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Coetzee's Carcer[e]al State: Michael K as Hunter-Gatherer

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Abstract: In *Life & Times of Michael K*, J. M. Coetzee appears thoroughly persuaded by those anthropological theories—still emerging at the time of the novel's publication—that were reconceiving hunter-gatherer bands as happier, healthier, better-fed, more leisured, and less socially stratified communities than the permanent settlements of agriculturalists. By depicting Michael as a nutritionally and spiritually satisfied forager upon the karoo and by figuring the labor camps in which he is intermittently confined as epitomes of the Neolithic (and subsequent) grain state, Coetzee endorses those intellectual currents that have now supplanted the optimistic narrative of the Agricultural Revolution with that of the Agricultural Trap. In short, the novel figures the adoption of farming as a hedonic catastrophe for the great mass of humankind. Thus, critics who register their disappointment with the novel's supposed political quietism have failed to grasp the text's *longue durée* concerns or to realize that Michael refuses to aid the guerillas because their victory would only impose upon him a different version of agro-culture. By the same token, many critics' insistence that Michael is a vaguely allegorical figure offering some unrealizable alternative lifeway is refined into sharper focus by the revelation of his anthropological specificity.

Keywords: agriculture, hunter-gatherers, Coetzee, cereal grains, Neolithic

Critical responses to J. M. Coetzee's *Life & Times of Michael K* (1983) have frequently sounded a note of plaintive frustration. This arises

from the fact that while Michael steadfastly refuses to affirm the legitimacy of the (future, warring) apartheid state that hectors, imprisons, and exploits him, he also refuses to aid the enemies of that state, or to figure forth, in deed or thought, any kind of successor regime that might be more racially inclusive, more economically egalitarian, or even simply more pacific. The *locus classicus* of such objections is Nadine Gordimer's 1988 review of the novel, in which she claims that although Coetzee is "fiercely moved" by the plight of non-white South Africans, he "does not believe in the possibility of blacks establishing a new regime that will do much better"; she thus detects "a revulsion against all political and revolutionary solutions" running through the narrative. According to Gordimer, this antipathy prevents the author from "recogniz[ing] what the victims [of apartheid], seeing themselves as victims no longer, have done, are doing, and believe they must do for themselves." These sentiments are echoed and amplified by Derek Wright, for whom the novel implies "that the land is to be returned not to the blacks but to itself" (440). While "these two things could, conceivably, be the same, . . . there is no indication in the book that they will be"—a conclusion which leads Wright to dismiss Michael as "a hero of the white ecological Eighties" (440). Anthony Vital is equally disappointed to find that *Life & Times* suggests "that however good it would be to remove the apartheid regime, the nation, at a profound level, is not worth fighting over" (99), a mistaken resignation, in his opinion, since "it is the nation state that provides the area in which people are fated to seek improvement in their lives" (100). Even co-authors of *Empire* Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri warn that, by itself, an absolute refusal "of work and authority" like that manifested by Michael (and by Herman Melville's Bartleby) is "empty": although such characters may constitute "beautiful souls, . . . their being in its absolute purity hangs on the edge of an abyss" because "their lines of flight from authority are completely solitary" (204). Instead, Hardt and Negri require an "exodus" that "create[s] a real alternative," in which "as part of [our] refusal, we . . . construct a new mode of life and above all a new community" (204). While all of these critics are correct in perceiving that *Life & Times* offers little hope to those attempting to

overthrow repressive political regimes by means of armed struggle at the level of the nation-state, they offer no real answers as to *why* the novel downplays this mode of action. The answer, I believe, is to be found in Coetzee's engagement with contemporary anthropological debates—an engagement which, despite the apparent quietism that puzzles and disappoints some readers, enlists Michael in a longer-term struggle whose stakes remain, in their own way, deeply political.

My own explanation of why Michael refuses to strive for or even imagine a successor polity is based on understanding Coetzee as familiar with, and sympathetic to, a new ensemble of ideas in cultural anthropology that was only beginning to gain significant ground when he wrote the novel in the early 1980s. This new conception maintained that our species' abandonment of hunting and gathering for the supposed benefits of fixed-field agriculture—which had thitherto been viewed as exponentially expanding the possibilities of human happiness—was in fact a thoroughgoing hedonic catastrophe. This rival to the long-established paradigm has, in the intervening years, steadily continued to gain adherents (Zerzan 255–56), growing in popularity to the extent that, as James C. Scott asserts in *Against the Grain: A Deep History of the Earliest States*, it has recently reached the realm of popular culture under the label of all things "Paleo" (10). The older conception, first propagated by the founding mythologies of the early Tigris-Euphrates grain states three millennia before the Common Era, remained largely unmodified until the mid-twentieth century (Sahlins 2–7), even among academic anthropologists and political scientists:

> some primitives, through luck or cleverness, domesticated crops and animals, founded sedentary communities, and went on to found towns and states. They left primitivism behind for state and civilization. The barbarians, according to this account, are the ones who did not make the transition, those who remained outside. After this great divergence there were two spheres: the civilized sphere of settlement, towns, and states on the one hand and the primitive sphere of mobile, dispersed hunters, foragers, and pastoralists on the other. The membrane

> between the two spheres was permeable, but only in one direction. Primitives could enter the sphere of civilization—this was, after all, the grand narrative—but it was inconceivable that the "civilized" could ever revert to primitivism. (Scott 230–31)

According to the competing conception, however, the Agricultural Revolution was not, as previous claimed, "a great step forward in human well-being, nutrition, and leisure"; indeed, it appears that "something like the opposite was initially the case" (Scott xii). As James Scott explains,

> [i]n fact, the early [grain] states had to capture and hold much of their population by forms of bondage and were plagued by the epidemics of crowding. The early states were fragile and liable to collapse, but the ensuing "dark ages" may often have marked an actual improvement in human welfare. Finally, there is a strong case to be made that life outside the state—life as a "barbarian"—may often have been materially easier, freer, and healthier than life at least for nonelites inside civilization. (xii)

This alternative view of our species' turn toward agriculture, to simplify slightly, arrived in two waves. The first, steadily advancing during the 1970s and 1980s, asserted that paleolithic hunter-gatherers were much happier and more food-secure than had previously been assumed; the second, articulated most forcefully from the late 1980s onward, insisted that denizens of the earliest agricultural states were much more miserable and food-insecure than had earlier been supposed. As we shall see, Coetzee's *Life & Times of Michael K* is remarkable for the consistency and specificity with which it both assimilates the still-evolving tenets of the first wave and anticipates the arguments of the second. My approach in what follows will be to touch, one by one, on the major assumptions of this school's view of farming's catastrophic triumph over foraging and to show how each of them is embodied and enacted in *Life & Times of Michael K*. The result, I hope, will be 1) a clearer understanding of why the novel refuses to commit to a successor nation-state to the one

it depicts, and 2) a better appreciation of Coetzee's tragic "big-history" view of our trajectory as a species.

Both the plot and diction of *Life & Times* strongly suggest that Coetzee was intellectually convinced and imaginatively inspired by those anthropologists attempting to recast what had once been lauded as "The Agricultural Revolution" into "The Agricultural Trap," a technological self-swindle that Jared Diamond eventually came to decry as "the worst decision our species ever made" (64–66). According to Hugh Brody, academic anthropologists date the beginning of the new thinking to 1972, when

> Marshall Sahlins published *Stone Age Economics*, a set of essays about economic anthropology. The first of these essays, "The Original Affluent Society," summarized the main discoveries emerging from anthropological field work: with small populations, low levels of need, and expertise in a particular landscape, human beings could eat well, enjoy much leisure, and evidence great health of body and mind. The central stereotype of human social evolution was more than contested and undermined: it was turned on its head. (118)

It is noteworthy, then, that in *White Writing: On the Culture of Letters in South Africa* (1988), Coetzee seconds many of the new paradigm's assertions. Take, for instance, the notion that the turn from hunting and gathering to agriculture, far from giving birth to the concept of leisure, was in fact "the first step in a long increase in drudgery" (Scott 95) that largely extinguished leisure for everyone except elites. According to this paradigm, the transition also spawned pervasive cultural slanders that depicted foragers as hedonistic and short-sighted, and thus unable to plan for (i.e., worry about) the future. In *White Writing*, Coetzee scrutinizes European explorer/settler descriptions of the Cape's Indigenous "Hottentots" (the KhoiKhoi), taking particular note of how these Indigenous people are chronically figured as indolent and providing an exhaustive catalogue of such characterizations. While doing so, he notes that the KhoiKhoi were represented as retrograde examples of humanity on both rational and religious grounds, since, on the one hand, to "the

[Enlightenment] science of Man, the spectacle of wholesale idleness is inherently scandalous" (11), while on the other hand "early Discourse of the Cape effectively excludes the Hottentot from Eden by deciding that, though he is human, he is not in the line of descent that leads from Adam via a life of toil to civilized men" (25).

Coetzee, apparently intrigued that so historically recent an encounter between invading agriculturalists (i.e., the European settler-colonialists) and pastoralist hunter-gatherers (the KhoiKhoi) has produced a literature so close to home, singles out the English explorer William John Burchell, who, diverging from his fellow colonialists, declares the Hottentots "the happiest of mortals" (32–33) and reminds his readers that Jean-Jacques Rousseau believed mankind's golden age to have occurred in "the phase of leisure intermediate between savage indolence and the . . . invention of metallurgy and agriculture" (24).[1] Viewing the invaders' discursive field as a whole, however, Coetzee detects a telling imaginative lacuna in the settler mindset, which he lyrically describes:

> Nowhere in the great echo chamber of the Discourse of the Cape is a voice raised to ask whether the life of the Hottentot may not be a version of life before the Fall (as Bartolomé de las Casas suggested in respect of the Indians of the New World), a life in which man is not yet condemned to eat his bread in the sweat of his brow, but instead may spend his days dozing in the sun, or in the shade when the sun grows too hot, half-aware of the singing of the birds and the breeze on his skin, bestirring himself to eat when hunger overtakes him, enjoying a pipe of tobacco when it is available, at one with his surroundings and unreflectively content. . . . [N]o one bothers to put, save rhetorically, the ethical question: which is better, to live like the ant, busily storing up food for the winter, or like the grasshopper, singing in the sun all day, heedless of the morrow? (18–19)

Coetzee, however, is clearly fascinated by this question and at times implies what his own answer might be: "With our wider historical perspective, we might also appreciate better what a massive cultural revolution is entailed when a people moves from a subsistence economy to

an economy of providence, from pastoralism to agriculture—a move, indeed, in which the notion of *work* may be said to make its appearance in history" (34; emphasis in original). This answer is even implied in his epigraph to the volume, a passage from Ovid in which Pallas inaugurates agriculture when commanded to plow and then sow the earth with dragon's teeth. Furthermore, an understanding that the Agricultural Trap associates humanity's transition from hunting and gathering to field tillage with the rise of the first ancient grain states—and that these political entities depended on unprecedented levels of coercion, social stratification, physical drudgery, and psychic simplification (Scott 9–10, 170–76)—can also illuminate Coetzee's novel *Waiting for the Barbarians* (1980). Within this paradigm, the Magistrate's desire to exist in the "time of the cycle of the seasons" (Coetzee, *Waiting* 153) rather than inside "the history that Empire imposes on its subjects" (178) is a similar (if forlorn) fantasy of escape into a pre-agricultural social condition. Hence, there is much explanatory value in seeing the protagonist of Coetzee's subsequent *Life & Times of Michael K* as a figure who, fitfully but significantly, embodies and enacts that longed-for condition. Striking out across the veldt, living contentedly off the land, and being hunted, imprisoned, and forced into field work (and force-fed as well) by soldiers of the grain state, Michael becomes an emblem for the forager conceived specifically as a benign alternative to the ecocidal farmer. As such, he embodies a way of life that Coetzee sees as historically and anthropologically prelapsarian.

Michael's self-description as a "gardener"—he plants and tends to crops with loving care whenever he is allowed to do so—surely masks his role as an embodiment of pre-agricultural practices. But anthropologists insist that the lifeways of hunter-gatherers who opportunistically scatter seeds in likely ground must be strictly distinguished from the wholly different social arrangements necessitated by the fixed-field, tilling intensive sedentary agriculture undertaken in the early (and present-day) grain state (Barker 60–69; Rowley-Conwy 63). As Melinda Zeder asserts, "cultigens and domestic animals were incorporated into the general round of subsistence strategies, sometimes for thousands of years, with little disruption of the traditional hunter-gatherer way of life" (99).

Peoples who, when conditions were right, sporadically sowed seeds on the edges of flood plains or promising riverine patches remained, like K, "dispersed and highly mobile, and lived in small settlements. They might be shifting cultivators, pastoralists, fisher folk, hunter-gatherers, forages, or small-scale collector-traders. They might even plant some grain and eat it, but grain was unlikely to be their dominant staple as it was for state subjects" (Scott 229).

Once K breaks out onto the veld, the narrator explains that "this was the beginning of his life as a cultivator" (59). I would suggest that Coetzee carefully chooses this word to differentiate his protagonist from the (few) farmers and (many) farm laborers whom he encounters throughout the novel, social roles that are tied to privately owned, fixed-field, stoop-worked, grain-state agriculture. We can hear the author's desire to parse this difference in the Medical Officer's overtly sarcastic tone as, having joined K's interrogation, he suggests Michael confess the truth about his "recent agricultural enterprise" (Coetzee, *Life & Times* 140). In the Officer's opinion, it doesn't qualify as one. The novel, I believe, concurs (but values that fact positively), portraying what Michael does not as sub- but rather as ante- (and perhaps anti-) agricultural. Indeed, at the novel's end, Michael, regretting his crop's vulnerability to destruction by the security forces, chastises himself for planting his pumpkins too much in the style of a farmer and not enough in the manner of a hunter-gatherer:

> Then my mistake was to plant all my seeds together in one patch. I should have planted them one at a time spread out over miles of veld in patches of soil no larger than my hand, and drawn a map and kept it with me at all times so that every night I could make a tour of the sites to water them. Because if there was one thing I discovered out in the country, it was that there is time enough for everything. (183)

Clearly, one can cultivate plants without literally or even figuratively domesticating oneself.

Dominic Head affirms that "K's life as a cultivator is only possible when he escapes the camps" (103). It is thus illuminating that,

in redescribing the rise of the ancient grain states, Scott provocatively labels agricultural proto-cities such as Uruk, Ur, and Akkad as "late-Neolithic multispecies resettlement camp[s]" (18), a term which clarifies the fact that Jakkalsdrif, Kenilsworth, and their like in the novel stand as epitomes of Scott's early agricultural state, with their rations of mealie-porridge, gangs of corvée labor, and elaborate bureaucracies of control (140–44). As Head would have it, such camps function as "anti-nomadic device[s]" (103), but one of the most revisionist assertions of those who posit an Agricultural Trap is that the primary function of the iconic walls of ancient grain states—and even of the Great Wall of China—was "to elevate the potentaties in command of the construction" (Manning 34) and to keep an unfree labor force in place rather than to keep "barbarians" out (Scott 29, 137–38, 233–34). As the guard at Jakkalsdrif warns Michael, "you climb the fence and I'll shoot you dead, mister" (Coetzee, *Life & Times* 85), and later the Medical Officer wonders whether the camps might "not close down" even "when the war is over" since "camps with high walls always hav[e] their uses" (147). Coetzee implies that so long as agriculture and the grain state endure, the walls that coerce hunter-gatherers into becoming full-time and unfree tillers of the soil will also persist.

When Michael is arrested for vagrancy in Prince Albert, his charge sheet lists him as "CM"—that is, "coloured male"—and "NFA," indicating that he has no fixed address. Many critics, rightly interested in Michael's resistance or lack thereof to the apartheid regime, have focused on the first abbreviation, but given my concerns in this essay, the second one also deserves attention. To belong to no permanent settlement is, in the eyes of the historical (as well as Coetzee's imaged) grain state, to be a "nomad"—a "barbarian"—and to thus be less than fully human. As Scott argues, this sharp distinction and its accompanying lockstep "sequence of progress from hunting and gathering to nomadism to agriculture" have been the "settled doctrine" at the center of agrarian ideology from the city-states of Sumer to the 1960s (9). Furthermore, although the police report lists Michael as "Unemployed," the fact is that there is simply "a radically different tempo to the lives of hunting and fishing peoples[,] . . . a rhythm that farmers often read as indolence"

(Scott 53). In the eyes of agriculturalists, hunter-gatherers are "uncaptured [by agro-state overseers] at the very least and, at worst, represent a nuisance and threat that must be exterminated" (221). K's serial arrests are therefore as much about habits of locomotion as they are about his coloration, since "weeds, varmints, vermin, and barbarians—the 'undomesticated'—threaten civilization in the grain state. They must either be mastered and domesticated, or failing that, exterminated or rigorously excluded from the domus" (Scott 221). Under agriculturalist ideology, to be errant in the sense of chronically mobile is also to be errant in the sense of sinning.

Unsurprisingly, those characters inculcated in established agrarian mythology look with condescension and pity on the "unfortunate" hunter-gatherer, and thus Robert, the veteran prisoner of Jakkalsdrif, declares K a "baby" who has "been asleep all [his] life" (Coetzee, *Life & Times* 88), while the Medical Officer initially calls him "a poor helpless soul" (141). For his part, Michael is quite aware that he is being seen through the lens of an agriculturalist ideology: he says of young Visagie's assessment of him, "He thinks I am an idiot who sleeps on the floor like an animal and lives on birds and lizards and does not know there is such a thing as money" (62). Of course Michael *does* live partly on birds and lizards, but he is cognizant that grain-eaters disparage such fare, just as he understands that those who live behind walls and fences would scoff at his burrow-shelter, that they would "shake their heads and say to each other: What shiftless creatures, how little pride they took in their work!" (101). Thus it follows that throughout the novel, Michael's extreme leanness is taken as a marker for his degraded condition, for his perverse rejection of the (supposed) cardinal benefit of sedentary agrarianism. It is only after a prolonged and inquisitive exposure to K that the Medical Officer begins to recognize that there might be a way to view him outside of the grain state's assumptions, inadvertently stating a truth when he muses that "maybe he eats only the bread of freedom" (146). At this point, he ceases thinking of Michael's way of life as degraded and begins considering it as radically alternative: "Maybe he is just a very thin man" (146).

Coetzee makes the issue of what Michael eats and how often of central importance. Whereas the traditional narrative of the Agricultural

Revolution envisions a cultural win-win, in which humanity traded a precarious and brutal existence of hunting and gathering for a more "civilized" existence made possible by a forward leap in food security, the rival account highlights the new "diseases of sedentism and crowding" (chiefly due to chronic contact with domesticated animals), exacerbated by "an increasingly agricultural diet [that was] deficient in many essential nutrients" (Scott 107). Thus, within and without the walls of the early city-states, "a diet that weakened the vulnerable" was combined with "new infectious diseases which carried them off" (107). Nor was this inferior nutrition reliably available. The frequency of accounts of famines in the ancient historical record "suggest the opposite" of the received mythology, so much so that "famine was the mark of a maturing agricultural society, the very badge of civilization" (Manning 69). Within the camps and on corvée labor details, Michael is often fed penurious portions of grain-based foods such as "mealie-porridge" (Coetzee, *Life & Times* 70) and "soft white bread" that he vomits up (123). Other products of sedentism, such as the wine, milk, and bread he consumes after returning to the seaside make him feel "that what he had previously thought of in himself as tough and rope-like was becoming soggy and fibrous" (177). As he eventually tells the Medical Officer: "I can't eat the food here, that's all. I can't eat camp food" (146). Encompassing the related ills of the late-Neolithic multispecies resettlement camp, K laments an "earth stamped so tight" by the crowded prisoners that "nothing would ever grow there again" (104), while the Medical Officer admits that "dysentery and hepatitis are rife, and of course worms" (160). In sum, the deterioration of Michael's physical health after being forced inside the fences of Jakkalsdrif and Kenilsworth roughly parallels the overall declension that many anthropologists now conclude was imposed upon the bodies of former hunter-gatherers herded within the walls of ancient cities, wherein a relatively healthy and robust existence was traded for one likely to be nasty, brutish, and short.

Of course Michael also eats meagerly when he is outside the camps and living as a hunter-gatherer. But here Coetzee makes his point through a remarkable strategy, for when K is a free man tramping across the karoo in the guise of a paleolithic forager, his hunger, though present, does not

seem to matter, almost as if it were a neutral condition that can be recognized by him without being deplored. It would seem, for instance, that K's caloric intake is at its minimum during his stint in the mountains after his first flight from the Visagie farm. There, he becomes a literal cave dweller, and his diet also takes on a prehistoric cast: "he made a fire and roasted a lizard he had killed with a stone" (65). During the ensuing days, "he felt hungry but did nothing about it. Instead of listening to the crying of his body he tried to listen to the great silence about him" (66). Leaving the carceral (car-cereal?) farms far behind and below him, he feels himself "becoming a different kind of man" (67). This new (actually, old) Homo sapien must still eat in order to live, of course, but something fundamental about nourishment has changed: "In his first days in the mountains he went for walks, turned over stones, nibbled at roots and bulbs. Once he broke open an ant-nest and ate grubs one by one. They tasted like fish. But now he ceased to make an adventure of eating and drinking" (68). He feels hunger, but hunger is no longer, as in his earlier days, a problem that must be solved:

> As a child K had been hungry, like all the children of [his charity school,] Huis Norenius. Hunger had turned them into animals who stole from one another's plates and climbed the kitchen enclosure to rifle the garbage cans for bones and peelings. Then he had grown older and stopped wanting. Whatever the nature of the beast that had howled inside him, it was starved into stillness. (68)

Michael's ability to practically live on air—and to live happily, at that—seems to embody Sahlins' original conception of hunter-gatherers as "the first affluent society": "by the common understanding an affluent society is one in which all the people's material wants are easily satisfied. . . . [But] wants may be 'easily satisfied' either by producing much or desiring little," and so there are, accordingly, "two possible courses to affluence" (1–2). It is only when K returns to the fruited plain below, entering Prince Albert where "the smell of peach-blossom enveloped him" (Coetzee, *Life & Times* 69), that hunger again forces him to perform actions against his inclinations and troubles his clarity of purpose.

It is only when he smells the agricultural food at the infirmary there that he experiences "the first hunger he had known for a long time" and is "not sure that he wanted to become a servant to hunger again" (71). Given that part of the Agricultural Trap involves the promulgation within grain states of a vertical hierarchy of castes and classes that contrasts sharply with the egalitarianism of hunter-gatherer bands (Brody 185–86; Manning 18), a "servant to hunger" seems a synoptic description of the typical denizen of an early farming state.

If Michael's sojourn in the vicinity of the cave lets us glimpse his fullest embodiment of the hunter-gatherer's way of life, his pair of residences at the Visagie farmstead is where he comes in closest contact with agricultural life while still a free man. For the most part, this proximity does him no harm. For instance, on his first visit Michael discovers a herd of goats, but because he possesses none of the required pastoralist skills, he finds he must hunt them as if they were game in the wild. It is also at the farm that he plants his beloved pumpkins and melons, which, to reiterate, is an activity completely consistent with his identity as a hunter-gatherer. But there are moments during his stays there when he wishes for and flirts with the accoutrements of settled life (recall his self-criticism above), and Coetzee is not blind to the genuine attractions of sedentism (Michael longs to top his pumpkin slices with sugar and butter), though the author always depicts them as carrying an attendant price in the coin of worry. During his second visit to the farm, for instance, "the ripening of the pumpkins brought a new anxiety" (Coetzee, *Life & Times* 114), including questions of storage and spoilage. But what he fears most is exactly what the tillers of early agricultural states had best reason to fear: the confiscation of his crop by the powerful (Scott 132–34, 140–41), a fate that befalls him once the army arrives.

If, however, the Agricultural Trap is baited with some genuine allurements, its teeth are the chronic toil required to till the fields of the grain state, given that "typically . . . hunter-gatherers spend only three or four hours per day working at what we could call economic activities" (Gowdy xxi), keeping what Sahlins likens to "banker's hours" (34). Indeed, for Scott, "once Homo sapiens took that fateful step into agriculture, our

species entered an austere monastery whose taskmaster consists mostly of the demanding genetic clockwork of a few plants" (91), which shifted the "leisure-drudgery ratio between foragers and farmers" (255) so heavily against the latter that it is difficult to imagine the former taking up farming "unless forced to by . . . some form of coercion" (20). Or, as Richard Manning tartly puts it, the self-serving foundation myths of agricultural societies "had to have sprung from the imagination of someone who never hoed a row of corn or rose with the sun for a lifetime of milking cows" (23). As I discuss above, Coetzee muses about an era in human history before the concept of work had inculcated itself into our psyches in *White Writing*, and when Michael acts most like a hunter-gatherer, he fitfully inhabits just such a time before toil. Ensconced in the highlands, "he spent a day in idleness," during which "he felt hungry but did nothing about it," experiencing no anxiety because "there seemed nothing to do but live" (Coetzee, *Life & Times* 66)—a renunciation of exertion so profound that "he wondered if he were living in what was known as bliss" (68).

It is back at his burrow adjoining the pumpkin patch, however, that this particular aspect of his forager's consciousness is perfected:

> But most of all, as summer slanted to an end, he was learning to love idleness, idleness no longer as stretches of freedom reclaimed by stealth here and there from involuntary labour, surreptitious thefts to be enjoyed sitting on his heels before a flowerbed with the fork dangling from his fingers, but as a yielding up of himself to time, to a time flowing slowly like oil from horizon to horizon over the face of the world, washing over his body, circulating in his armpits and his groin, stirring his eyelids. He was neither pleased nor displeased when there was work to do; it was all the same. . . . [A]ll that was moving was time, bearing him onward in its flow . . . [for] he was living beyond the reach of calendar and clock. (116–17)

At times, Michael even appears to hibernate within his burrow, sleeping "through whole cycles of the heavens" (118) and only then "emerg[ing] into wakefulness unsure whether he had slept a day or a week or a

month" (119). It is difficult to imagine anything further removed from the agro-industrial imperative to "improve the time," but as Brody notes, for the hunter-gatherer, time as experienced is already unimprovable, just as the land is perpetually Edenic (116).

Not only is the labor required by the grain state onerous, but it is often coercive and uncompensated. As Scott argues, "[v]ariable as it is over time and hard as it is to quantify, bondage appears to have been a condition of the ancient state's survival. Early states surely did not invent the institution of slavery, but they did codify and organize it as a state project" (30). And, as Manning reminds us, the historical record provides "no clear examples of colonized hunter-gatherers who willingly, peacefully converted to farming," the best evidence suggesting that "most went as slaves" (41). Given this, it is worth noting the chronic blurring that occurs in the novel between the labor camp and the prison camp. "This isn't jail," exclaims one of the guards to Michael, "this is a camp, you work for your food like everyone else in the camp" (Coetzee, *Life & Times* 77). This distinction without a difference is reiterated by Robert, who ironically informs Michael that "this isn't a prison" and asks, "don't you know what a camp is?" (78). He then goes on to sarcastically paraphrase the mythology of agricultural superiority: "[W]hy should people with nowhere to go run away from the nice life we've got here? From soft beds like this and free wood and a man at the gate with a gun to stop the thieves from coming in the night to steal your money?" (78). He explains that one of the camps' primary purposes, like the agendas of the early walled grain states, is to stamp out nomadism by first capturing and then enslaving the nomads: "'You climb the fence,' the man said, 'and you have left your place of abode. Jakkalsdrif is your place of abode now. Welcome. You leave your place of abode, they pick you up, you are a vagrant. No place of abode'" (78). And who profits from the camps? According to Robert, it is "the farmers" (i.e., farm owners, not farm workers), and soon enough Michael is assigned to work in a field where a "foreman" menaces him with a "rattan stick" (82), followed a few days later by field-scything under the aggressive shouts of overseers. Even when the camp officials discuss among themselves what kind of place they are running, they cannot help but reveal that Jakkalsdrif

and Kenilsworth are forced-labor enterprises. As an officer angrily asks a guard, "What do you think you are doing here—running a holiday camp? It's a work camp, man! It's a camp to teach lazy people to work! *Work!*" (91; emphasis in original). The Medical Officer confirms this when he becomes impatient with K's passive resistance. He says, "[t]his is a camp, not a holiday resort, not a convalescent home: it is a camp where we rehabilitate people like you and make you work!" (138). These passages make clear that while Michael is officially suspected of caching food for the rebels, his actual crime is living as a hunter-gatherer, having no fixed address, and avoiding the stoop labor that the agricultural state demands.

If slavery is a mode of grain-state violence perpetrated against an internal victim, its frequent comrade is aggressive war waged against perceived external enemies. Scott maintains that "the ancient states replenished their population by wars of capture and by buying slaves on a large scale from barbarians who specialized in the trade" (36). Brody agrees, noting the "striking links between agriculture and warfare: farmers compete with one another as well as with hunter-gatherers, and their skills were brought to bear on the development of weapons as well as farm implements. From the very beginning, they must have learned how to beat their plowshares into swords" (148). Similarly, Coetzee's imagined South Africa is at war with enemies that seem to include both the domestic and the foreign. The society he depicts is thoroughly militarized, and most of the characters in the novel either wear a uniform or are in the custody of those who do. The Medical Officer, recalling the participation of "labour battalions" in the "big military parades," provides an image of the denizens of the camps let out on furloughs in order to "march with spades on their shoulders" (Coetzee, *Life & Times* 134). And finally, in a palpably ironic episode, when the armed forces of the agricultural state discover Michael's clandestine garden, they tear out his potentially nutritious pumpkins and sow the ground with land mines.

But if a mythology promulgating the "natural" superiority of agriculture over foraging is to be reproduced down the ages, more than brute violence is necessary: ideological indoctrination is required. I have already touched on the longstanding slanders that the grain state hurls

against supposedly shiftless "barbarians" enjoying no fixed address. But at one point during his incarceration, K seems to wonder if some more systematic method of persuasion is being aimed at him: "Is this my education? He wondered. Am I at last learning about life here in a camp? It seemed to him that scene after scene of life was playing itself out before him and that the scenes all cohered. He had a presentiment of a single meaning upon which they were converging or threatening to converge, though he did not know yet what that might be" (89). This passage leaves unanswered the question of whether Michael will submit or resist the Big Lie of the agro-state, but there are indications that attempts to inculcate him in agrarian habits of mind began early in his life, for at one point he recalls struggling with a story-problem at Huis Norenius:

> Numb with terror he stared at the problem before him while the teacher stalked the rows counting off the minutes till it should be time for them to lay down their pencils and be divided, the sheep from the goats. Twelve men eat six bags of potatoes. Each bag holds six kilograms of potatoes. What is the quotient? He saw himself write down 12, he saw himself write down 6. He did not know what to do with the numbers. (110)

Furthermore, the agri-culture's penetration of the everyday language of those in authority is deep and unconscious: at the height of his exasperation with K, the Medical Officer shouts a word that seamlessly melds his official power to every farmer's anxiety about how much food their land and labors will render: "and no one is going to remember you but me, unless you yield and at last open your mouth. I appeal to you, Michaels: *yield!*" (152; emphasis in original).

Throughout the novel, one of K's defining traits is his verbal reticence, a characteristic which drives even the curious and sympathetic Medical Officer to fits of frustration. Many commentators on *Life & Times*, including Susan Gallagher (164–65), have understood Michael's refusal to converse at any length with his various captors—to answer the Medical Officer's questions in a way the latter would find satisfactory, for example—as Coetzee's way of representing the inaccessibility of the racial Other's experience or essential language. What I would add

to such readings is an insistence that K's silence in fact "speaks" when overlaid with the ideas I describe above. Referring to farmers' perceptions of foraging tribal bands, Brody contends that "in this 'wilderness,' the voices of the hunting peoples were likened to the calls of the wolf or the hooting owls: resonant, beautiful, haunting, susceptible to much sentimental and nostalgic interpretation, but not quite human. If the wild hunter-gatherers could be made to speak a *real* language, they, like their lands, could be turned into something of use and value to the settlers" (182–83; emphasis in original). Does the Medical Officer, who disbelieves the official suspicions of Michael, not urge him to speak on precisely these grounds—that only speech that makes sense to him and his fellow officers will furnish K's life with a meaning and a purpose? The Medical Officer says to Michael,

> Give yourself some substance, man, otherwise you are going to slide through life absolutely unnoticed. You will be a digit in the units column at the end of the war when they do the big subtraction sum to calculate the difference, nothing more. You don't want to be simply one of the perished, do you? You want to live, don't you? Well, then, *talk*, make your voice heard, tell your story! (Coetzee, *Life & Times* 140; emphasis in original)

Without a biography in the language of sedentism, he implies, K will resemble the beasts that perish, since foragers always appear as human beasts in the eyes of the grain state. By this point the structural function of the Medical Officer should be clear: while he hectors Michael with the questions, accusations, and assumptions of a tiller's mindset, he also slowly, fitfully moves toward empathy and admiration, admitting in his last utterance that Michael has outpaced him in a journey toward a place that now appears to him Edenic. He is, like most of us, a settled citizen of the agro-culture and must squint and strain to decipher the message of contentment spelled out by the wanderer's footprints.

But what is one to make of the band Michael encounters when, at the novel's end, he returns to Sea Point, the scene of his pre-foraging adulthood? On the one hand, there is an untrustworthy edge to their aggressive friendliness, and while they in some sense adopt K they also

attempt to rob him of his seeds (and, as D. Wright observes, cause him to spill his "seed" by means of a sexual act [441]). Although the wine and bread they offer causes Michael to vomit and to void himself, they are happy to share their food with him. And although the sexual services he receives are unasked-for, they do not seem to count in his mind as much of a violation. In the end, given that the band constitutes a sort of extended family and that they move from place to place in search of what they can find (their baby swaddled for easier tramping), one can assume that Michael has at last found a tribe of fellow hunter-gatherers. However, they seem unhappier versions of himself, eating the cast-off food of sedentary production and moving through an urban rather than a natural environment. They appear satisfied with their lot and inclined to celebrate frequently, though their moods do not reach the "bliss" that Michael enjoys in the mountains. If he experiences genuine happiness in the purest stage of his foraging, they, picking through the detritus of a failed grain state, only get as far as happy-go-lucky.

Hence Coetzee ends his novel with the Medical Officer imagining Michael's escape back into a landscape that can genuinely sustain the authentic hunter-gatherer. However, the latter's (actual as well as imagined) willingness to leave the band underscores his one signal difference from most foragers known to the anthropological record. Veridical hunter-gatherers, both paleolithic and extant, live within tight-knit communities that share material recourses equally, make decisions cooperatively, and enjoy high levels of emotional intimacy. In fact, Michael belongs to no community at all and seeks none. It is in this respect that he appears to diverge farthest from the lifeways recorded in the ethnological record and to resemble instead the primordial figure described by Rousseau, a happy isolato negotiating the State of Nature. What are we to make of this? For one thing, the fact that Michael has no people to whom he can meaningfully "return" seems to render him as much a harbinger of the future as a holdover from ages past—a harbinger, or perhaps more properly a hope, since what makes him the idealized denizen of futurity is the radical smallness of his ecological footprint. Michael "thought of himself not as something heavy that left tracks behind it" (like a specimen from the fossil collection) but rather as one whose passage over the

earth is like "the scratching of ant-feet, the rasp of butterfly teeth, the tumbling of dust" (Coetzee, *Life & Times* 97). And apparently, once he resumes his solitary veldt-walking, his requirements will continue to be minimal: "he would bend the handle of the teaspoon in a loop and tie the string to it, he would lower it down the shaft deep into the earth, and when he brought it up there would be water in the bowl of the spoon; and in that way, he would say, one can live" (184). Thus the novel positions Michael not just as a kind of human being whom we have lost, but as one whom, given the ecological catastrophes of the novel's near-future present day, we may soon be required to emulate.

Michael's isolation from all communities and the fact that his presence resonates both forward and backward in time combine to insulate the novel from the charge of atavism, though in the South African context Coetzee still seems to skirt perilous ground. But even though hunter-gatherers roamed the Cape a mere eyeblink ago in anthropological terms, Michael seems free of any relationship with the historial KhoiKhoi as encountered and described by white colonizers: he resembles more an Enlightenment thought experiment dropped from on high than a character tragically separated from, much less behaviorally recapitulating, some version of his own historical roots. Even his mother's "home," toward which he helps her return in the book's initial section, turns out to be a white-owned farm, while by the end of the novel the Medical Officer's meditations paint Michael not as a throwback to a conquered culture but as a living alternative to his own. And yet, for all his Rousseauean isolation and despite the novel's future rather than present-day setting, the political realities of 1980s South Africa are on full display. It is, finally, a testament to the novel's multivalent fertility that Michael can simultaneously appear as a *philosophe*'s confection, a hunter-gatherer retaining most of the anthropological bona fides, and a victim of an all-too-real apartheid regime. If he is plausibly the avatar both of Franz Kafka's hunger artist and Sargon's unfree subject, he is also a "CM" in South Africa who must show his pass to the police. In Coetzee's hands, this figure is rich rather than confusing.

The protagonists's refusal to be confined within a single channel of allusion is confirmed by the fact that even those critics most interested

in showing *Life & Times* to be a commentary on the political circumstances of 1980s South Africa, and who are therefore often the most disturbed by Michael's refusal to join the rebels, admit that there is some aspect of Michael—frequently labelled as "allegorical"—that somehow seems to transcend these historical particulars. Gallagher, for instance, asserts that the novel offers a "millennial vision of a new heaven and a new earth" by "*obscurely* pointing toward ineffable realities transcending discursive definition" (136; emphasis added), since, in its "different layers of context and allusion, the novel recounts past, present, and future" (143). But she concludes that "Michael's story rejects several common South African versions of pastoral to explore an alternative way that human beings might live in relationship to the land and to each other" (156) without specifying very closely what these alternatives might be. What I am providing, then, is a set of particulars that will help forward or complete many critics' recognition that Michael represents some transformational potential to redefine humanity, since up to this point, they have not been quite able to say what that transformation would look like.

In this vein, David Attwell insists that "the Magistrate's halting steps" toward a "posthumanist, reconstructed ethics . . . become elaborated more fully in *Michael K*" (97), though he conceives this new morality in linguistic rather than anthropological terms. Similarly, Laura Wright correctly states that K is positioned "as the barbarian beyond the reach of civilization" and thus is "a victim of the forms of classification he seeks to avoid" (92), but she does not touch on the fact that "barbarian," in the language of the grain state, always implies a nomadic non-farmer. Dominic Head, meanwhile, comes to "a realization that the space in which K's experiment as a cultivator can endure does not exist, either in the expectations of the novel at this time, or in the particular terrain alluded to" (106), but he does not entertain the idea that, in historical and anthropological terms, it once did. For his part, Derek Attridge admits that "K's relation to the earth and to cultivation implies a resistance to modernity's drive to exploit natural resources" but states that this "resistance . . . never becomes an alternative moral norm" (75). Sarah Dove Heider likewise leaves things overly general when she declares that

"Michael K is the Other of everyone" because "he seems to have no culture which he embraces as his own, beyond the idea of gardening" and is thus "distinguishable mainly by his disengagement" (87). Finally, Stephen Clingman admits that Coetzee's novels "have to do with the *longue durée* of a history of frames of consciousness" without touching on the specifically pre-agricultural world that K appears to embody. I contend, then, that understanding Michael as a hunter-gatherer gives desired concreteness to many such general acknowledgements of Michael's larger implications for a radically new (which is actually, I would argue, a venerably old) way of relating to the earth.

This reading also provides a specific answer to the question of why Michael refuses to join the rebels, since we are now in a position to understand the key term "gardening" aright:

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

Viewing "gardening" not as just *any* form of fixed-field agriculture but as connected specifically to the hunter-gatherer way of living clarifies part of the novel's puzzle. The "gardening" the rebels are likely to forget or cause others to forget is not the sowing of seeds writ large but rather a foraging way of life in which human traces upon the earth might approach the insectile lightness that Michael seeks. If this life is the paleolithic life, then the Edenic echoes of the "gardening" K champions can be given an anthropological facticity that keeps it from being frustratingly vague or apolitically escapist. Michael's *non serviam* now becomes recognizable as a thirst for a deeper, more comprehensive revolution. Yes, the guerillas battle against the apartheid regime, but if their eventual victory results merely in the founding of a kinder, gentler version of the sedentist, agricultural state, then this, from Michael's viewpoint

(which is that of an anthropological *longue durée*), would merely entail replacing Tweedledee with Tweedledum.

If the text's aspiration toward an imagined future is wildly ambitious, its assessment of the present predicament is clear-eyed and daunting. Scott Cutler Shershow notices how recent currents in anthropology have manifested themselves within popular culture as various "Paleo" diet plans:

> It is argued that humanity evolved to be hunter-gatherers, that our genes remain those of the carnivore, and that our grain-based diet is responsible for a whole spectrum of nutritional ailments. Anyone who even glances at the discourse of these contemporary diets, especially 'Paleo,' will be struck not only by how much of it there is but also by how these dietary plans are explained, pursued, and celebrated with the fervor and passion of a religion. (110)

Shershow's dismissive tone is obvious, and he seems to mock "the extravagant claims of various diet books, which trace the cause for almost every human illness to the consumption of grain" (124). I would like to say something important about Coetzee, however, by taking diet fads seriously for a moment, for nutritional prescriptions sometime carry within themselves (even if they rarely articulate) a rough-and-ready historico-evolutionary picture of our species' trajectory. In western popular culture, most diets of the post-war period focused on the number of calories consumed in a day (assumed to be high) and the number of calories expended through physical exercise (assumed to be low). The implication of this was that, nutritionally speaking, the dire inflection point for "first-world" humanity occurred within the last 250 years, when, commencing with the Industrial Revolution, we began to enjoy chronic nutritional abundance, transport ourselves in motorized vehicles, and eat processed foods. If one possesses even a moderately long-term historical vision, a 250-year-old mistake in our species' enterprise is one that seems potentially correctible. However, anyone accepting the premises underlying the supposed superiority of "Paleo" diets must admit, as Scott notes, that our species took a dire turn not

a quarter-millennium ago but at least five to ten millennia before the present day (25–27). This is a blunder of such long standing and whose effects have been compounding for such an extended period of time, that recovery from it appears almost impossible to imagine.

From this viewpoint, the Agricultural Trap becomes a secular version of the Christian fall from a fruited Eden into a world of thorns and nettles that must be worked by the sweat of one's brow. And while Coetzee's representation of the forager's "cultivation" practiced by Michael, as well as the author's later commitments to animal rights, shows that he is not one to take any culture's foodways lightly, the problem as he depicts it goes far beyond the remedies suggested by nutritional gurus, for he sees it as a political, ethical, and psychological tragedy that permeates all aspects of contemporary consciousness. *Life & Times of Michael K* suggests that an entire secular order (secular in the old sense of persisting from age to age) must be overturned if we are to make progress toward that human possibility that exists "out of all the camps" (Coetzee, *Life & Times* 182)—out of, specifically, the Neolithic-multispecies-resettlement camps that have since metastasized into the agro-industrial complex. The Medical Officer's suspicion is thus correct when he claims he is "not sure that he [Michael] is wholly of our world" (130), and when he intuits the vastness and nearly un-begin-able nature of the recuperative project K represents:

> Let me tell you the meaning of the sacred and alluring garden that blooms in the heart of the desert and produces the food of life. The garden for which you are presently heading is nowhere and everywhere except in the camps. It is another name for the only place where you belong, Michaels, where you do not feel homeless. It is off every map, no road leads to it that is merely a road, and only you know the way. (166)

As the Medical Officer tries in vain to convince his colleagues, Michael K was never inclined to follow the guerillas into the mountains. According to Coetzee, if the order such rebels seek to establish is to represent a genuine and lasting revolution in the human condition, it is they who must follow Michael out of the Agricultural Trap.

Note

1 As Adelman points out, Coetzee seems aware of Enlightenment and Romantic discourses on the philosophical insights potentially available through idleness, especially those of Samuel Taylor Coleridge.

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