

Re-mapping Colonial Violence: A Postcolonial Study of Coetzee's *Life and Times of Michael K*

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Abstract: This paper analyses the novel *Life and Times of Michael K* by J. M. Coetzee in terms of the postcolonial theory by stating that the novel engages in a deconstructive mapping of the colonial violence in the geographical, narrative, linguistic, and bodily plane. Through the prefiguration of the marginal character of Michael K, a man of mixed race with restricted speech, Coetzee disrupts colonial cartographies, which divide people and places into systems of value and domination. The paper reveals the way in which violence in the novel is not an isolated and less physical act but is structurally embedded in institutions, discourses, and space practices that accrue to colonial rule. Tending to the geography of abandonment of the novel, the instrumentalization of law, the bureaucratic gaze, the subaltern tactics of withdrawal and reclamation, the present paper argues that Coetzee textualizes an ethics of unmapping and refiguration: it does not accept the colonial logics that only subject things can be seen as resources, threats or data. The article uses the postcolonial terms of coloniality of power, biopolitics, archival violence, and the strategies of subaltern speech to demonstrate how the silent and incessant agency of Michael K produces a counter-cartography which cannot be assimilated into nationalist or postcolonial teleologies. In conclusion, the paper recommends *Life and times of Michael K* as a model of thinking about decolonial memory and justice that is concerned about absence, nonlinearity and the reparative possibilities of dwelling.

Keywords: Colonial violence, postcolonial theory, biopolitics, counter-cartography, subalternity, landscape, narrative ethics.

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Introduction

J. M. Coetzee's *Life & Times of Michael K* (1983) has long held a tricky position in the postcolonial literature: admired with its lean and mean writing style and clear moral issues, some have accused it of not having enough aesthetic proximity to political action. This work repositions Michael K as a political text in a more direct sense of being a text that questions the spatial and institutional-constitutive and constitutive status of the colonial violence in a postcolonial present. Instead of considering violence as a localised event at a certain historical moment, the novel by Coetzee encourages the reader to follow the sedimentation of coercive practices the manner of how administrative routines, discursive formations, and cartographic logics reproduce dispossession and social death. In this perspective, Michael K is not just a portrait of marginality but a continuing critique of the manner in which colonial power continues to define mobility, identity, and personhood. Defamiliarization of the nation, family, and law coordinates is the process of the novel remapping of violence that shows how these three concepts are complicitous in the reproduction of hierarchies and erasures.

This paper is divided into four sections:

- First, it places the novel in the context of postcolonial theoretical discussions on the subject of colonial violence, biopolitics, and the space-making process.

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- Second, it considers how geographical and institutional mapping is used by Coetzee to demonstrate how violence is routinized.
- Third, it resorts to withdrawal, movement and labor practices of Michael K as contrary strategies that generate another cartography of meaning.
- Lastly, it speculates on the moral lessons the novel teaches the modern debate on reparative justice and memorialization.

Notes on Method and Scope

This paper places Coetzee novel in general theoretical discourses in postcolonial studies, biopolitics and spatial theory. It avoids the use of archival or empirical assertions concerning particular historical events with an intention of prefiguring the conceptual interventions that the novel makes with respect to violence and mapping. The presented close readings are selective and are meant to bring out patterns some of which include geographical, institutional, bodily, and linguistic, to which the novel remaps itself. Although further archival investigation may be used to support the arguments presented in this paper, the main purpose has been to examine the role of literary form and narrative point of view in a postcolonial attack on the sustaining systems of violence.

Colonial Legacies: Violence, Space, and the Production of the Social

The idea of colonial violence, as constructed on the basis of postcolonialism, demands that domination is not only enforced by the spectacular acts of violence, but by banal, everyday forms that make some life disposable. The colonial governments depended on written regimes of registration, extractions of labor and legal categorization to render populations readable and manageable. These rule technologies are passed on to next-generational forms of politics and survive as administrative forms of violence: border inspections, identity documents, forced migration, institutional amnesia. This is the very legacy of Coetzee in his novel. It is not something unique about the war and the bureaucracy Michael K finds out but the continuations of colonial rationalities that quantify and regulate human life. The concept of biopolitics by Michel Foucault can be useful here in that power in a particular state governs the population using methods that enhance life of some people at the expense of others or even death. Postcolonial theorists have extended this point to indicate how the colonized people are considered expendable when it comes to the imperial management of resources. The structures of the state, such as military checkpoints, hospitals, prisons, relief centers in *Life and Times of Michael K*, are the institutions where the life and death are practiced. These apparatuses that put Michael K into a marginal position further compound his marginality by contrasting him with other categories of race, productivity, and legal identity. The novel thus challenges us to perceive violence as systemic and distributive and not just episodic. In addition, colonial cartography (the process of mapping territories, populations as well as resources which can be extracted) is used as an analogy with epistemic violence. The colonial maps generate a seemingly neutral grid that hides the relations of power, dispossession, and displacement. This map-making is challenged in Coetzee text at several levels, the physical maps, the social maps, which place the person where, the textual mapping of narrative point of view that places institutional rationality over embodied knowledge. When one reads the novel as a remapping project, we are likely to understand how Coetzee exposes and subverts epistemic premises of domination.

Mapping and the Geography of Abandonment

In the novel, Coetzee employs geographical imagery to play out the theme of abandonment as a characteristic of postcolonial afterlife. The movement of the protagonist, the journey of the city to the countryside, the hospital to the farm, the encounter to isolation is a path of absence: the absence of families, the absence of institutions, the absence of histories. This lack is not emptiness but a shadow of forceful dislocation and destruction. The idea that Michael K tries to transport the body of his mother to a countryside area of origin is his response to the institutions taking on the way of dealing with the body; the road trip itself represents a rejection of letting the state machinery work on the body. The countryside, in its turn, is also involved in the colonial past: the territory is not such an innocent refuge but a disputed ground formed by previous expropriations.

The frequent appearances of maps, roads and checkpoints in the novel provide us with a world in which movement is monitored and regulated. The fact that the state apparatuses have transformed movement into a problem to be solved, measured and policed makes movement a political act. The inability of Michael K to get things on paper and his settled address puts him regularly into the hands of authorities who believe that his illegibility is

either criminal or pathological. The map of the bureaucracy is that of lines and parcels; the way Michael K makes his way is not conducive to being organized in such manner, and he meanders, stops, lingers in ways that are not anticipated by the administration. His wandering in this regard is not pointless but a strategic avoidance of being placed at the nodes that state has prepared him to be.

Notably, the nationalistic narratives also bequeath a colonial map in the novel. The war of the novel is referred to its idioms of national survival, yet its workings, internment camps, rationing, population control, were reminiscent of colonial oppression. Coetzee therefore indicates that independence or a struggle to be a nation does not necessarily eliminate colonial practices but on the contrary it can be repaired using other flags. The remapping that the novel carries out is thus corrective: it brings into the view the continuities between colonial and postcolonial violences.

Institutions and Administrative Violence

One of the main points of this paper is that institutions are the best channels of perpetuated colonial violence in the novel by Coetzee. The hospital, the prison, the relief center, and the army all work by the classification, quantification, and neglect. As an example, the medical gaze interprets the body of Michael K to be wanting and requiring correction or imprisonment. The routines of the hospital which are supposed to be curative are subjected to Michael K and are perceived to be intrusive and dehumanizing. In the same way when he is sent to jail, the law machine does not see him as an individual but as a case file; his person is degraded to levels that are administratively efficient.

This institutional violence has a rhetoric aspect. The narrator voice in the novel frequently echoes the language of administration, reports, memos, procedure which dehumanises the human object. The prose of Coetzee sometimes resembles the official documents which renders an eerie intimacy between the literary genre and the official discourse. What it produces is an implication as to make the reader complicit in what Coetzee depersonalizes the logic of bureaucratic language he is invoking: by creating textual space within which the discourse of bureaucracy can be applied, Coetzee makes us confront the question of how institutions define the terms within which lives are narrated and understood.

The other element of institutional violence in the novel is the narrative and historical control. Relief centers, government press releases and civic accounts release versions of events, which cloud lived experiences. Memory is turned into an institutional commodity, which is selectively archived. The destruction of some type of testimony rural voices, the experiences of women, subaltern lineages is part of the violence of omission that the novel attempts to undo by anticipating absence and silence as significant.

The Body, Labor, and the Aesthetics of Injury

The body of Michael K is the major point of writing and resistance to colonial histories. The physical deformities, his inability to speak, and his professional identity as a gardener make him weak in the systems that claim to esteem productivity and normal bodies. The body is also endowed with some kind of agency in the novel: with the help of physical work, tilling plots, making gardens, Michael K becomes again connected with the land without reference to the state. Labor is a nature of restitutionary

practice, a practice that does not tend to re-employ him in the economy but to restore a relationship with the earth.

Injury and sickness in the novel are not sensationalized; the prose of Coetzee is very sparse, making the physical pain very humble and personal. This aesthetic decision carries out an ethical intervention: rather than attaining pain into spectacle, the text challenges the readers to be aware of the gradual, compounding consequences of dispossession. The material detail that is given in the novel, the feel of the soil, the mechanics of gardening, the logistics of cooking, creates a counterhistory in favor of the embodied knowledge over the bureaucratic abstraction.

Meanwhile, the physical difference of Michael K disrupts the category of the normative socially. The scope of categories on which governance is founded is revealed in his inability or unwillingness to fulfill the expected social roles of son, citizen, worker. His marginality is therefore imposed and voluntary; the novel does not want to reduce him to an era of passive victim or an era of heroic rebel. Instead, the physical life of Michael K exists somewhere in the gray moral zone, where there is a conflict between survival, dignity, and refusal.

Language, Silence, and Subaltern Speech

Language politics is a major element in the politics of violence that Coetzee is involved in remapping. The comparative inarticulateness of Michael K makes the traditional discourses that equate agency with speech extremely problematic. In postcolonial terms, it is no longer possible to conflate silence and powerlessness; silence might be strategic, defensive, or involve an alternative communicative economy. The use of silence by Coetzee makes the reader question the criteria according to which the voice is measured.

Meanwhile, the novel challenges monopoly of authoritative speech of the colonial archive. The official testifications, the military reports, the news are sources that generate approved accounts; the other groups of testifying, rumors, gestures and little gestures are marginalized. The few words of Michael K combined with gestures and even practices embodied by him, therefore, are a kind of subaltern speech that cannot be translated into the dominating language of the state. The novel thus performs the challenge of rendering subaltern experiences visible in the discourses of the dominant, as well as to the ethical need of listening otherwise.

The method of narration used by Coetzee, its changes of focalization, ironic distance, its attention to interiority, forms an epistemic space where reticence is privileged. The text, therefore, serves as a critique of representational regimes which either vociferate or hush up the other. In denying Michael K the possibility to become a recognizable subjectivity, Coetzee opposes the object to appropriation, and maintains a degree of alterity, which is politically relevant.

Counter-Cartographies: Withdrawal, Dwelling, and Repair

Provided that colonial cartography classifies people into administrative groups, then the movements of Michael K are decipherable as counter-cartographies: practices that disrupt the state maps through insisting on other kinds of relation to one another. His retreating into the land, his few contacts with the institutions, and his bringing up of little self-sustaining spaces of habitation all play a politics of denial. It is not a nihilistic refusal of

this. It is a remapping through which what defines a life worth living is requalified.

According to the novel by Coetzee, the kind of repair can be in forms that do not conform to state-centric concept of justice. Cure in *Life and Times of Michael K* is local, haptic and sluggish. It is practiced by taking care of a garden, lifting a heavy burden, sowing a seed or protecting someone against a tempest. These mundane practices add up to another form of ethics of belonging that favors stewardship, rather than ownership, care, rather than control.

The character of Michael K therefore represents a kind of survival that does not assimilate. His morals make it hard to conform to traditional requests of recognition by state agencies or national discourses. Rather, the novel indicates an ethic that relies on a concern to others and the land, an ethic that cannot be incorporated into bureaucratic structures. This ethic might be more appropriate to those societies where the reparations of the law or formal reconciliation cannot follow the extent of the dispossession.

Narrative Ethics and the Reader's Responsibility

The formal decisions of Coetzee create an ethical text-reader relationship. The flat affect that is prevalent in the novel, its paused rhythm, and its unwillingness to provide neat redemptions engages the reader to have to exist in an uncomfortable state. This aesthetic position is opposed to catharsis and demands instead that readers challenge the mundane processes of normalization of violence. The task of the reader is to pick out the complicity in the structures that the novel reveals and to envision other forms of solidarity that is not a repetition of the language of control.

Its skepticism of easy solutions is also of the ethical significance of the novel. Coetzee is not providing us with a schematic map of liberation, he is forcing us to take our seats on the grey moral landscape occupied by such characters as Michael K. Politics of remediation that the novel examines are not legislative, but rather relational, whereby the focus is not on the interventions that may be carried out at the top-down, but on the caring and attentive practices that lie outside the scope of formal governance.

Conclusion

Life and Times of Michael K is an effective meditation on how colonial violence can be sustained and how such violence can be remapped in the embodied practices, linguistic reticence and moral care. The interventions of the novel are very subtle, yet extensive: they restructured our vision of resistance as not merely opposition but also restoration, recapitalization, and repossession. By so doing, Coetzee dispels the conventional ideas regarding the effectiveness of politics and invites the readers to reflect on how noncoercive modes of life could serve as a solution to the issue of systemic violence.

This argument has far reaching consequences that go beyond the literary analysis. The novel by Coetzee provides an example of this kind of attention: a policy of paying attention, caring, and reweaving of social fabrics at a slow pace. The future studies could examine the comparison of the trajectories of Michael K and other characters in literature that lead to the creation of counter-cartographies, or consider the novel and the ethnographic studies of postcolonial bureaucratic practices to learn more about the systemic continuities of literary form and administrative reality. In its turn, *Life and Times of Michael K* can

be identified as a reminder that even the most significant political reorientation processes may be initiated in the tiniest of gestures: a seed planting, a wound treatment, a voyage being made in the name of memory.

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