitive to local gender inequities, or in collusion with economic elites, etc.) as well as its potential to defend (through its ability to articulate specifically modern ways of thinking about humans and healthful natural environments, which can serve as basis on which to mobilize opposition to exploitative ways of behaving). Moreover, whatever the effects of ecology in practice, such historical attention to language would note that, in the spread of modern thinking, ecological understanding has displaced, at least among those so educated, ways of articulating human relation with the natural world which tend to be spiritual, religious in character, and which persist as influential in all regions of the world (though in every place modernity has reached it is the discourse of "natural resources" that bears the force of normality). For an African ecocriticism a consideration of the role these various discourses of nature play in a region's social processes would enable focus on such older ways of thinking about nature which might offer resistance to harmful features of modernity, as well as on the flows of power that give ecology its potential value in modernizing societies. For if it is possible to link conservation and empire, it is also possible to perceive ecology's value for a post-colonial environmental concern, one attuned to histories of unequal development and varieties of discrimination, including, of course, racism and sexism. (See Vital "Situating Ecology" 297-99.) Keeping track of developments in such people-centered environmentalism would, I believe, assist literary interpretation by providing it with a body of thinking to guide its interpretation of literary works past and present, to structure evaluation of the different ways writers have deployed cultural understandings of society and nature.¹

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Reading *Michael K* with these ideas in mind reveals it still an important text for an African ecocriticism, but less for how (as Head claims) it "reorients the politics of post-colonialism from an ecological perspective" than for how it demonstrates that a particular kind of postcolonialism can indeed, as ecocritics have worried, inscribe the nature-human relation in ways that forestall the development of ecological thinking ("The (Im)possibility" 34). Rather than finding ways to reconcile the novel's writing of nature with an ecocritical project I believe a postcolonial ecocriticism might take the novel's apparent rejection of ecology as its subject. There is, as I have suggested, no inherent inconsistency between ecology and postcolonial thinking, if both are understood as

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discourses with specific social histories. What matters in reading *Michael K*, then, is clarifying the novel's postcolonial strategies and understanding the way it writes nature to advance these—while, in the process, excluding a writing that is ecological. For *Michael K*, as postcolonial, does indeed mount a challenge to ecological thinking and a postcolonial ecocriticism will need to respond to that challenge, one grounded historically on ecology's complex relation, both negative and positive, to a modernity rooted in colonialism.

Benita Parry has commented that Coetzee's novels "interrogate colonialism's discursive power" and I argue that *Michael K* engages in this interrogation to reveal in a violent colonial past an origin for modern nation states (Parry 150). To the dominative power of nations the novel opposes a fragile intuition that life might (somewhere) be lived outside the reach of that colonial past. Enabling this interrogation and embodying this intuition is the figure of K, one who lacks status, authority, community, and property, but because he feels no desire for these, is not frustrated by the lack. Moreover, this lack appears to cause in him little resentment—except, most noticeably, in the moment of his bitter outburst to the Medical Officer (*Michael K* 136). Imposed upon utterly, yet without complicity (and in this he contrasts with the Medical Officer, who finds his own complicity simultaneously distasteful and inescapable), K, without any complicating desire for power, serves to expose, through what he encounters, the ugly underbelly of a modern state. And just as K is drawn as gentle outsider during a time of advanced civil war, a vagrant who avoids war however possible, the structures of power he is subject to are drawn (in this depiction of a projected moment of state disintegration) at their most harshly coercive. Head with his comments on the allegorical function of the camps in the novel finds in the motif of incarceration an exploration of "the exercise of discipline through institutions" that grounds modern socialization (*J. M. Coetzee* 103). Head, though, reads the narrative's elaboration of this "disciplining" as comment on the apartheid state, whereas the narrative might just as plausibly (considering, again, the title's reference to Kafka and the textual references to colonial history) be using the apartheid state to focus criticism on modernity in general. The story may be set in apartheid South Africa, but its language draws attention to common state mechanisms of control: the bureaucracies, the schools, the mechanized military, the fences marking property lines, the highways and railways subjecting space to communication and transportation networks, camps for "illegals," prison labor force/work programs, etc. While the apartheid government certainly supervised such mechanisms of control with extreme harshness, especially after 1961 as it sought to maintain power against an armed opposition, it did not invent them and those the novel includes are markers as well of modern nation states with liberal democratic traditions.

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It is attention to how narrative form so persistently develops K as solitary, as isolate, that signals K as an implausible carrier of ecological value. His figurative distance from the state does link him with nature (the narrative, as Attwell and Head have noted, appears constructed around an opposition between the "camps" and "gardening"), yet the significance the narrative supplies K's "gardening" or its presentation of K's relation to nature in general is not strongly related to ecology. Crucial to ecological discourse is the idea of relation: ecology's scientific work is predicated on the recognition that living beings exist only in relation to other living beings as well as to a complex non-living material order. A generalized ecological understanding, which draws on the scientific discourse for ways of organizing thought in other fields, reminds us that whatever else we humans are (and before we can be anything else) we are organisms interacting constantly with an environment (and that environment will involve members of our own species, members of other species, and elemental matter). Without these interactions we would not have bodily existence; and though someone, for a time, may lead life away from other humans, separation from other species, from elemental matter is impossible. Observations such as these provide content to an idea of interdependency conventionally associated with the implications of ecological thought. Donald Worster in responding to the challenge set by Daniel Botkin (who in 1990 outlined fundamental shifts in the assumption of stability in ecosystems) argues that despite theoretical changes within ecology, there "are conclusions [regarding nature and humans] that transcend our present-day circumstances." Of the three he offers, the first is worth quoting in full:

Modern knowledge reveals that living nature, for all its private individualistic strivings, works by the principle of interdependency. Indeed, it can work only by that principle; no species, plant or animal, no person in society, has any chance of surviving without the energy or aid of others. This is not simply the discovery of today's natural science, however; it was also the discovery of the earliest cultures we know about. All the changes we can find in civilization, it is now clear, are

only changes in the patterns of this interdependency, not in the reality or necessity of interdependency itself. (78-9)

As a character in narrative K has to be written "in relation" (he breathes, he eats, he talks with others) but this relational being is developed minimally, and in terms mostly of feelings for family. He finds in caring for his mother (despite sensing she did not care much for him) a justification for his life; he considers as his children the pumpkin and melons he cultivates (7, 63, 113). Gardener he may be, but he demonstrates no special knowledge of plants, and seems to value gardening not for the opportunity to know other life-forms but for the sense it gives him of living outside civilization's temporal rhythms and patterns of self-assertion. K sees with neither a post-Linnaean naturalist's eye nor one shaped by an agrarian or gathering culture's need to recognize plants and their value. When the narrative does raise explicitly the issue of K's knowledge ("He had no fear of being poisoned [by the roots he ate], for he seemed to know the difference between a benign bitterness and a malign one") it shies away from an interpretation consistent with ecological thought by distancing K doubly from animal being "*as though* he had *once been* an animal" and talking of his "soul" (102, emphasis added). His imagining of a familial relation with earth and crop does reveal sentimental attachments,

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but such affection, though it forms in the novel the ground for reading K as gentle, caring, non-dominating, does need to be distinguished from a sense of ecological relation. Coetzee in his later *The Lives of Animals* demonstrates that he is aware of this difference, when his central character articulates an understanding that ecology sheds unsentimental light on "systems of interactions" within which individual living beings emerge as those interactions' "earthly, material embodiments" (54). It is precisely this systemic vision that is lacking both in K and in the way the narrator builds his representation of K, a lack that parallels K's lack of a sense of social connection.

What significance the narrative does assign nature derives from its complex literary form and the significance it develops for its protagonist. As Head (among others) has noted, the novel blends conventions drawn from two distinct discourses on narrative, so that it simultaneously enacts self-reflexivity and presents material that can be grasped as "literal." Critics have tended to focus on the self-reflexive dimension, on the narrative's self-conscious "textuality" (a quality Coetzee is happy to acknowledge in interview) and though Head has offered valuable general comment on the details delivered in the realist dimension ("elements of typical historical action alongside the developing personal engagement of an individual in history") more needs to be said about how these construct K as isolate (Coetzee, *Doubling* 206; Head, *J. M. Coetzee* 98). First, the "historical action" in this case involves a story pattern of birth, childhood, youth, and work-life in a city, a journey into the country, life alone in the country (intruded on a number of times) and then an eventual return to the city. The "developing personal engagement" reveals the narrative providing for K a plausible subjectivity, with his patterns of thinking and feeling altering as he experiences first his ever-widening (and sought after) sense of dissociation from "civilization" and then his various periods of capture and confinement. To prepare for understanding this subjectivity, the novel's opening pages elaborate meticulously an origin for his life as an outsider, his comfort with solitude, his desire for it. In this depiction, drawing on familiar South African forms of racial discrimination, K is revealed as doubly dispossessed: without social status (the apparently fatherless child of a "Coloured" servant-woman whose only home is a servant's quarters in someone else's home) and without a cultural legacy he can consider his own (instructed to stay quiet while she does house-work for a different "race" of people for whom this urban setting was created, taught at Huis Norenius the skills for similar work).

But even so, K might have found common cause with others suffering his not uncommon fate, if it were not for the hare-lip on which the first sentence focuses. Strode finds it a detail that serves to explain K's later "lack of sociality" and his lack of interest in all that modern sociality encourages, acquiring property, settling into a home, starting a family, etc. (Strode 189). One might argue further that the hare-lip provides the one detail that allows the reader to grasp K's distance not only from those in the "master" class (he has that distance already) but from someone like Robert (from similar social background, who includes K in an "us") and the guerillas (with whom K does feel an urge to join in comradeship) (*Michael K* 77-88, 109). The narrative signals K's subjectivity from the outset as one that would make unlikely his identification with any social group, and especially those he might be expected to ally with politically. Just as the narrative in this realist dimension focuses attention past the apartheid setting to typical features of modern social

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organization, so it focuses attention past K's historically determined identity and its racial and class elements. K's status as outsider, in other words, is to be interpreted not as representative, but as singular.²

It is this figure of K as social nonentity (Attwell quotes a perplexed but perceptive reviewer in the *African Communist* who writes of K as "an amoeba, from whose life we can draw neither example nor warning") on which the narrative reflects in its metafictional dimension (92). If 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. Head, Attwell and others have commented well on the narrative's focus on "textuality," and Head's remark on K's "elusiveness" (influenced by Attwell's analysis) can be taken as representative: in the way K "eludes final meanings and [his] story challenges the power of interpretation," there is "an obvious parallel with Derridean notions of textuality" (*J. M. Coetzee* 97). What I want to add, shifting attention from the novel's narrative ambiguities, is that it is in this metafictional dimension that the often-observed references to colonialism supply the narrative its temporal depth (as well as offering a context in which to understand the motivation for narrating K's life in such a way as to not "colonize" him). If the span of K's life (still in progress at the narrative's end) defines the time of his encounters with modernity, it is the metafictional dimension that proposes the link between the institutions of a modern nation state and European colonialism.

As readers we are aware that the narrative, from its title on, is an artifact aware that it proceeds through literary territory already traced by earlier texts. In ways (almost) parallel, K (entirely unaware) moves through physical territory similarly marked by textual tracing. The narrative alludes early to the "east-west shipping lanes around the Cape of Good Hope," suggesting a general context in which to understand how this region of Africa comes to be marked by place names reflecting Dutch and British settlement—and how as narrative it bears a title alluding to Kafka and eighteenth-century British novels (12). And in this narrative which figures the struggle for control of a nation state, the text alludes to past wars among competing settler communities, pairing Prince Albert with Stellenbosch, names reminiscent of the elites who engaged in the South African War of 1899-1902 (Stellenbosch named for the seventeenth-century Dutch governor of the Cape Colony, Simon van der Stel). Moses has pointed to the allusive reach (signaling "colonial slave plantations" and "wars of imperial conquest") in K's wish for cinnamon and sugar as he bites into his pumpkin, though he could have mentioned as well that the pumpkin, *Cucurbita pepo*, is not an African gourd, and would have arrived in the Cape as part of the bounty Europe was extracting from the Americas (150). It is not only territory and material objects that carry the imprint of a colonial history: K's official racial classification indicates how he too has been inscribed with an identity (which appears to mean nothing to him) rooted in a colonial past. The term "Coloured," though people have through the time of its circulation given it a rich and complex significance, is a term colonial authorities in the Cape assigned to those who did not fit the simple settler/native binary, descended (mostly) from slaves from Madagascar and the Dutch East Indies, indigenous Khoi (likewise enslaved) and Europeans.³

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A further layer of allusion to a European colonial past, to narratives influential in British culture and serving to normalize colonial adventure, strengthens its suggestion that modernity's forms of domination are identical with those of colonialism. K (and here again, as character he appears unaware, even when speaking words that supply the reference) is marked not only as subject to forces deriving from these symbiotic historical processes, but as one who inverts their values, who acts out the possibility of rejecting empire's values in a world defined by them. Through intertextual reference to Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe* and Virgil's *Aeneid* especially (Defoe's novel written in the early eighteenth century when the British ruling class had for a while been drawing on Roman history to justify their expansionism) the narrative develops K as anti-Crusoe and anti-Aeneas, devoid of the single-minded focus, the acquisitive and dominating impulses of the original figures.⁴ This is no place for a full reading of *Michael K* beside its two intertexts (the *Aeneid* is written with complicating irony): what matters is that K's journey is written as contrary to key features of the narratives it echoes (for example: presented with tools in an abandoned farmhouse that parallels Crusoe's wrecked ship, K rejects them, not wanting to involve himself in further activity that will tie him to civilization; celebrating his relationship with his mother, idealized in memory and imagined now as one with the earth, K, very unlike Aeneas, rejects the idea of "found[ing] a rival line," and instead, is content to think of the plants he grows from the earth as his children [104]). K's narrative highlights especially the masculinism shaping this past. In Aeneas' story a patriarchal order threatened after long struggle is restored and emerges in the process stronger than before. In Crusoe's story (which refracts an increasingly confident modernity), rebelling against patriarchal order becomes the means for a man to expand, reconstitute and strengthen that order using the world's

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resources and its people as his tools. K with no apparent biological father disrupts this tradition, spending his life negotiating and where possible avoiding figures that stand in for fatherly authority. He flees a "burning city," but not as Prince with father on his back and a mission to reestablish his line elsewhere: he wants simply to help his ailing mother be happy, to be present in the glow of her happiness, as he takes her from an unruly city to a childhood home geographically obscure, though clear in her daydream.⁵ K's version of Crusoe's island, the Visagie farm, the place he identifies with his now dead mother ("not yet risen"), he is forced to leave by agents of the state, at a point when he is so weakened physically and mentally that he is close to death (105). This "island" gives him no tangible asset, from which to return to civilization richer than before, only a sentimental and impractical dream of return. But along the way he passes comment on the character of Crusoe when he dismisses the Visagie grandson as "a boy on an adventure [...] to him the farm is just a place for adventure," thereby recalling how Coetzee's title displaces Defoe's "life and adventures" with "life & times," and recalling too the role stories of "adventure" played in fostering a culture of imperialism (*Michael K* 63; see *Green Dreams of Adventure*).

Noting how *Michael K* through such textual echoes suggests temporal continuities for modern institutions, thereby providing a history of discourse through which these institutions can be interpreted, helps focus the idea that the novel "interrogates colonialism's discursive power." Coetzee's early work in linguistics may indeed (as Attwell claims) have prepared him for the kind of complex focus

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on signification that marks his novels as postmodern, but it also prepared him for approaching colonial history through a focus on language that gives him an important place in the history of postcolonialism—in narrative strategies anticipating the theoretical turn taken by Said towards examining colonial discourse's constitutive power (Attwell 4, 33). (*Dusklands* was first published in 1974, *Orientalism* in 1978.) In *Michael K* Coetzee deploys these strategies, creating a narrative shaped by two kinds of literary discourse (the realist, which sets an isolate in opposition to modern social and political institutions in order to reveal their capacity for oppression, and the metafictional, which de-solidifies both character and institutions, revealing them both as consequences of colonial discourse in action), and thereby articulates a suspicion of the nation state characteristically postcolonial. The historical moment in which he chooses to do so adds to the narrative's significance. *Michael K*, published in 1983, during intensifying civil war fueled by memories of the uprising that began in Soweto on June 16th, 1976 (claiming upward of 575 lives country-wide by February 1977) and of the death in police custody of Black Consciousness Movement leader, Steve Biko (September 1977), bypasses this battle for South Africa even while referencing it through its fictional depiction of a society in civil conflict.⁶ Though the novel indicates Coetzee's profound antipathy to the apartheid state, instead of proceeding as a script calling for the state's liberation from its current regime through installation of a new one, it points instead to the state's inherently coercive structures and links these to a history of European global expansion.⁷

For ecocritical reading, the question thus rises: in this reflection on modern politics, suggesting that the nation state supplies either a shallow, compromised freedom or none at all, where is nature? Certainly "gardening," as Attwell and Head claim, emerges as a life-giving alternative to modernity's "camps," and Wright is accurate in claiming that K is drawn with a cluster of "chthonic" associations "with its own ahistorical order" ("Black Earth" 437). But what needs noting is that the novel's writing of nature is subordinate to its profound suspicion of modernity and that as a result its assigning of value to nature reproduces the terms of a broadly conceived "romantic" discourse—though, through its reflexivity, it also works to discount such romanticism. For an ecocriticism of the sort I am proposing the deployment of this discourse in the novel's writing of nature matters for how it helps give content to the distance from ecological thinking already noted.

In its realist dimension, the narrative inscribes nature using a standard romantic trope, marking it with the sign of distance from the social. In this dimension, details supply the narrative its topographical coherence, within which it tracks a journey from city to country conceived, undertaken, then reversed, before being dreamed of again as possible. Representing a place away from civilization (K's mountain cave he considers as a point furthest from humanity [66]) nature is where K seeks relief from modernity's oppressions, where, in ways typically romantic—as Moses suggests in his pairing of *Michael K* and Rousseau's *Reveries of a Solitary Walker*—physical distance from society permits K moments of enjoying a full sense of being. Within the topographical frame defined by city (flats, streets, camps) and country (open plains, farms, mountains) nature has value to K (beyond the food it provides him) for the moods it prompts in him, ranging from elation to depression, for the ways it is filtered through reverie, or, most important, for

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moments in which he loses track of time, which early in the novel are named as providing the pleasure K takes in his gardening job (4). While noting that K observes the world around him enough to be able to live from it the narrative focuses rather on K's mental states, which lead him not to thoughtful observations on nature's other lives, but to a self-absorbed reflection (on the pumpkins as his children, for example) or to blissful periods of no thought whatsoever.

And just as K's significance is developed in the novel's two sets of narrative conventions, so too is nature's, and the same detail can function likewise in both dimensions. For example, the lizard K kills and eats is literally that, serving to keep his body alive (65). But in the context of his earlier killing of the goat the killing of the lizard (as with other passages emphasizing the materiality of nature) serves a more complex purpose in the narrative's metafictional dimension (53). In Defoe's novel his central character's ability to act on the natural world for his own benefit is celebrated for ideological reasons; in Coetzee's novel K's struggle to kill the goat he finds on his "island" and his failure to take satisfaction in the killing marks him as anti-Crusoe (he notices the animal's struggle for its life and feels no relish in taking it). Yet, as other details reveal, K shows dexterity in dispatching (and cooking) lizards and birds, grasshoppers and termites. K's skill is not less than Crusoe's and he appears just as pragmatic (when he can't eat sufficient goat to prevent its remains from rotting, he comments: "The lesson ... seemed to be not to kill such large animals"); but in his success with lizards (and such) K appears drawn as more "realistic" in order to underscore the ideological intent Defoe embodies in Crusoe (57).

The range of allusiveness in this metafictional dimension is wide but details function mostly to comment on the narrative's basic romantic tropes. Read together with details from the realist dimension they suggest the implausibility, in an era of the complete subordination of the earth to systems of property sustained by military convoys, etc., of various dreams of escape generated by overbearing civilizations. What matters in this dimension is that the Crusoe spirit has in intervening centuries come to dominate the living earth so entirely that K finds little that is unfenced, unowned. For K there is no sanctuary, his attempts failing in two key moments: first, when, in an inversion of the Crusoe story, the intruder on his island, the Visagie grandson, expects K to be his servant, and then when soldiers haul him back to the city as suspected enemy of the state (an intervention that seems only by a short while to have beaten out death's). Moses makes a similar point when indicating the echoes of Rousseau in *Michael K*, and arguing that the narrative as a whole suggests both "the ultimate power of the political world" and how "its very oppressiveness may provoke a quest for an alternative realm of radical freedom and autonomous solitude" (153). Wright has suggested echoes of Wordsworth's project in poems such as "Resolution and Independence," especially in those moments when K through identification with the earth seems barely human, but (with the novel's focus on modernity's power in mind) it is more accurate to find the inspiration Wordsworth finds in such figures as the leech-gatherer undercut and commented on in Coetzee's narrative ("Chthonic Man" 7).⁸

In the realist dimension the narrative's attention to "the scratch of ant-feet," to "the tiny cold searching of [a fly's] proboscis" on K's mouth, suggests Coetzee's concern to write the natural world K moves through avoiding the "tedium of reproduction" of standard South African landscape writing (*Michael K* 97, 71; *Doubling*

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142). Wright has commented well on this specificity of image with which the narrative develops its "earthscapes" and though the attention to other life surrounding K tends to be subordinate to elaborating his significance as character—the ant-feet deployed to mark K's sense of himself as not making demands on life, and the insect (and stone) images in general marking K's distance from (warm-blooded) humanity—its specificity grounds the abstract game that reveals this Southern Africa territory as thoroughly written over with a European textual tracing ("Chthonic Man" 2). The place names serve as example, but so too do the story patterns and the conventions guiding the narrative's development. The narrative depicts the modern nation dragging in its wake attitudes and behaviors from a past in which it emerged as a product of European colonial adventure; so too come literary traditions, which serve as scripts for the reproduction of these attitudes and behaviors (including dreams of escape). If K discovers in his stay on the Visagie farm that his times provide no islands without owners, the narrative, as carefully constructed echo-chamber, works to teach the reader a similar lesson (61). The job of the writer (this novel suggests) is to be explicit about modernity's textual freight and to work to illuminate it, transform it, and (where possible) dismantle it. How nature has been written about during that history (as resource for enrichment, as island of tranquility) is part of that freight and needs to be worked on in the same way. Through this process the narrative offers no reason to believe that nature, written as subject to institutional and discursive power, can serve as point of

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resistance, whether to modern institutions or to history's dominating discourses.

Yet, there is one crucial way in which nature is written as "answering back"—as indicating a need to limit discussion of its subjection to discourse. How K's suffering follows as material consequence from his desires and choices when he attempts to "live off the land" indicates the value the narrative assigns to organic life. Moses elaborates well how the narrative insists on K's physical fragility both in the cave and in his longer stay in his burrow, yet he perhaps does not do full justice to the persistent reference to disease: the references to weakness, dizziness, delirium, the "shiverings that will not stop," the "continual taste of blood in his mouth" (68-69, 117-26). In these times K's physical disease and mental state seem to exist in a positive feedback loop: the narrative refers frequently to K's stupor, listlessness, and languor (as well as to his excessive sleep). Such references increase during K's time in the burrow, together with (in ironic echo of *Robinson Crusoe*) episodes of fear and intense anxiety as he imagines being captured, his hide-away discovered, by "savages" who, this time, are representatives of the state. Over this second bout of illness hangs the suggestion of slow suicide, which the unwelcome conclusion to his first bout of illness (walking into the arms of the state) would support. K in these sections of the novel cuts a very different figure from the one exhilarated by the idea of country life, when he first trundles his mother out of the city on the burrow. So K suffers from the limits placed on him not only by modern institutions (in origin symbiotic with colonial activity), but by organic life being inescapably time-bound. Here the novel indicates the contradiction at the heart of K's quest to escape history: K's relishing of isolated reverie in nature leads him into collision with a determining fact of life, that bodies, their birth and daily renewal, exist only in time. As its title punningly suggests, *Michael K* can be read as taking the suggestion provided by a key passage towards the end of *Waiting for the Barbarians*, the novel that precedes it, in which the Magistrate develops a

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culminating reflection on the time of empire and yearns to live outside it, subject to different rhythms (133). *Michael K* takes that yearning as its subject and explores the meaning of those other times in a world dominated by Empire's history. The realist dimension suggests the narrative's ambivalence towards this yearning: all the joy K finds in his life in nature—and especially his timeless bliss—has to be balanced with the suffering and the suggestion that the drift into reverie is linked to a death wish (which then also implicates both his mother's initiating dream and K's final lyrical flight of fancy, to be discussed below). If *Michael K* explores how life outside Empire is unsustainable, then it asks us to recognize the limits to modern freedom, which offers either life complicit with patriarchal forms of dominating both nature and people or attempts to escape physically, mentally, that are doomed to fail.

But what might it mean for an ecocriticism of the sort I am proposing, one that attends to the social and historical dimensions of discourse, that *Michael K* should write nature this way, so marked by "textuality" and so unavailable as position from which to resist the material and discursive power of the modern nation state—and therefore, by implication, unavailable for those who want to advance an ecological vision of life? For, contrary to Head's assertion that *Michael K* prompts recognition of a materiality resistant to over-textualization, it would seem that the novel's focus on colonial discourse suggests the fragility of any attempt to find in relation-with-nature a means to confront modernity's oppressive power (landmines, after all, supplant K's pumpkins). It is precisely this way that *Michael K* appears to devalue nature as site of resistance or historical transformation, writing it by using and simultaneously undermining broadly romantic tropes, that is of interest and calls for ecocritical interpretation. Such interpretation would begin, I suggest, by noting how, in 1983, the novel responds to its violently divided social world (and in the process inscribes nature) with a form of postcolonial discourse marked by a critical focus on textuality and profound suspicion of nationalism.⁹ Lazarus argues that postcolonial studies in the late 1970s and through the 1980s developed a positioning that combined "antiliberalism" with opposition to the "dominant forms of antiliberalist discourse (right-wing, Eurocentric...)" (113). And this formulation would seem to capture well the way the novel, through writing its region of South Africa in a space-time continuum marked by modernity's expansion, suggests that however good it would be to remove the apartheid regime, the nation, at a profound level, is not worth fighting over. Any "liberation" would be unable to alter the inevitable power relations that construct South Africa both as modern nation within its own borders and as nation in a global network (with centers which would continue to hold South Africa subordinate). Chrisman, in a recent essay, has argued that the culturalist tendencies of postcolonial critique at its inception led it to adopt a prematurely dismissive view of nations and nationalism—and *Michael K* could be added to the texts she cites as evidence, especially for the way that it represents the nation as a "dominatory formation" explicable in terms of narrative scripts (188, 193). Historicizing

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in this way the novel's version of postcolonial thinking can help put its refusals in perspective and suggest ways of thinking beyond them, which might have value for a postcolonial ecology.

The modern nation-state system of course supplies reasons enough to reject it, reproducing as it does the inequities, bigotries, and control mechanisms of

[RAL100]

modernizing processes in all their earlier phases. (And *Michael K* suggests the harshness in the disciplining suffered by vagrants who find themselves excluded within and between modern states.) Nonetheless, as Chrisman points out, it is the nation state that provides the arena in which people are fated to seek improvement in their lives. In our human relation to nature, such desire for improvement has found expression among the world's relatively prosperous in an environmental concern that seeks to reduce the impact of social life on natural systems by reorganizing production and reducing consumption. It is within nations (and in treaties between nations) that such concern finds translation into policy. For the world's poor, too, both urban and rural, it is within nations that people seek solutions in their quest for access to land, to clean water, to decent, unpolluted living and working conditions—in their quest, in other words, for a sustainable future (what Guha and Martinez-Alier have termed an "environmentalism of the poor"). *Michael K*'s suspicion of the nation as social form precludes this awareness of the nation's (limited) positive value and in its specific articulation of that suspicion, forestalls the thinking that could deploy ecological knowledge in addressing environmental problems in all social sectors.

Lazarus (along with others) has called for a "new materialist tendency" in postcolonial thinking, one which complicates its inherited culturalism, and it is within this tendency, I suggest, that postcolonialism can best find rapprochement with ecocriticism (Lazarus 120-21, and see, e.g., Chrisman, Dirlik, Hoogvelt and Brennan). Viewing discourse materially, as one moment among many in social processes shaped by relations internal (among humans) and external (between humans and the non-human world), supplies these two modes of interpretation their conceptual bridge. Yet rather than develop the details of such rapprochement theoretically, in isolation from the very social processes it is designed to address, I suggest a postcolonial ecocriticism might unfold through critical engagement with environmental discourses emerging in response to local conditions—and differing as local conditions differ. Turning to environmental tendencies current in South Africa can both clarify what *Michael K* misses in its reflexive reliance on romantic tropes and indicate as well an emergent form of postcolonial thinking, one less culturalist, less intently focused on textuality.¹⁰

Beginning in the late 1980s, just a few years after *Michael K*'s publication, environmental concern in South Africa shifted from being rooted in colonial-style conservation to asserting the need for a people-centered approach to the natural environment. (See Vital "Situating" 298-299.) Among the varieties of people-centered approaches (including those fostered by government) it is the country's environmental justice movement that embodies the greatest potential for being socially progressive and, I suggest, represents an emerging form of postcolonialism for how it defines the field of its ecosocial activities and the best ways to operate therein. Not encumbered as government is by need to grow an economy in alliance with big capital, environmental justice thinkers can grasp capital's power both to shape (and distort) local social opportunity and to override or fund (and then withdraw funding for) local environmental initiatives. Recognizing that social inequalities and the current state of natural environments are consequences of a colonial past, they nonetheless recognize that anticolonial liberation discourse is of little use in the daily struggle to improve lives materially. The nation state is not rejected a priori nor is it considered a natural ally but instead serves as the

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arena in which to stage local struggles. The state, in a world where government is forced to play by the rules of a neoliberal global order, is something to be negotiated, drawn on where useful, defended against where damaging—in the same way that cultural and economic influences from outside the country's borders are negotiated, either accepted or rejected, whichever is advantageous. (The term "environmental justice" was adopted from the United States where it developed within African American communities.)

In its awareness of a tension-filled interdependence of local and global at both economic and cultural levels and a need to work flexibly within the force-fields set up by this interdependence (which merge with those set up by histories of European colonial activity) this environmentalism affords valuable opportunity for rethinking ecology and postcolonialism in terms of each other. For the present I will simply draw on this thinking in outline to suggest the limits for an African ecocriticism of *Michael K*'s culturalism, its finding in textuality an interpretation of both social institutions and landscape. As already noted, the narrative's focus on *K* as isolate precludes it from exploring

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an ecological understanding of the social world as emerging from and interacting with natural systems, in which the nature-society boundary is grasped not as a line marking opposition, but as a space of intersection within which laws of cause and effect apply and through which information circulates ceaselessly. Similarly, with K drawn as isolate there is no recognition that human relation to nature is fundamentally communal and social and that for those impoverished by modernity's advance environmental problems affect communities, require community response. Moreover, while the novel's submerging of Southern Africa under only European textual traces acknowledges the power of a global modernity rooted in European expansionism, it obliterates signs of local African voices and how they might, through their own negotiation of modernity, articulate versions of the nature-human relation. (See Parry 150-51 for a similar comment on the novel's exclusion of African cultural traces.) *Michael K*, by focusing attention on the nation state and its colonial origins, appears to set itself against the daily work of improvement in specifically African communities, speaking instead to the nightmarish possibility (available to all, independent of cultural inheritance) that this modernity will not, despite progressive intentions, become something much other than what it has been. The problem with modern social institutions, the novel suggests, is structural, independent of who is at the helm. In this way it serves warning of what any popular movement (including the environmental justice movement) will need to compromise with, enter into complicity with, as it advances its interests within the current nation-state system.

Nonetheless at this level of awareness the novel does not leave the reader with an overriding oppressiveness and here it is important to turn again to the complexity of its literary form. K, after all, with a little help from the state, survives to avoid (for the moment) confinement by the state. K in his evasiveness does indeed endure. As a figure of alterity, one who is already subject in social identity to social history, K is written in such a way as to evade further subjection by either authorial or readerly interpretation, what Attwell has aptly termed "hermeneutic capture" (92). More important, the yearning that motivates the dream of life outside history (in K's case associated with a mother-focused ethic of care that sets in relief a history marked by patriarchal domination) is not

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by the novel's close extinguished. The narrative through its images and allusions organizes the reader's own awareness of history's oppressiveness—while simultaneously supplying images of an alternative kind of life, not historically possible, but haunting history with its combined impossibility and ethical necessity. The novel's closing pages make this complex effect most clear, as they appeal to a utopian intuition that there has (somewhere) to be a life lived differently, lived better, more worthy of what we could be as humans, while at the same time they underscore the limits of this intuition.

Just as the pumpkins K cultivates serve as better index of a decent humanity than the landmines planted by the state, so too K's teaspoon of water is measured against the name of the building in which he daydreams: "Côte d'Azure," sign of the comfortable class's fantasy of how elsewhere, in Europe, "one can live" a glamorous leisure-filled life, one which rests on unthinking use both of nature and of people who, like Anna, find themselves born into social strata that give them no option but to provide invisible labor (184). Of similar quality is K's simple delight (the delight of an anti-Crusoe, an anti-Aeneas, untainted by the will to dominate) in the idea of "the vivid green, pumpkin leaf or carrot-brush" that he might help bring to fruit from the seed he plants (183). Yet, whatever the attractiveness in K's concluding desire to return to the land, his daydreams occur in the place where his mother's daydream had set in motion his journey with its pattern of escape, physical decline and capture (the fact that he daydreams again in this setting suggests an endlessness to the cycle). Everything about K's lyrical fantasy points to the way it is underdetermined, revealing his lack of knowledge of a historically shaped world (which contrasts with the narrator's ironic knowingness). K seems not to know as well what he could and should remember, the suffering, mental and physical, that followed from his earlier good-hearted dreams of living well. His impulse, equally good-hearted, to share this dreamed-of better life with the old man as yet unmet is similarly suspect: the room's absent resident may in actuality be neither an old man nor amenable.

There may be no way to recruit K to the historical work of social healing and environmental repair, but his elusiveness (singular and solitary) speaks to a special hunger born of late modernity. Old forms of society reproducing themselves through slow change in stable sustainable ways, reinforced daily by common culture, seem no longer possible in this world in which colonialism's work does not cease (continuing now in multiple guises globally, originating in multiple centers of economic activity). Modernity continues its transformation of the earth fueled by a desire itself transformed by modernity's enhanced opportunities for consumption, seducing with these

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opportunities wherever they appear. (Ferguson calls us the “first-class world” no matter where on the planet we live [175].) New social forms which match the ecosocial integrity of the old may be conceivable in reverie, but in practice exist as K does, elusive, ultimately outside of interpretation’s reach. For readers wanting to make a world different from the one (set in motion circa 1492) in which they are caught, there remains only daily ameliorative work, compromised and complicit, which this novel shies away from depicting, about which this novel, to complicate our understanding, remains silent.

NOTES

¹ Harvey provides valuable analysis of discourse in relation to social process, which might provide a model for such interpretation.

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² There is a tendency to read K as representative. K’s silence has been read by Wright as figure for colonial history’s silencing of “blacks” (Wright, “Black Earth” 442). Head reads K as “symbolizing” his “people” and the narrative as a whole as embodying a “paternal ethnocentrism” that goes “hand in hand” with the novel’s “lingering realism” (*J. M. Coetzee* 109; “The (Im)possibility” 37)

³ For recent work on “Coloured” identity formation, see Erasmus. Not writing from within this “Coloured” community, Coetzee’s construction of K as “singular” signals his desire (often commented on) to negotiate ethically the complex issues of agency and representation bequeathed by colonial history—though Parry argues he does not succeed.

⁴ In this section I draw on Vital (“Reading”); see also Marais and Franssen. Marais focuses on the novel’s treatment of epistemology, the way K inverts the Cartesianism that underpins Defoe’s novel. Difference between the novels may not be schematic, though, and in places may instead highlight ethical and political rather than epistemological issues. For debate on the link between European expansion and the development of modernity as we know it, see Blaut.

⁵ The Medical Officer reinforces this interpretation of the story-line but he over-reads, imposing a more properly Virgilian significance: Cape Town is not literally burning when K leaves; and “filial piety” distorts as well (150). “Piety” through its root denotes reverence for the father, whereas K’s concern is for the well-being of his mother, she who, he will say when he is on the farm, is buried but “not yet risen.”

⁶ Attwell in various sections of his book articulates a good account of South Africa’s social and political situation during the roughly two decades during which Coetzee wrote his first six novels (early 1970s to the late 1980s). Coetzee in an interview with Attwell referred to *Michael K* in these terms: “to a reader [concerned with models of behavior in the face of oppression] much of the text of *Michael K* is just one fancy evasion after another of an overriding question: how shall the tyranny of apartheid be ended?” (*Doubling* 207)

⁷ The novel’s relation to the concurrent struggle for South Africa annoyed its critics from the start and Coetzee has commented on the pressure he felt to conform his novel-writing with a “political discourse” interpreting all things South African in terms of the struggle against apartheid. That he should have felt a “duty ... ethical, perhaps” to resist such pressure may have been at least partly related to his awareness that independence in Africa resulted in forms of neo-colonialism (*Doubling* 200). With contemporary news stories of “Fortress Europe” and the U.S.A. using fences and advanced technology in the battle to keep out paperless migrants, *Michael K*’s vision retains its plausibility. (See, for example, Ghanmi.) Both regions have their detention camps (as does South Africa—the Lindela Detention Centre outside Johannesburg, for example) for those who do not play by the rules of the nation-state system. The difference between these migrants and K is that they tend to have economic motives—though in among them there are likely too to be some fleeing the irrational and damaging attentions of their own states.

⁸ One other European text drawn into the novel’s allusive reach sets *Michael K* to comment on another dream of escape, an eighteenth-century British fascination with rural retirement inspired by the spirit of Horace and Virgil. Fielding’s *Joseph Andrews* begins (as does *Michael K*) with a summary account of its eponymous hero’s childhood and youth (written as parody of by then conventional practice), uses in its title the same formula that *Robinson Crusoe* uses (“the life and adventures of”), and is plotted on a journey from city to country. Though *Joseph Andrews* treats with scorn the self-centered, social climbing, non-conformist values evidenced by the likes of Crusoe, it too

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(and this is only one perspective *Michael K* opens onto Fielding's novel) subordinates its celebration of a life outside society to a celebration of patriarchal order reformed through

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discovery of proper country living, one with its justifications in knowledge of ancient Rome. K, creation of colonial history, wanting (unsuccessfully) only to escape in nature the oppressiveness of the society derived from that past, exposes the element of bad faith in such fantasies in which (in a century when England led Europe in world-wide commerce) a gentleman's life in the country models a superior ethic.

⁹ Coetzee's remarks on the novel's "rivalry" with history are by now well-known (cited Attwell 15)—and might in this novel clarify its refusal to accept the modern nation as a given. In this context, while K obviously alludes to Kafka, both initials of K's name allude to and displace two other MKs, each with strategies for winning national power: MK is the nickname of Umkhonto we Sizwe (Spear of the Nation) armed wing of the African National Congress, figured by the narrative's guerrilla fighters; and MK represents as well the first names of Mohandas K. Gandhi who, in South Africa, developed his philosophy of non-violent mass resistance (satyagraha) deployed in the liberation of India. Gandhi's spirit of communal resistance to modernity lives on in such movements as Sarvodaya in Sri Lanka, which organizes village life in ways that are equitable and sustainable. With the line in this novel drawn so firmly between K as isolate and social history there is no room for exploration of such experiments in communal life.

¹⁰ For a valuable introduction to writing which articulates South Africa's environmental justice movement (acknowledged to be fractured and involving deep differences in analysis and strategy) see McDonald. Cock offers equally valuable sociological analysis of the movement now, its different participants and positions, while Bond represents a position more radically oppositional to the current social-political order. For a good account of the shift in the character of South African environmentalism see Khan.

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