WRETCHED, AMBIGUOUS, ABJECT:
ORDINARY WAYS OF BEING IN SELECTED WORKS BY ALEX LA GUMA,
BESSIE HEAD, AND J. M. COETZEE

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This is an exploration of the possibilities for political literary resistance in South Africa. Alex La Guma’s *In the Fog of the Seasons’ End*, Bessie Head’s *Maru*, and J. M. Coetzee’s *Life and Times of Michael K*, uncover the daily performance of national, ethnic, and racial affiliations that result in a shared experience of alienation, masks, and shifting allegiances. Rather than relying on the tradition of the “protest” novel, these authors move into the realm of what Njabulo Ndebele calls “the rediscovery of the ordinary.” In applying Frantz Fanon to La Guma’s novel, the depiction of the wretched conditions of oppressed life showcase a variety of human reactions to oppression. Using Homi Bhabha’s idea of “national narration,” Head’s *Maru* emerges as a search for national belonging, while Julia Kristeva’s abjection serves to illuminate the mystical regression of Michael K in Coetzee’s novel. Oppression is challenged through recognizing everyday alienation.

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Dedication

To David, for all his assistance, patience, and love.
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Introduction

“Wretched, Ambiguous, Abject: Ordinary Ways of Being in Selected Works by Alex La Guma, Bessie Head, and J. M. Coetzee” explores the range of possibilities for fiction that attempts to represent or encourage political resistance, specifically in southern Africa, with an emphasis on South Africa under apartheid. In spite of the entrenchment of the genre of “protest literature,” writers in the 1970s broke from the tradition of identifying and confronting oppressors to explore the inner lives of those living within an oppressive system. These alternative forms of “political” fiction, I argue, effectively reveal the internal conflicts of their characters so that readers may be challenged by the complexities of notions of national belonging, racial and ethnic identity, and individual protest.

Because of the counter-intuitive way in which oppressed peoples must live to preserve the lives of their families and themselves, Frantz Fanon suggests that colonized groups (in particular, blacks) experience psychosis, where their actions do not reflect their desires. Alex La Guma’s novel *In the Fog of the Seasons’ End* dramatizes the alienation experienced by all those within the system. Through a detailed exploration of the many characters in La Guma’s novel, I show the efficacy of such portraits for the writer with a political agenda. Because La Guma’s “point” is to encourage the people to violent uprising, it is essential that he does not deify or demonize his characters; they must have the same concerns as his audience. By making use of Fanon’s idea of the “wretchedness” of oppressed peoples, La Guma ensures that his readers will understand and perhaps, become motivated to act.
Bessie Head’s agenda in *Maru* is not so pointed. Her concern lies with racism in the post-colonial world and the creation of notions of nationhood. I use Homi Bhabha’s “DissemiNation” to explore the ways in which Head’s fairy tale story serves as the format for depicting contesting forces and the desire for unity. The character of Margaret Cadmore challenges the national identities imagined by the powerful males of Dilepe, and, although she submits to the desire for a sense of belonging, her alternative story rumbles beneath the surface of Maru’s seemingly idyllic life. The iteration of stories of difference challenge the national ideal, I argue, and such iteration is an essential step in promoting political resistance.

Sometimes, however, the iteration of difference is complicated by the structure of language. In *Life and Times of Michael K*, J. M. Coetzee demonstrates that the agenda of the state—to keep people in line—and that of the reader—to “understand” the motives of a character—serve the same impulse for power. The character Michael K, I argue, resists the imposition of structures of meaning through retiring to a hole in the ground. In isolating himself, I argue, he resists the attempts of the powers-that-be to label him “abject.” By retreating into his second mother (the earth) Michael is able to connect with those parts of himself that were rejected by the law of the father in the realm of the symbolic. By implementing Julia Kristeva’s conception of abjection, I show how individual resistance may be possible, if not very effective.

Each of these novels demonstrates an alternative way of envisioning the realm of the political and the possibilities for resistance. By exploring the realm of the individual and the ordinary choices each makes daily, political affiliations are problematized and the
power of the performance of the people is underscored. The novels show possibility for the future in the space where marginal voices gain a platform.

“Protest” Literature and the “Rediscovery of the Ordinary”

Although South Africa became an independent republic in 1961, the political repression of the majority of its inhabitants—the native Africans—continued. This repression was answered by protest literature, which pointedly identified the agents of repression while illuminating the atrocious nature of life for Africans in the apartheid system. While the method was an effective way of raising consciousness both within and outside of the country, the power of the genre eventually wore thin. Characters seemed flat, sometimes wooden. Scenes that were meant to arouse indignation occasionally titillated instead. Recognizing that those who suffer under apartheid must not always be represented as victims or heroes, some critics began to call for a wider scope to South African literature.

Prior to 1994 and the official end of the apartheid state, the focus in South African arts and letters was on apartheid and its effects. Writing in 1981, Lewis Nkosi asserts that, “with very few exceptions the literature of Southern Africa is wholly concerned with the theme of struggle and conflict—conflict between the white conquerors and the conquered blacks, between white masters and black servitors, between the village and the city” (Tasks and Masks 76). For Nkosi, such literature is inevitable in times of oppression; he says that “Tyranny and the ‘literature of protest’ are dialectically linked” (“South Africa” 434). As long as tyranny exists, then, literature that is designed to
uncover the conditions of oppression will be written. Because oppression does not exist without an oppressor, this type of writing relies on its historical basis for its very existence. The institutional and individual connections to injustice must be revealed in order to demonstrate the pervasive nature of domination. Nkosi asserts, “Black literature in particular, especially in the European languages, has relentlessly sought to expose the conditions of its own existence: conquest, exploitation, and racial discrimination of which, by its very definition, it is a symptom” (“South Africa” 434). Without these acts of empire-building, African protest literature would not exist.

Having been given the format for such artistic endeavors (writing) as well as global languages in which to write, Africans were inevitably going to use their skills to enlighten those who did not see the brutality of the system of (neo)colonialism and apartheid. The first group of writers to be designated under the “protest” label became prominent in the years between the world wars. Nkosi cites a Zulu poet, Herbert I. E. Dhlomo, as one of this group. His long poem Valley of a Thousand Hills (1941) illuminates some of the themes that form the basis for “protest literature”: “A sense of loss, genuine pain at the impoverishment and decline of a once-powerful nation, counterbalanced only by admiration for the national beauty of the land, constitute the nodal points of tension in the poem” (“South Africa” 437).

The next generation of “protest” writers, including Alex La Guma, Peter Abrahams, Ezekiel Mphahlele, Richard Rive, and Nat Nakasa, moved from poetry into fiction and autobiography. Although their writing included scenes of injustice and brutality, Nkosi contends that these writers “were still possessed of a hope, […], of some
likelihood of a peaceful change which could be brought about through domestic and international pressure” (“South Africa” 438). In theory then, “protest literature” should arouse political reaction through the moral indignation of readers who, presumably, either had been ignorant of the situation or had not imagined any possible means of resistance.

In the 1960s, many of these authors were forced into exile due to increasingly stricter censorship laws. The growth of international publishing of “protest literature” meant that such writers needed to find a way to convince their audiences of the severity of the South African situation. Nkosi argues that “the need to bear witness before the world created a pronounced tendency toward factuality: toward reportage, the memoir and autobiography” (“South Africa” 442). This writing, then, focused on two primary audiences. Piniel Viriri Shava says that “It was partly aimed at awakening white consciousness to black frustration. Even more important was the fact that the protest was calculated to raise the political awareness of blacks” (29).

The “protest novel” became a staple genre of the literary world, but the narrow focus on specific political themes allowed little room for extensive character development, stylistic experimentation, or complex plots. Njabulo Ndebele argues that in the world of South African letters, “we have a society of posturing and sloganeering; one that frowns upon subtlety of thought and feeling, and never permits the sobering power of contemplation, of close analysis, and the mature acceptance of failure, weakness, and limitations” (50). In the depiction of the brutality of black life under apartheid, protest literature necessarily limits its characters to two-dimensional portrayals rather than making an attempt to complicate any notions of national, ethnic, or racial belonging.
Identities appear fixed. In creating cardboard cutouts for characters, Ndebele argues, South African writers ignore “the human dimension of this barren politics. [Instead,] [t]he artist should help the reader condemn a stooge while understanding something of his motivations” (72). Complicating the question of individual identity is one of the primary ways of undercutting the power of a system that minutely controls every aspect of societal membership. However, people acclimatize to such rigid structures. For this reason, some readers may resist useful insights into the psychology of the apartheid state, as well as colonial or post-colonial states. Arjun Appadurai argues that “The modern nation-state, in its preoccupation with the control, classification and surveillance of its subjects, has often created, revitalized or fractured ethnic identities that were previously fluid, negotiable or nascent” (799). In the apartheid state of South Africa, where ethnic identities were solidified within the political structure, it is easy to see how writers and citizens alike would dismiss the notion of hybridity.

Ndebele recognizes that the extreme brutality of the system demanded a response based in horror and indignation; because “the most outstanding feature of South African oppression is its brazen, exhibitionist openness,” black writers are bound by circumstance to address it (42). Because of its reactionary basis, such literature is necessarily timely and temporary. Having raised consciousness in the 1950s and 60s, writers in the 1970s needed to move to another type of aesthetic. In the protest literature tradition, authors voice the grievances of the oppressed and point fingers at the sources of the oppression. In the new literature Ndebele sees emerging, writers have “rediscovered the ordinary” (53). Instead of relying on the depiction of South African reality to create “a symbol of
spectacular moral wrong,” they now can use the representative nature of fiction to show that their reality can be “a direct object of change” (53). The difference lies in the dedication to a brighter future and the empowerment of individuals.

Therefore, Ndebele’s vision if literature of the “ordinary” validates the experience of those most oppressed. Without recognition of the complex nature of individual experience, where subjects must traverse at least two different discourses (in the white world and the black), the type of political consciousness raised will be simplistic, reactionary, and vengeful. In depicting the inner lives of characters, writers can confront the complex of affiliations each South African must live daily: family, race, religion, nation, gender. While the authorities attempt to categorize people, the people should resist, and this is the kind of writing Ndebele encourages in black South African writers. Ndebele believes that portraying characters with inner conflicts and awareness will encourage such personal growth in the audience; he says, “The new literature can contribute to the development of this subjective capacity of the people to be committed [to revolution], but only on the basis of as complete a knowledge of themselves and the objective situation as possible. The growth of consciousness is a necessary ingredient of this subjective capacity” (58).

Furthermore, Ndebele argues, in complicating the inner lives of their characters, the outer situation is also called into question. In such “ordinary” writing, there is a space for readers and writers to see the historical process as one of interpretation; the irony of a political system and its attendant mythology is that it is necessarily temporary. Ndebele says of irony that
Its fundamental law, for the literary arts in particular, is that everything involving human society is in a constant state of flux; that the dialectic between appearance and reality in the conduct of human affairs is always operative and constantly problematic, and that consequently, in the representation of human reality, nothing can be taken for granted. (69).

Through a focus on the transitory state of nations, then, writers can expose the weaknesses and subtle frailties of the seemingly impenetrable powers-that-be, revealing the open space of the present, where people perform their identities and alliances daily in an unpredictable, unstable forum where meaning is constantly sliding.

**Critical Review: Alex La Guma’s *In the Fog of the Seasons’ End***

The critical treatment of Alex La Guma’s novel *In the Fog of the Seasons’ End* (1972) illuminates the growing need for a new type of literature in South Africa. Although political consciousness had certainly been raised by the early 70s, Njabulo Ndebele, for one, sees La Guma as a prime example of an author (still) working in the realm of the “spectacular” (52). Many other critics would agree with La Guma’s classification as a “protest” writer, but most couch this evaluation in more positive terms. La Guma’s biographer Cecil A. Abrahams and a number of other critics consider *In the Fog* to be autobiographical, accepting the work as a dramatization of La Guma’s personal experience with oppression and the resistance movement (*Alex La Guma* 112; *Moore* 106-107). Such basis in reality gives the novel political cache that is essential in the genre. In addition, Abrahams claims that La Guma “consciously sat down to be the social
historian of the Cape colored people” (Alex La Guma Preface). Abrahams emphasizes La Guma’s identification with and full acceptance of the apartheid category “coloured.” In emphasizing La Guma’s racial categorization and in focusing on his embrace of that label, Abrahams seems to suggest that such classification reflects reality. However, Abrahams seems to dismiss the lack of emphasis on specific racial labels in In the Fog; La Guma was, in fact, already moving into a new aesthetic based on the responses of individuals to the social issue of racism.

The Marxist ideology underlying La Guma’s novel draws the attention of critics. M. Keith Booker emphasizes the Marxist focus of In the Fog, implying that, in embracing Marx’s social categories, La Guma rejects those of the west as irrelevant—including apartheid. Booker praises such political motivation, arguing that

This suggestion that the niceties of Western bourgeois aesthetics are irrelevant or even harmful in the crisis context of apartheid South Africa can be read as an allegorization of La Guma’s literary project, which dispenses with common Western expectations that art will present pleasant and beautiful images disengaged from the world of politics. (162)

For Booker, then, the “spectacle,” which La Guma’s writing often employs (according to many critics) is a necessity borne of the desperate situation, as well as an expression of the difference between the proletarian perspective and the bourgeois.

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1 This designation will be used throughout my paper, in reflection of the official categories implemented by the apartheid state of South Africa. “Coloured” refers to persons of mixed European and African race, as well as to Indians and Southeast Asians. In no way does its use imply approval of the author.
Nevertheless, such an argument seems to align La Guma with yet another Western philosophy, one that is also based in social stratification. However, critic Balasubramanyan Chandramohan argues that this strategy leaves La Guma open to freely contest politically based racial classification. Chandramohan sees La Guma’s purpose as one of uniting the oppressed of all races in order to overthrow the corrupt system. He says, “In his creative works La Guma tried to evolve a set of transracial moral and political values based on Marxist ideas of the binary polarizations between exploiting and exploited social groups” (Chandramohan 27). While Chandramohan seems to argue that the substitution of one polarizing ideology is better than another, for those who see life in more or other than economic terms, such a strategy is not useful.

Some critics, however, see In the Fog as an exploration of the inner lives of those who feel compelled to resist the apartheid system. In this individual, personal way, La Guma’s novel can be seen to move into Ndebele’s realm of the ordinary, where motivations and personal conflicts are highlighted rather than subsumed under an overarching banner for resistance. Abdul R. JanMohamed, for instance, says of In the Fog that in this novel the self-as-individual discovers his being in his existence for others, in his existence as a social being. Thus the realism of this novel is simultaneously manifested in its mimetic accuracy, in its representation of the dialectical conflict, and, most significantly, in its revelation of authentic being through a transcendence of the dialectical conflict. (258-59).
In such a way, In the Fog looks ahead, into the future, with hope for the possibilities. However, JanMohamed’s insistence on the reality of an “authentic being” holds fast to western enlightenment ideals of individuality and self that are challenged daily in the post-colonial, postmodern world. There seems to be little chance of escaping the ideology of the West.

Nahem Yousaf, on the other hand, finds La Guma a deft prober of the psychology of the oppressed; he argues, “La Guma deploys a dialogic approach in his fiction in order to elucidate the daily realities of the oppressed majority and the various subject positions his characters may adopt in opposition to the monologism of apartheid” (xi). Rather than simply depicting the brutality of a state that sees most of its populace as objects to be herded into compliance, La Guma individualizes those who have been herded together, giving free reign to their inner thoughts, according to Yousaf. Such exploration of humanity necessarily complicates characters and subjectivities; one of the primary reasons for resisting apartheid is its insistence on categories of individual identification.

It is ironic, then, that the system that is designed to make life “simpler” actually causes inner disconnect for its subjects. Rather than living as unified “black,” “white,” or “coloured” people, these designations serve only as social masks, which brutally sever the continuity between work and home life, family and friends. Kathleen Balutansky sees this disruption displayed throughout La Guma’s novel: “La Guma uses narrative and time and structure, style and tone, images and symbols, to construct a novel that is a representation of the fragmentation of Black South African experience” (83). Such disruption and fragmentation is at the core of the brutality enacted upon those oppressed
in South Africa. Especially for the resisters, who must live on the margins of society, existence is fragmentary. JanMohamed notes that, in *In the Fog*, “The narrative of these seven or eight days is so discontinuous that it matches perfectly the abnormality, marginality, and precariousness of the protagonists’ experiences” (254).

While each of these critics—Yousaf, Balutansky, and JanMohamed—sees the fragmented reality of the resistance members, they all also note that there is an important unifying element in La Guma’s novel: the history of resistance and the continuation of the struggle. JanMohamed notes the irony of the protesters’ *choosing* to live marginally in order to reach their goal for a free South Africa (257). Balutansky sees victory for the movement in Elias’ death, due to his “transcendence of all physical reality into the mythical realm of African history in which he joins his glorious ancestors in their common battle against the White oppressor” (100). From his early depiction of the Bushmen in the natural history museum, Yousaf argues, “La Guma is at pains to take the first warriors out of an anthropological exhibition in a museum and make their concerted historical efforts count explicitly within a South African world view” (101). Through such a historical device, La Guma is able to situate his protagonists in a timeline stretching from the first contact with Europeans into the future that lies on the horizon.

Although the historical perspective adds unity and direction to the resistance movement, these critics fail to recognize that La Guma’s characters in *In the Fog*—of any color or politics—remain fragmented by the very conditions of living in a nation based on heterogeneous groups coming together. By exploring the complexities of life in the post-
colonial world, La Guma reveals the psychology, the emotions, and the inner conflicts that drive the populace to rely on masks for survival.

**Critical Review: Bessie Head’s *Maru***

While critics dispute whether Alex La Guma’s political stance keeps his fiction from being complex and truly representative, critics of Bessie Head’s *Maru* (1971) debate whether the novel even has a political edge to it. Where, for La Guma, his personal experience in politics and the resistance movement validates his writing as meaningful in the South African milieu, Head’s experience seems to distance her from the possibility of serious political commentary. *Maru* is set in Botswana, the place of Head’s exile, and the dramatic circumstances of her birth and childhood serve as an excuse for many critics to focus solely on the particulars of her life and how the details seemingly play out in her work. For instance, Elaine Savory Fido claims of *Maru*’s protagonist Margaret, that “Her inner self emerges only through the development of her artistic ability, which is in fictional terms the parallel to Head’s own capacity to use her writing skill to explore her life and society, as well as to survive the trauma of her childhood” (339). In focusing so closely on the autobiographical parallels between the character Margaret and the writer Head, critics erase the possibility of broader political implications, seeing only the converse “spectacle” of individual suffering and alienation. Valerie Kibera also cannot resist linking the two women, emphasizing their common interest in art as psychological release for the pain caused by being part of the oppressed majority, yet lonely and shunned (322).
Rob Nixon explores Head’s personal history, looking for psychological reasons for her writerly moves, but without claiming any sort of political motivation. He notes, “Many of the fundamental criteria for social membership—notably those of family, race, and nation—characteristically assume or invoke the authority of blood-lineage. Because Head’s relationship to all these categories was so radically and traumatically liminal, she could never live the illusion of their naturalness” (Nixon, *Homelands, Harlem, and Hollywood* 103-104). In seeing her concern as lying in the exorcism of personal demons rather than as part of a larger resistance movement against apartheid or slavery, Nixon denies the possibility of a different kind of political novel. Outside of the “protest” literature genre, Head’s *Maru* confuses the notion of oppressed and oppressor through a seemingly “romantic” story, where it is essential to recognize that national power truly resides in flawed, complex, and fragmented individuals.

Head’s experience as an unwanted child, raised by a succession of families and by the South African state, followed by her exile in Botswana, leads many critics to read *Maru* as symbolic of her yearning for a space in which to belong. Huma Ibrahim notes that her longing is not without reservations, however, since she has been rejected so many times before: “The exile’s consciousness constitutes a tension between a desire and longing to belong to a nation-state but the fear and reality of unfulfillment of that same desire” (89-90). Ibrahim senses that Head questions the validity of national belonging based on either performative affiliation or the bonds of blood. In her exploration of the “ordinary” consequences of personal, familial bonds, Head fuses the discourse of the everyday with that of nation building. This is more aware, and less patriarchal than
Coreen Brown’s vision of Head using Maru to show how love becomes a political endeavor, “the most fundamental means by which wrongs can be righted” (75).

Some critics argue that Head’s individual status as exile, woman, “coloured,” and orphan override any consideration of the novel apart from the autobiographical connections. This idiosyncratic combination of labels, in fact, serves as a platform from which Head can speak solely for herself, in a confusing, politically unsatisfying manner (Beard, Bruner, Gardner, Savory). According to this view, because Head herself was a unique person with complex affiliations then, few of us would be able to relate in any politically productive way. This kind of thinking flattens out the complexities in everybody, reducing each to their label. Such thinking obtrudes in any attempt to see the “ordinary” politics in a complex work like Maru.

In delving deep for solutions to political problems of oppression and inequality, Head posits a different kind of protest novel. Sophia O. Ogwude writes that “Her goals are much broader than those of the ordinary protest writer and as such they demand different and diverse techniques” (66). Because Head is not simply addressing apartheid, passbooks, or forced relocations, but racism at large, her politics may seem so far-reaching as to be simply ethics. Maru’s abandonment of his chieftaincy to pursue a life with Margaret points to another kind of political movement: Oladele Taiwo remarks that “Maru abandons his political responsibility in order to demonstrate his belief in freedom of action for the individual and help extend that freedom to people of all races” (193). Head’s vision of politics, according to these critics, is both individual and far sweeping, not easily contained by the type of rhetoric espoused by political parties or resisters.
The question, then, for many critics is whether to accept Head’s vision of Africa-wide—or even worldwide—politics that play out within the individual. Craig Mackenzie finds such focus on personality ineffective; he says, “the flaw in Maru arises from Head’s inability to unite the public and the social with the inner life of the individual” (119). Others find the flaw to lie in her broad scope: Cecil A. Abrahams notes of Head that “She does not lead the question outside the familiar orbit of victim and victimizer; the result is that Maru is a rather weak, vapoury study on the theme of racial prejudice” (“The Tyranny of Place” 23). Huma Ibrahim agrees with this analysis, objecting that “It seems that Head foregrounds issues of race in an effort to transcend local apartheid versions of racism, but this transcendence is at the price of not engaging this subject with all the seriousness it deserves” (91).

This accusation of a “lack of seriousness” seems to focus around the fairy tale elements of the story, with which many critics are dissatisfied. Abrahams objects, “The plot […] culminates in a fairy tale marriage and seems somewhat contrived” (“The Tyranny of Place” 23). Modupe Olaogun argues that the formulaic structure ironically reenacts the oppression against which Head attempts to rail: “In casting Maru’s initiatives in active terms, relative to the subdued tones of Margaret’s resistance, Head’s narrative unwittingly subordinates the agency of the enslaved and the oppressed to the grand gestures of the benevolent enslaver and oppressor” (“Slavery” 190). The use of a fairy tale marriage to ostensibly resolve the social issues raised in the novel reasonably conflicts with the feminist view whereby the agency of the “fair maiden” is lost when the “handsome prince” swoops down to “rescue” her. Such issues lead Ibrahim to assert,
“Margaret Cadmore remains the perfect victim of racism and sexism throughout this novel” (100). In her grand gesture towards the freedom of the Masarwa, then, Head sacrifices the freedom of her heroine; Ibrahim says, “Even though the Masarwa are dependent on the marriage for their liberation—or so we are told—this marriage does the opposite for Margaret” (109).

While most critics see the fairy tale ending either as an elegant and symbolic means of addressing racism or as a failure in the vision of an author they had hoped would be more “radical,” Colette Guldimann contends that Head knew exactly what she was doing with the seemingly simplistic ending. She says that “Paying attention to textual factors that give rise to this ‘uncertainty’ [about whether the ending is happy] will reveal that far from having a romantic resolution, Maru is, in fact, a radical subversion of the romance genre and reading it this way will offer a way out of the longstanding critical impasse” (Guldimann 48). The subversion lies, for Guldimann, not in the symbolic marriage of tribal chief and a member of a race of slaves, but within the character of Margaret Cadmore. She argues, “Margaret cannot be contained by the conventional meaning of the sign Masarwa. She is constantly dismantling perceptions about what a Masarwa should be and exceeding the boundaries of the constructed definition and place of Masarwa” (57). Maru’s dream is thus doomed from the beginning of the novel, where, in the prolepsis, we see storm clouds gathering above the seemingly peaceful lovers’ retreat after their exile from Dilepe. For Guldimann, Margaret is not simply a Masarwa; she is much, much more, and Maru is anything but a simple fairy tale with an implied “happily ever after.”
Although Guldimann’s insistence that Head’s ending is not “happy” is insightful, relying on the character of Margaret to carry a message of possibilities for political resistance is naïve. With the close of the story, Margaret is trapped in a house where she lives seemingly without remembrance of her past, waiting for the storm to break. Rather than casting Margaret as a heroine, then, Head demonstrates how easily people can be manipulated by those with power, even when it is not to their benefit. In subverting the romance genre, Head also subverts the mystification of power that allows some to rule over many.

**Critical Review: J. M. Coetzee’s *Life and Times of Michael K***

Confusion about the political stance of author J. M. Coetzee surrounds his novel *Life and Times of Michael K* (1983). Critics remain apprehensive about making a judgment as to Coetzee’s political intent largely due to his self-referential writing technique, which constantly questions his own (and everyone else’s) authority. Stephen Clingman, for his part, insists that Coetzee stands outside of the politics of his nation, saying, “In *Life and Times* there is the refusal of anything we would normally count as political. Certainly untempted by the past, Coetzee will not be tempted by any notions of partisanship, participation or salvation in the future” (49). Others agree that Coetzee’s means of characterization, plot, and theme clearly reject political ideology as configured by the oppressive South African government. Graham Huggan and Stephen Watson argue, “Spurning the almost endless series of binary opposites that are so characteristic of
South African life, cultural or otherwise, J. M. Coetzee has simply refused to be tied to the terms of the debate” (4).

With respect to Life and Times, in particular, Coetzee has been charged with ignoring the politics of his era only to become a slave to the worst excesses of it. Michael K’s limited verbal expression can be seen to work in a damaging manner, especially for a white South African author who is attempting to represent one of the oppressed classes. Benita Parry argues that the mystification of Michael’s silence only perpetuates the idea of the Other: “the homages to the mystical properties and prestige of muteness undermine the critique of that condition where oppression inflicts and provokes silence” (158). Ironically, for Parry, Coetzee’s refusal of the binary system of the powers-that-be is actually reenacted on paper; she says that “Coetzee’s narrative strategies both enact a critique of dominant discourses and pre-empt dialogue with non-canonical knowledges through representing these as ineffable” (158).

Other critics, however, buy into the notion that Michael represents something more universal than contemporary politics. Luc Renders calls Michael “Christ-like” in his dedication to his ideal of keeping the land alive through gardening (101), while Dick Penner calls Michael’s vision the “innocent romanticism” (94) of an outsider, “for Michael, the tender of the earth, prefers the company of plants, of solitude, to that of people and causes” (104). Michael’s ability to survive despite barely eating, to escape camps, prisons, and hospitals, is here seen as a testament to his privileged position, in the eyes of these critics.
Others note that Michael’s silence and confusion demonstrate the possibilities that lie outside the system as politicians have construed it. Stephen Watson says,

Failure to attain and articulate self-consciousness is not rendered here as a disappointment, since silence is privileged as enabling the euphoria of desire unmediated by words; alternatively, if Michael K is perceived as dramatizing the inability to achieve a voice in the Symbolic order, then we can note that his ‘loss of thetic function’ is not represented as a lapse into psychosis but as a path to the visionary. (46)

The state of heightened inward awareness that Michael achieves due to his isolation, then, can be seen as a way out of the oppressive structures with which he is constantly surrounded. Teresa Dovey says that “K’s obscurity, his talent for escaping and for surviving without food, make him a figure who can represent the possibility of eluding the meanings inherent in any system, or bypassing the hierarchy of authorities (and authorship)” (63-64). For these critics, Michael’s power lies in his ability to slip through the cracks and create his own system. Derek Wright sees hope in Michael’s very survival as a mirror of the endurance of the earth to which he is so closely bonded (“The African” 88), and Kelly Hewson argues that “Michael K’s retreat from History to cultivate his own garden can thus be understood as a creative, radical attempt to maintain innocence and to assert his own history” (66).

Where Hewson sees Michael K’s stubborn adhesion to his plan to feed the world as the creation of a personal history, others see in Life and Times actual referentiality to the politics of South Africa in the early 1980s. David Attwell contends that it is only
within this cultural context that the novel can be truly grasped (South Africa 103), and
that it is clear that the novel “was written partly—with the emphasis on partly—in
response to a particular political and constitutional debate in South Africa in the early
1980s, when the nation seemed to enter a cycle of insurrection and repression whose
outcome threatened to be bloody” (South Africa 88). On the other hand, Dominic Head
and Susan VanZanten Gallagher both point to Coetzee’s title in their claims of its
historicity. Head argues that the title “proclaims itself as having an involvement with this
tradition in which the individual life is held to interact intimately with social and political
development. The challenge is that the novel ironically undermines the association by
presenting the life of an anti-hero who resists all obvious contact with the social and
political milieu” (93). Despite all of Michael’s attempts to avoid the outside world,
however, the political situation seems to find him. Gallagher also points to the novel’s
title as proof of its historical context, but for her, the irony lies in the fact that, although
ostensibly set in the near future, the reality Coetzee represents is all too real for the
majority of South Africans (143).

Not only are the present and future of South Africa addressed, however, some
argue that Life and Times also works to rewrite the official history of the state, which
mythologizes the past in order to support its inequities. Gallagher reveals the way in
which Coetzee challenges three of the primary Afrikaner myths through Michael’s
journeys. Afrikaners are said to be independent, pastorally minded, and to have suffered
greatly at the hands of the British, especially in the concentration camps of the Anglo-
Boer War. Michael ironically usurps these myths as his own, seeking the purity of the
Karoo, wanting to create life from the barren land, and escaping the humiliation and confinement of work camps, prison camps, and hospitals. Gallagher argues, “the parallels of his life and the Afrikaner past demonstrate the inherent irony of South African history” (151). In confronting some of the central myths around which the institution of apartheid was built, Coetzee challenges the system’s claims to “right.” Teresa Dovey points out that this is a theme in much of Coetzee’s writing: “recognizing that repetition is inevitable, he wittingly inhabits prior modes of discourse in order to deconstruct them from within. In this sense the novels may be described as postmodern allegories, which undermine the authority of the appropriated discourses” (57).

In the end, then, some critics contend that there is no possible resolution to *Life and Times*, no suggestion for a better future, and no real insight into the individual person, Michael. According to Dominic Head, the reader eventually comes “to a realization that the space in which K’s experiment as cultivator can endure does not exist, either in expectations of the novel at this time, or in the particular terrain alluded to,” and therefore, “If the mythic story of Michael K is self-cancelling in this respect, so is the allegory of *Michael K*, the novel. Just as K eludes interpretation, so does the novel” (106). Both the character and the novel about his life and times are ultimately impossible to circumscribe. Jane Bennett also sees the tensions left unresolved at the end of the novel, explaining that “The story of K brings into focus a paradoxical dimension of the ideal of reflective individuality and suggests how contemporary fantasies of freedom can be bound up with quests of anonymity and a return to nature. And it does this without deciding between K as political hero or K as victim” (165). Susan VanZanten Gallagher
contends that such interpretive ambiguity—which could be seen as a political failure—is both necessary and honest; she says that the medical officer’s explanation of Michael in part two “overinscribes Michael and robs him of his human mystery. In writing Life and Times of Michael K, Coetzee commits himself to a similar failure. As apocalypse, Michael’s story resists complete explication even as it unveils the truth” (165).

In inviting so many contradictory interpretations, Coetzee’s novel invites readers to contemplate the machinations of power that lie both within the nation-state and in the act of reading. As readers searching for clues to explain the character Michael, we participate in the system that keeps him from self-consciousness by caging him in. Accordingly, it is this uneasy certainty that nothing and no one is understandable, whether by the terms of apartheid South Africa or the literary critic’s schemata, with which Coetzee leaves his readers.

**Wretchedness, Ambiguity, and Abjection**

As a challenge to the western ideal of individualism based on an ineffable “core,” the novels of Alex La Guma, Bessie Head, and J. M. Coetzee depict ways of being that exist in modern societies under the surface of masks, silence, and socialization. Although the protagonists of these novels may not “succeed” in self-liberation, their struggles to remember parts of themselves that are denied by the status quo represent hope and possibility for the future of oppressed people.

Where most critics find La Guma’s *In the Fog* a simple protest novel with little but surface representations of the spectacle of oppression, Frantz Fanon’s ideas on the
psychological damage done by the colonial situation open up a format for exploring the characters’ actions more fully. By expanding Fanon’s notion of “masks” to include the “mask” of paternalism that the oppressors must also wear, La Guma’s text reveals a path to understanding the fragmentary existence of all those involved in supporting or resisting the state. Through a recognition of the conflicted humanity of all people, La Guma opens a space for the negotiation to take place after the necessary violence of revolt.

Bessie Head’s Maru, although on the surface a simple romantic fairy tale, bubbles beneath the surface with complex personalities and power struggles that suggest the contestation between political groups over the “narration” of a nation, in Homi Bhabha’s terminology. Head’s suggestion that there is no simple, easy way out of the long-standing traditions of racial stratification is borne out in her ironically unresolved example of a Hollywood ending. The story looks to the future of Africa, the nations being formed in the wake of the end of colonialism, and sees no easy answers to the question of how best to reconcile groups peacefully in order to unite them. Her story ends with brewing storm clouds, but the storm could bring rain to nourish life in their new nation.

Likewise, Coetzee’s Life and Times remains unresolved, leaving the reader to wonder if Michael K can ever succeed in his attempt to fully elude interpretation. Through an understanding of the relation of state structures to Julia Kristeva’s idea of psychic abjection, Michael K’s story emerges as one of a consciousness developing in spite of the self-repulsion with which it has been conditioned. Observing the development of Michael’s consciousness also leaves a giant question about the possibilities open to a man who wholly rejects society. Michael has succeeded in surviving, at least marginally.
But what meaning can his resistance have when he is so isolated, uncommunicative, and uncooperative? Coetzee suggests that we, the readers, participate in drawing Michael’s boundaries through our very curiosity. When Michael is an object for our study, he has little chance to assert himself as subject; alone, in his burrow, he can do that.

All of these novels, then, explore the possibilities for resistance open to the postmodern, post-colonial subject. By recognizing the multiple subject positions (as well as the instability of these positions), readers can imagine new alternative ways of living. Through exploring the complexities of their protagonists, authors like La Guma, Head, and Coetzee unveil the truth(s) that inhabit even the most rigid of individuals. Whether police officer, indentured worker, member of the resistance, paramount chief, teacher, or gardener, all have the capacity for developing a self-consciousness that delights in its multiplicity. Such multiplicity is a powerful tool in resisting oppression.
Chapter One

Ordinary Alienation: Alex La Guma’s In the Fog of the Seasons’ End

The fiction of Alex La Guma is consistently classed as “protest” literature. This is, presumably, due to his pointed political commentary, his focus on spectacular episodes of brutality, and his conviction that the reader must do something. His novel In the Fog of the Seasons’ End seems to be directed to multiple audiences. While clearly intended to raise consciousness and indignation in the non-White population of South Africa, it also clearly speaks to an international audience with less experience in the day-to-day realities of the system of apartheid. In response to the needs of this audience, La Guma spends time explaining the rationalizations of the government as well as the resistance movement’s response in the prologue to the novel. Using broad strokes, it serves to introduce the reader from the outside to the brutality of South African apartheid. However, the shocking introduction, designed to draw the reader in, does not signal that only “spectacles” are to follow. Instead, La Guma’s characters—including those tied to the regime—are complex, conflicted, and multi-dimensional: they both react to the oppression by learning to wear masks of complicity and act through undercover protest.

In such a fractured reality, the colonized person becomes alienated. In Black Skin, White Masks, Frantz Fanon argues that the culture of colonialism creates native subjects who are out of touch with themselves. He contends that “the black man’s alienation is not an individual question,” but a social disorder caused by the unnatural state of colonialism (11). In fact, he goes on to state, “White civilization and European culture have forced an
existential deviation on the Negro” (Black Skin 14). Because the gulf is wide between the
technical vision of the oppressor and the oppressed, and because the nature of power
relations, those with little power must live in the world imagined by the elite. The
psychological drain of maintaining the illusion of satisfaction in order to avoid
punishment, degradation, or exile in the face of brutal realities such as poverty, crime,
and starvation, creates a society harboring multiple interpretations of the world around
them. The story of In the Fog implies such an experience is so common as to be
universal. Because the identity of the prisoner who is being questioned in the prologue is
unknown, his situation reads as one of the thousands of interrogations taking place within
South African police stations at the time. The Major tells him, with a paternalistic tone,
“We know the things which are best for you. We have gone far to help you, do things for
you. Yet you want to be like the Whites. It’s impossible’” (4). The prisoner (we later see
that it is Elias Tekwane) then responds in an articulate manner, voicing the rage behind
every non-White’s mask of compliance, outlining the mistrust at the bottom of the
apartheid situation:

‘You want me to co-operate. You have shot my people when they have
protested against unjust treatment; you have torn people from their homes,
imprisoned them, not for stealing or murder, but for not having your
permission to live. Our children live in rags and die of hunger. And you
want me to co-operate with you? It is impossible.’ (5-6)

That both participants feel that the demands of the other are “impossible” speaks directly
to the alienation suffered by those who are oppressed by the apartheid system. In order to
live within it, because the alternative is violence or imprisonment, they must deny their feelings of distrust and betrayal and buy into the regime’s notion that it is improving life for all of them.

One major way in which control over people’s identities is mastered is through passbooks. These were mandatory for all non-whites during the apartheid era. La Guma’s description of the procedure surrounding the assignation and use of passbooks also make use of anonymous, unnamed characters. Fanon notes that “The colonized is elevated above his jungle status in proportion to his adoption of the mother country’s cultural standards” (Black Skin 18). One of the most basic of these standards is presumably the use of written records. Because the colonial administration couldn’t possibly keep track of all of the natives without passbooks, they are a necessity to the functioning of the state, which (of course) has their best interests at heart. La Guma describes this process of becoming an official subject as a kind of initiation:

When African people turn sixteen they are born again or, even worse, they are accepted into the mysteries of the Devil’s mass, confirmed in the blood rites of a servitude as cruel as Caligula, as merciless as Nero. Its bonds are the entangled chains of infinite regulations, its rivets are driven in with rubber stamps, and the scratchy pens in the offices of the Native Commissioners are like branding irons which leave scars for life. (80)

Where the initiation rites of many African nations serve to bring sons and daughters into the fold of the community, these initiatory rites create an underclass, a pool of resources, hands for working. They have become a part of a community that they have had no part
in forming or approving; they are truly objects. According to the universal administrator, without a passbook, “‘You will be nothing, nobody, in fact you will be decreated’” (82). With the passbook, you have a defined purpose and attendant right; without it, you are simply void. Fanon says it is natural that the oppressed person would react to such labeling with vehement refusal: “the first impulse of the black man is to say no to those who attempt to build a definition of him. It is understandable that the first reaction of the black man is a reaction” (Black Skin 36). Often, however, that reaction must simmer beneath the surface while the “show” of everyday complicity continues.

The surreal feeling of living a part in a production directed by someone and something beyond your control is prevalent in In the Fog. Many chapters begin with a sense that the scene is being set. The first chapter, for instance, gives a strong sense of the strange effect of the English imposition of order on the African landscape; the effect is unsettling: “Among the trees were cultivated patches in the billiard-table lawns, the patches were grown with various plants and little sticks pinned with labels in front of each gave their names in English and Latin. Now and then a squirrel came face-down from the oaks and darted into the forest of carefully-tended flowers” (8). Later in the novel, prefiguring Elias’ capture, the scene is of disrepair and neglect: “A slum hung on the edge of the city suburbs like dirty plaster, cracking and crumbling away, yet unwilling to fall apart” (141). It is difficult, for anyone with a sense of beauty, to resist the commonplace that those who live in beautiful places are good and clean, while those in dilapidated flats are dirty and evil. Nevertheless, La Guma’s characters challenge that assumption again and again, living daily the split between outward and inward reality.
Throughout the novel both blacks and whites are enthralled with news of a sensational murder story from an Afrikaner farm. The gruesome story serves as a gauge of the entire South African society’s alienation from the truth of the war going on around them. Beatie Adams, in the first chapter, wonders “how people could be so nasty as to go around murdering each other” (13), blind to the reality of political murder and torture, titillated by the sordid details of the crime of passion. Beukes, the protagonist of the story, risks imprisonment and torture to deliver anti-government leaflets, while wondering how the taxi driver can be amused by the gory pulp fiction he is reading, when, for him and others in the resistance movement, “Life had become mysterious rides, messages left in obscure places, veiled telephone conversations” (25). Where Beatie Adams and the taxi driver remain actors in the theatre sponsored by the state, Beukes and his comrades star in a production of their own, created in response to the government, but with an ending that is still up in the air.

Fanon emphasizes the degree to which colonized subjects wear masks to succeed in the oppressor’s society, but La Guma also describes the regime as performers, as wearers of masks. When Elias first meets the Major, he detects the falsehood in his “good cop” routine: “The small, prissy mouth smiled, but his eyes belied the assumed air of bonhomie. There was a defect in the disguise; the mask did not conceal all” (4). Just as the non-white needs to wear an air of satisfied servitude to escape trouble, the enforcers of the laws wear masks of paternal care and jollity. Often, however, the masks themselves cannot be clearly interpreted. Even on the coloured level of the bus, Beukes nervously scans for police: “There was nobody there that looked like a police agent; but
then what did one look like?” (62). Color alone cannot serve as a clue to a person’s true feelings; Fanon’s alienation seems to extend to both oppressor and oppressed. The crowd on the bus taunts the fare collector as the stooge of the bus company, calling him a “boss-boy” (69). An African clerk passing out passbooks for the government is insulted by his white coworkers when he sarcastically notes, “‘The big bosses have ordained that only when you carry the pass will you be a man’” (125). The mask one chooses to wear does not indicate what emotions may simmer beneath.

The different people Beukes comes into contact with during his week of underground maneuvering serve to represent the different ways in which people choose to deal with the reality of oppression. When Beukes meets Beatie Adams, the nursemaid, in the park, he sees that she does not recognize that she is playing a part in the white man’s fantasy. Instead of recognizing her position as unfair, she simply says, “‘That’s life, isn’t it?’” (11). In accepting her fate as a servant, remaining comfortable in her room, she is able to avoid trouble, other than “admonishments that the baby had nappy-rash” (12). Nevertheless, her safety comes at a price; while she blames her mother’s overprotectiveness for her lingering country accent and her remaining single, she fails to see that her security is, in reality, a prison, a “fortress in the backyard” (12) where she lives isolated from others of her own race.

Where Beatie Adams remains secure in her fog because of the comforts of second-hand furniture, Arthur Bennett is even deeper into the deceptive security material possessions can bring. His middle-class position and fear of losing it causes him to renege on an offer of a bed for Beukes. His house shines with brass trinkets and the
leftover glow from his family’s weekend at the (coloured) beach. It is clear that his wife has objected to any involvement in the resistance movement, but Bennett tries to keep up a front for Beukes; he is described as having “anxious, harassed eyes that fought to maintain the disguise of bonhomie, but it kept slipping like a badly-glued moustache in a school play” (20). Bennett puts up little resistance, much like Beatie’s “That’s life” when Beukes mentions his area will soon be declared white. Bennett just doesn’t want any trouble, and moves uneasily between various masks he can don as needed.

For Beukes’ friend Tommy, life is too short to worry, so he makes life livable through music and dance, living in a fantasy world of ballroom dance and skimming the surface of the rest of the world. His mask is one of satisfied intoxication, and it is never clear whether he is as innocent of the world as he seems. To Beukes, though, it seems that “For Tommy, reality, life, could be shut out by the blare of dance-bands and the voices of crooners. From this cocoon he emerged only to find the means of subsistence, food and drink. Politics meant nothing to him. He found it easier to live under the regime than to oppose it” (53). Nonetheless, this appearance (perhaps reality) of complete ignorance serves Beukes and the resistance movement well. Tommy takes and delivers messages, never asking questions, not wanting to know the answers. In addition, his “cocoon” provides a safe place for Beukes to rest and hide out.

Others do not play the part of the ignorant savage, however. Mister Flotman, for one, is an educator, using his mask of respectability to help Beukes deliver the handbills that risk the lives of all involved. Flotman works from within the system; he knows all of the dearest tenets of the government and the supporting mythology by heart. He is
described as “surrounded by the battlements of education: toppled rows of encyclopaedias, The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire, piled and dog-eared journals, numerous school text-books” (85). Flotman is on the front lines of the culture wars, forced to feed government propaganda to his students on the one hand, while secretly encouraging revolution on the other. He has learned to manipulate his position to make whatever sort of difference he can and still receive a paycheck. Likewise Abdullah and his wife have learned ways in which to make their lives of oppression more tolerable through taking advantage of the trust placed in them because of their impenetrable masks of obedience. Abdullah gets special suits made for him on the sly, while handing out subversive information to his coworkers, and his wife tacks on extra charges for her white customers. The doctor Beukes visits after he is shot does his part, too, behind the examination room curtains, treating the wound without asking questions, content to simply rail openly against the unjust system that he and the rest of the characters are trapped in, returning to his mask of benign neutrality once Beukes disappears.

Perhaps the most glaring instance of a mask being suddenly dropped once and for all comes when Isaac realizes he must leave his job. In the petroleum company, he is just one of “The Coloured ‘boys’ who carried messages for this American firm” (110), and the only outward suggestion of his discontent comes from the sly way in which he avoids the secretary he most dislikes and the surreptitious drawings of firearms he doodles when on a break. When he realizes that the police have come looking for him, he discards his old life, his mask of obedient satisfaction: “He got up and went over to the cupboard in a corner of the kitchen, opened and removed his white company jacket. He took down his
own coat and put it on” (117). He steps off the stage, walks down the hall, “and after the artificial air-conditioning the heat of the summer day struck him like a blow” (118). In this moment, Isaac chooses sometimes-uncomfortable reality over a life of repressed hostility and alienation.

Nevertheless, those in the movement make use of their own set of disguises. Beukes blends into the sea of brown faces in his inconspicuous brown suit. He never forgets the danger he is in, “But with his everyday brown suit, the anonymous hang of the shoulders, he was just somebody going somewhere” (61). It is very important for his purpose that he does not call attention to himself, and for this reason, he prefers to appear to be just one of the herd. Even in the middle of the night, Beukes instinctively protects himself: “he moved with the caution of someone grown used to hiding, to evading open spaces; the caution of someone who knew that a man alone in the street was as conspicuous as a pyramid, but that in a crowd one could become anonymous, a voice in a massed choir” (107). Ironically, then, it is essential for the success of the movement that its functionaries remain unknown, invisible. Frantz Fanon notes that resisting the oppressor’s assigned part means exposing oneself as an individual; for this reason, “In the man of color, there is a constant effort to run away from his own individuality, to annihilate his own presence” (Black Skin 60). To neglect to do this means risking direct contact with the oppressor. While the effort to disappear or to blend in comes naturally enough for most people, to the resistance movement, it becomes a necessity upon which the safety of innumerable others rests.
Despite the ideal of spreading “civilization” and the colonial power’s mask of paternal care, cracks appear in the disguise, revealing manipulative schemes rather than unconditional love. In *The Wretched of the Earth*, Fanon says,

> On the unconscious plane, colonialism therefore did not seek to be considered by the native as a gentle, loving mother who protects her child from a hostile environment, but rather as a mother who unceasingly restrains her fundamentally perverse offspring from committing suicide and from giving free rein to its evil instincts. The colonial mother protects her child from itself, from its ego, and from its physiology, its biology and its own unhappiness which is its very essence. (170)

This is the mother who wants to do what she feels is “best” for the child, to keep it from embarrassing itself and her, to keep it from walking around in only a loincloth, to keep it forever in doubt of its own inner thoughts and being. Part of this control is exerted in the colonial practice of giving names to Africans whose names are otherwise “unpronounceable.” Elias remembers his experience with the colonial mother, when “the missionary, who had always found it difficult to pronounce indigenous names, had said: ‘We’ll call him Elias, that’s a nice biblical name’” (72). Ironically enough, for the movement it has been necessary for Elias to adopt yet another name, Hazel, the name by which Beukes knows him. However, the commonplace experience of the state’s renaming of Africans proves useful, and Hazel names the new recruits, about to begin military training, Peter, Paul, and Michael. Having learned from the colonial mother, the resistance makes use of whatever scraps are available to it.
Nevertheless, La Guma shows some skepticism about the worth of names in the larger political scheme. In his description of a labor strike and the massacre that follows (modeled closely on the Sharpeville incident), he reverts to the use of universal description. In his naming of the characters—the Washerwoman, the Outlaw, the Bicycle Messenger, the Child, and the Sergeant—La Guma emphasizes their roles as workers or dependents of the state, rather than creating complex characters with which the reader could emotionally identify. Instead the effect is that of pointless, confused, and surreal violence meted out on the innocent, and the ineffective means of protection the regime offers its “children.”

In portraying the victims of the massacre as workers, La Guma emphasizes the economic exploitation that lies behind the violent desperation of the oppressors. This type of struggle over goods and money affects both portions of society, however. The effect of colonialism is, according to Fanon, that “the native, who has seen the modern world penetrate into the furthest corners of the bush, is most acutely aware of all the things he does not possess. The masses by a sort of (if we may say so) childlike process of reasoning convince themselves that they have been robbed of all these things” (Wretched 58). However, in the South African reality of In the Fog, such fears are indeed grounded. Throughout the novel, there are portrayals of government-made ghost towns, areas that were previously integrated but that now have been emptied of residents in preparation for a new, all-white community. Tommy’s neighborhood, for instance, is in transition. The narrator notes, “The sector had the look of a town cleared after a battle. Whole blocks had disappeared, leaving empty, flattened lots surrounded by battered survivors” (26). In the
meantime, people are surrounded by advertising for things they don’t need, with the
promise of happiness that can only come through having what the pretty, smiling, white
people on the billboards have. In the prologue section, where Elias is first questioned by
the Major, his disguise of friendliness makes him seem as if “he could have been an
advertisement for good cheer” (3), linking the false promises of the regime with those of
the capitalist corporations. The corporations of the world look on while the majority of a
nation is subjected to random searches and relocations. In watching the police barricade
at the subway station, it is impossible for Beukes not to notice that “Above them on a
huge billboard a happy family drank Coca Cola, smiling down with merry faces” on all
the accusations and insults being hurled (63).

The ironies of everyday life, especially the economic exploitation in the face of
what’s “best” for everybody, certainly cannot escape the consciousness of every person
involved in it. How could ordinary life be more confusing, complicated, and anti-
intuitive? Elias cannot remember his father, who was working in the far-off gold mines,
where “he was buried hundreds of feet below ground, deeper than any of his ancestors
had been buried” (73). After being shipped out of their homes inside the city limits,
“Black people came into the White-proclaimed city each morning to do the menial work
and left each evening to return to the Locations, the Townships, set aside for them like
ghettos” (112). The chief clerk decides to ask some of his “boys” to serve at a Country
Club outing, paying ten shillings for the day: “After all, he thought, they’ll probably
pinch half the canapés and smoked salmon sandwiches; they’re not used to such luxuries”
(113). Many of the men who share rooms at the bachelor’s barracks with Elias are
actually married, but have been separated from their families in the interest of the economy. Elias, the most politically enlightened character in the novel, is able to articulate (internally, at least) the truth about the injustice surrounding him: “he thought[,] we are not only humbled as Blacks, but also as workers; our blackness is only a pretext” (131).

Nevertheless, there are some Blacks who serve as the intermediaries between the upper and lower classes: the educators, the police, the administrators. Fanon says that “The national bourgeoisie of under-developed countries is not engaged in production, nor in invention, nor building, nor labour; it is completely canalised into activities of the intermediary type” (Wretched 122). The “translation” services such people offer the powers-that-be are essential to the management of the nation. Their position of relative privilege makes such people ideal role models for the lower class. The others, in Beukes’ words, are “‘all good enough to be servants. Because we’re black they think we good enough just to change their nappies’” (11).

Living in close, unpleasant spaces that smell of urine, garbage, and stale cooking is one of the adverse effects of non-white status; for Beukes, and presumably others in the movement, physical discomfort is a constant companion. Exhaustion due to wandering the streets at night, without a safe place to sleep, means that Beukes must counter-intuitively resist his body’s need for sleep. He moves on, despite his bodily needs, much like La Guma’s description of the resistance movement in the years following the Sharpeville massacre: “The movement writhed under the terror, bleeding. It had not been defeated, but it had been beaten down. It crouched like a slugged boxer, shaking his
spinning head to clear it, while he took the count, waiting to rise before the final ten” (48). Worry is also ever-present; Beukes must constantly be on the lookout for defects in the chain of sympathizers: loudmouths, idiots, traitors, the fearful. Beukes thinks, “You did this work, taking a chance all the time, hoping the bugger behind you or the one ahead of you would play the game” (50). The rules need to be followed, the disguise worn: if not, the entire project is in jeopardy. Nerves leave Beukes with a “cold feeling in his stomach” (52) and sweaty palms (58). Such a condition is not reserved solely for those involved in the underground movement, however. Because of the randomness of police checks and the labyrinthine nature of the law under apartheid, all non-whites feel the fear of “being caught.” Because “[t]here were a hundred and one crimes one might have committed without knowledge [, p]alpitations of the heart had become a national disease” (63-4). The system has created a sense of confusion over what’s right and wrong.

There is confusion, too, over what makes a home, when homes can be commandeered and destroyed in order to build homes for others. Beukes must live without a home while he is working for the movement, simply for the security of his family. He sleeps where he can, sometimes with friends, sometimes in fields or ditches, sometimes not at all. He moves on the edges of existence, hoping not to be noticed. Despite his happy marriage and healthy daughter, Beukes finds himself standing “in the half-light at the street corner alone, like a lost traveller, holding onto the cheap cardboard case [of handbills] as if it contained all his worldly possessions” (106). Although he has only the best intentions, he must meet with Isaac’s young sister, a “girl-child in the dark
doorway, furtively, as if he was a child-molester” (108). The sordid appearance of much of his activity depresses and confuses Beukes, leaving him with yet another layer of resentment for the system which forces him to live in this manner. Fear for his wife and child seem to be both the reason for his activity as well as the sad, but unavoidable effect of it. After he has been shot, “He thought, through the pain in his arm, I want to go home, I must go home, I want to go home to Francy. He still felt hollow but it was not the hollowness of hunger, and he realized, with tears pricking his eyeballs, that it was the hollowness of abandonment” (147).

Finally, however, he meets up with Henny April, the smuggler of rebels and arms who lives without worry. Beukes is in awe of Henny’s ability to complete projects and to keep an optimistic outlook. When Beukes shares his worries about the plan to take the new recruits to the training station, Henny says, “’Leave it to Brother Henny, hey. Jesus, me, I don’t boast, but I get things done.’ He gestured again with his fork, taking in the crowded room, the unidentified boxes and suitcases, his big wife’s numerous pregnancies, past and future” (168). Henny is populating the earth with replicas of himself, confident, easy-going, and certain of victory. The innumerable children, who sleep all around Beukes, are the final image of the novel, “gathered in the sunlit yard” (181), waiting for the fog to clear.

La Guma has demonstrated that the foggy confusion in which the oppressed peoples of South Africa live and die must be cleared through violent resistance. Clearly, he is selling the idea to the rest of the world that such a step is necessary and desirable. Frantz Fanon argues, “Violence alone, violence committed by the people, violence
organized and educated by its leaders, makes it possible for the masses to understand social truths and gives the key to them” (Wretched 117). As long as the people are wooed by the just-out-of-reach promise of consumer security and kept in check through a vague fear that their very existence is offensive, no change is possible. Because he has demonstrated the importance of rejecting the world of fear, La Guma is able to cast Elias’ death by torture as a victory. Elias does not waver, does not speak: he listens only to “his ancestors gathered on the misty horizon, their spears sparkling like diamonds in the exploding sun” (175).

It is never assured, however, that Beukes, Elias, Isaac, or any of the other resistance members must believe in the next step of violence. Although the flashbacks into the history of Beukes and Elias serve to give some basis for their later decisions to sacrifice all for the movement, it is clear—through the use of all of the secondary characters—that the decision to oppose the government is not a simple one. All of the people of South Africa are affected by the frantic desperation of the apartheid system, which attempts to erase those who challenge personal definition. Arthur Bennett and Mister Flotman are not the only characters who must contend with conflicting fears and desires; so must Beukes and Elias. The government frames the situation simplistically, based on color; however, such a situation does not flatten out ethical dilemmas: it complicates them. The alienation of colonialism—and, by extension, apartheid—creates psychoses in the oppressed, according to Fanon: “Because it is a systematic negation of the other person and a furious determination to deny the other person all attributes of humanity, colonialism forces the people it dominates to ask themselves the question
constantly: ‘In reality, who am I?’” (Wretched 203). This is the question being asked by all of the characters in La Guma’s novel, whatever their degree of political consciousness. In recognizing the inner struggles of characters who nevertheless choose to resist, La Guma opens up possibilities for action in readers who may otherwise feel unworthy. When it is revealed that everyone questions their motives, action becomes possible for all.
Chapter Two

Ordinary Emotions and National Narration: Bessie Head’s *Maru*

Bessie Head was born and raised in South Africa, but her fiction is set in her adopted land, Botswana. She escaped the apartheid state on a one-way exit visa, living in limbo from 1964 to 1979 with no official nationality. Many issues common to postcolonial nation-states erupt forcefully in her novel, *Maru*. The story is deceptively simple, seemingly formulated as a fairy tale: the Masarwa (Bushman) woman Margaret, who has been raised by English missionaries, causes an uproar in the village of Dilepe, where she comes to teach. She attracts the attention of the man who is in line to become paramount chief (Maru) and marries him, opening a door of hope into the lives of the Masarwa slaves of the region. Maru has battled his former ally, Moleka, for possession of Margaret, but in the end, he wins and whisks her away to live happily ever after.

The novel opens with a glimpse of this future time, which seems, perhaps, less “happy” than the fairy tale format portends. Head’s story is not so simple after all and can be read on multiple levels. Most profitable, perhaps, is an allegorical reading of the story as the construction of a nation-state in postcolonial Africa, using Homi Bhabha’s “DissemiNation” as a guide. The contestation between Maru and Moleka over Margaret, the cultural outsider, a liminal and jarring figure, suggests an attempt to control the narration of this ambivalent moment in history.

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2 In *Homelands, Harlem and Hollywood*, Rob Nixon says, “From 1964 to 1979, her official identity remained sandwiched between two of the world’s most visible, immobilizing documents—a South African exit permit and a United Nations Refugee Travel Document—both of which denied her a national identity” (107).
The story comes to the village of Dilepe in a time of political indeterminacy; Maru is slated to become the next paramount chief, but has yet to officially accept the position. He is reluctant to do so, being without “the kind of personality to rule the masses” (50). His best friend Moleka, also the son of a chief, is used to “making goats and people jump” (28). He is Maru’s closest friend and “the only person who was his equal” (34). Nevertheless, Maru “saw their relationship in its true light. They were kings of opposing kingdoms” (34) and destined, therefore, to clash at some point in time.

Moleka was unaware of his kingdom, the power in his heart, until it was unveiled in a mystical moment of love at first sight. Then, “Something killed the old Moleka in a flash and out of one death arose, in a flash, a new Moleka” (32). Maru sees the change in Moleka, whose eyes betray his newfound sense of power, and knows the time to end their friendship has come. Moleka will no longer submit his will to Maru’s. Maru is determined to allow his vision for the future to take root and grow, since in such ripe times modern nations come to be. According to Bhabha, “The nation fills the void left in the uprooting of communities and kin, and turns that loss into the language of metaphor” (291). When affiliations are no longer based on blood or love but common vision, the modern nation replaces the old forms of community.

Meanwhile, Margaret Cadmore Junior has entered the frame and seemingly stopped time. Margaret’s very appearance confuses and shocks the people of Dilepe. She is a Masarwa, orphaned at birth, who was raised by an English woman intent on proving “one of her favourite, sweeping theories […]: environment everything, heredity nothing” (15). Having received a “proper” education, Margaret speaks English flawlessly and her
surrogate mother tells her repeatedly, “‘One day you will help your people’” (17). Those people are the San, or Bushmen, who, according to Head’s narrator, rank as the lowest nation on the continent; no matter how bad things got for the rest of the people of southern Africa, they could always think, “at least they were not Bushmen” (11). In the region surrounding Dilepe Masarwa are kept as slaves, so Margaret’s appearance in the village as the new teacher causes an uproar.

Margaret is used to the hatred of bigotry: “There was no one in later life who did not hesitate to tell her that she was a Bushman, mixed breed, half breed, low breed or bastard. Then they were thrown into confusion when she opened her mouth to speak” (15-16). Margaret easily performs the proper actions and speech of the English, having been surrounded by them her entire life. Nevertheless, Margaret Senior’s insistence that she would someday help “her people” means that Margaret Junior also performs “Masarwa,” although with a more self-conscious turn. Fellow teacher and sister of Maru, Dikeledi is baffled when Margaret says, unhesitating, “‘I am a Masarwa’” (24). The term itself is an insult: “Masarwa is the equivalent of ‘nigger,’ a term of contempt which means, obliquely, a low, filthy nation” (12). Margaret claims it without shame or anger, without questioning its appropriateness or its implications; she is, in a way, as far removed from the Masarwa as Dikeledi herself is. Nevertheless, Margaret claims affiliation, and the narrator comments, “No doubt, she lived on the edge of something” (16).

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3 In Achebe, Head, Marechera, Annie Gagiano reveals that the proper term is Mosarwa (singular) and Basarwa (plural) (127).
Having entered this community and challenged its very basis—both economically and culturally—Margaret represents the reality that a modern nation cannot simply ignore the cues of everyday life in order to prop up an old system based on the mythology of national history. Margaret is poised to lead the people of Dilepe into a new understanding of themselves; it is necessary that they be roused from their static notions of self and community in order to recognize, in Bhabha’s words, “the ambivalence that informs modernity” (294). Bhabha says, “The people are not simply historical events or parts of a patriotic body politic. They are also a complex rhetorical strategy of social reference where the claim to be representative provokes a crisis within the process of signification and discursive address” (297). When a white man claims to be Botswanan, when a black woman claims to be Swedish, on what does the national definition depend? Each individual, different, unique, splintered, anything but simple, challenges the notion of representativeness in everyday life. The fact is that all of the people of Dilepe perform their cultural affiliations every day; however, the blatantly contradictory sight of Margaret’s Masarwa body paired with her English speech and actions, questions the solidly entrenched notion of Masarwa inferiority, which is one of the foundations of the local culture. In decolonization, the nation-state must confront not only the multitude of ethnic groups, but also the expatriate English and those Africans who have become “Englishified.” Margaret’s confusing status as one of the lowest nation who acts like one of the elite, confronts the “natural” or essential reality of cultural categorization. The modern nation, made up of numerous ethnicities with countless ways of living, must
embrace these differences in order to construct an identity that demands affiliation without denying difference.

It is necessary to recognize that the nation is formed and reformed every day by all of the people who identify with it. Bhabha says, “In the production of nation as narration there is a split between the continuist, accumulative temporality of the pedagogical, and the repetitious, recursive strategy of the performative” (297). In the pedagogical discourse, national ideals spring from a sense of destiny and eternity; on the other hand, the nature of time demands that those who identify with that ideal perform its implications in order to sustain its currency. Both the accumulative and repetitious modes are typical in the construction of national identity; however, the space that exists between the two is, in fact, where everyday life occurs. This space is never static—it disappears as soon as it is articulated. It is the people themselves who are, naturally, the very basis for the identity of the nation but “[they] are neither the beginning or the end of the national narrative; they represent the cutting edge between the totalizing powers of the social and the forces that signify the more specific address to contentious, unequal interests and identities within the population” (Bhabha 297). Neither the seemingly complete demands of historical nationhood nor the sudden and repetitive acts of national performance can encompass the reality that is the people who make up the nation.

When the nation recognizes, instead of denying, its diversity, a space opens up where conflicting peoples and views can coexist; when the nation rejects the pedagogical and becomes “alienated from its eternal self-generation, [it] becomes a liminal form of social representation, a space that is *internally* marked by cultural difference and the
heterogeneous histories of contending peoples, antagonistic authorities, and tense cultural locations” (Bhabha 299). In this opening it becomes clear that there is no single narrative for that nation; the many groups experience its formation through a variety of stories, whether they focus on the theme of conquest, defeat, conciliation, marginalization, or erasure.

In Maru, Margaret’s simple presence challenges the unity of the story of Dilepe. She represents that liminal nation-state, and thereby, her existence “ensure[s] that no political ideologies could claim transcendence or metaphysical authority for themselves” (Bhabha 299). The “story” of the dirty, stupid Masarwa can have little relevance when the figure of Margaret intercedes to challenge its veracity. As long as she presents the villagers with an image of a Masarwa woman that they cannot assimilate into their view of Dilepe, she challenges the essentialism of the idea of “Dilepe.” To Moleka, she is irresistible, and the confusion caused by one who, theoretically, could be his slave, motivates him to invite his slaves to eat with him in his home. His actions stir up the entire village, and “they no longer knew what was what” (48). Ranko, Maru’s spy, relates that “‘People are angered by the behaviour of Moleka. They say his action was too high handed and has created confusion. There is no place for a Masarwa, whom everyone has seen behaving like a low animal in drink and filth, and he wants to force matters and stir up trouble’” (53). Although Maru responds by removing the bed Margaret had been loaned by the Tribal Administration, the situation effectively remains at a standstill. Margaret continues to teach in the local school, and those who wanted her fired –the
education supervisor, the principal, and Maru’s no-good brother—are (seemingly) terrorized by the legendary demon Tladi until they flee town.

In exposing the fact that other narratives exist that create a nation, including ones where Masarwa are not slaves, the liminal figure reveals that the nation-state, as it is presently constituted, relies on the chance happenings of history and does not represent any true or necessarily preferable way of being. Seth, for instance, the education supervisor, finds himself in a position of power, it is suggested, in part because of his easy acceptance of the rules and traditions of the British. He is described as “an exact replica of a colonial officer, down to the Bermuda shorts” (40-41). Likewise the position of Morafi, Maru’s brother, also depends on the chance of heredity and timing. His affinity for cattle thieving depends wholly on his social position, whereby he cannot be challenged. When he finds a superior bull in a commoner’s herd, Morafi has his proxies “say to the petrified man: ‘I say, where did you get the money to buy such a bull? It can’t possibly be yours. You must have stolen it from the chief.’ And without further ado they would go off with the beast” (43). Once historical bases for power are revealed to be fictional constructs, Margaret—and others with marginal voices—gain a platform, a place to live without fear. Bhabha says, “The nation reveals, in its ambivalent and vacillating representation, the ethnography of its own historicity and opens up the possibility of other narratives of the people and their difference” (300). In recognizing the fluid nature of the contemporary state, the oppression and inequality, which may be represented as a part of national identity, are exposed as structures designed to maintain the status quo. The
sound of the marginal voice insinuating itself into national consciousness metaphorically chips away at the basis of power that shows itself as essential and immutable.

The embrace of stereotypes—like that of the low, dirty Masarwa—that further the idea of the nation as a historical certainty are actually challenged daily by the very existence of an always new and already fading present. Bhabha notes that Frantz Fanon calls this moment of uncertainty the “zone of occult instability,” where, in fact, the people dwell (Bhabha 303). If the people truly represent the nation itself, then, most important is their existence in the space between what has already passed and become historical, and the repetitive acts of reaffirmation that arise in the moment of performance. Bhabha argues, “The people as a form of address emerge from the abyss of enunciation where the subject splits, the signifier ‘fades’, the pedagogical and the performative are agonistically articulated. The language of national collectivity and cohesiveness is now at stake” (304). In this present moment, the meaning of the “people” is unstable; in the moment between, a variety of voices and stories arise that cannot easily be subsumed into one. In fact, the idea of the “nation” must be repeatedly performed in order to sustain currency; however, the very repetition suggests that there was something lacking in the first articulated instance of the idea. Here Bhabha draws on Derrida’s idea of supplementarity, saying, “The supplementary strategy suggests that adding ‘to’ need not ‘add up’ but may disturb the calculation” (305). Attempts to incorporate new groups into the nation necessarily challenge its unity and coherence. In this moment of adding to what was already supposedly complete, supplementarity allows for renegotiation of the terms of the nation itself.
Thus, the minority discourse that thrives in this liminal space reveals the unsteady status of the idea of the nation itself. Minority discourse reveals, according to Bhabha, both that national discourse is contentious and performative and that ambivalence structures historical time (307-8). The power of renegotiation lies in the process of signification, in the space between language and reality. In this moment, Bhabha says, “there is no epistemological equivalence of subject and object, no possibility of the mimesis of meaning. The sign temporalizes the iterative difference that circulates within language, of which meaning is made, but cannot be represented thematically within the narrative as homogeneous empty time” (308-9). This moment can be seen in the different readings of the captioned sketch Margaret Senior makes of Margaret Junior’s mother. For Margaret Senior, the caption, “She looks like a Goddess” (15) expresses her anger at the ignorant prejudice of the Batswana women she has to force to tend to the Masarwa woman’s body; “She took revenge with a sketch pad and pencil” and “It [thereby] prevented her from hurling out a continuous stream of abuse” (13). For Margaret Junior, the caption seems to add a sense of dignity to her mother and serves as a source of pride. Dikeledi reacts most strongly because of the added significance such a caption is given by the fact that a white woman wrote it. She is stunned, saying, “ ‘Did a white woman write that? […] And about a Masarwa? “She looks like a Goddess”?’” (24). Margaret comes to Dilepe and passes around her sketch, proliferating new consciousnesses about the possibilities for a Masarwa. Slyly using the seeming approbation of her departed English guardian, she is able to play on both entrenched prejudices against the Masarwa
people as well as to use the prejudiced desire for the approval of those who were once the oppressors. Within the little sketch lies a world of meanings.

In a similar way, Margaret’s own paintings allow the ambivalence of multiple interpretations to emerge. Her experience with the supplies given to her by Maru (through Dikeledi) reveals the possibility for alternative expression to emerge without the immediate reconstitution as history. The paintings exist in their own time and space, and Margaret seems to be at the mercy of the images that insistently call upon her in her dreams. It is only when they are brought to Maru that they are interpreted; he adds the “captions,” so to speak, and relates them to the project that his “gods” have been calling for him to begin. He sees her as a representative of the Masarwa, a part of his grand scheme for their liberation; Margaret’s paintings of the everyday life of Dilepe “carried a message to his heart: ‘You see, it is I and my tribe who possess the true vitality of this country. You lost it when you sat down and let us clean your floors and rear your children and cattle. Now we want to be free of you and be busy with our own affairs’” (109). However, Margaret’s artistic experience was not filled with this sort of vision or motive. She felt only driven by the images in her head: “It was like all those other agonies of life which she had endured in silence, only those agonies had been linked with everyday things. Now she had lost the link completely, like a non-swimmer suddenly thrown into deep water. She could not discipline and control the power machine of production” (101). Margaret lives within that space between reality and language, but in the end her productions are stolen from her, labeled and given political currency.
Between the time of her arrival in Dilepe and her marriage to Maru, Margaret lives a quiet, peaceful life. Once her main opponents—Pete, Seth, and Morafi—are disposed of, she is able to enjoy her life: “so quiet and insignificant were her movements that the people of Dilepe village almost forgot that there was such a thing as a Masarwa teacher” (93). In this moment where local leadership is not resolved or stable, where Maru and Moleka challenge one another for Margaret, Dilepe exists in a time outside of history. The Masarwa teacher is able to live and create here, side by side with the local Batswana. Nevertheless, when Margaret is tormented by the insistent images that intrude into her consciousness, refusing to leave until they are put down in paint on canvas, she realizes that her peace is temporary. She looks at the huts of the village, spread below her home, and “They made her heart say other spontaneous things, that this peace and flow and continuity was only a brief resting place, that one day she would have to say goodbye to him [Moleka, the one she loves], that there was an accident in the whole arrangement and he had only been a kind passer-by who had given a helping hand to a lost soul” (113). At this point she recognizes that a power she cannot resist refuses to allow her minority discourse to stand uninterpreted.

Thus, Margaret is abducted, stolen from her safe space on the hill overlooking town. Maru seems determined to make her “mean” something in the realm of historical time, so he takes possession of her. Knowing Margaret would be weak and despondent in the face of Moleka’s marriage that day to Dikeledi, Maru “rescues” her from her lonely sorrow. To this extended hand “What could she say, except that at that moment she
would have chosen anything as an alternative to the living death into which she had unexpectedly fallen?” (124).

Along with Ranko, Moseka, and Semana, Maru and Margaret travel to the house a thousand miles away, which they have built in anticipation of this moment. A new world and way of life is in store for them there, “where the sun rose, new and new and new each day” (125). However, in order for Margaret to properly participate in this creation of a nation, she must “forget” the past, where her people were outcasts and slaves, and where she herself was a thorn in the side of all of those in Dilepe who were invested in the status quo. Bhabha uses Ernst Renan to explain that “It is this forgetting—a minus in the origin—that constitutes the beginning of the nation’s narrative” (310). In the moment—unrepresented in the text of Maru—where Margaret verbally agrees to be Maru’s wife and co-conspirator in the formation of this new nation, a mental erasure of past injustices must occur. Margaret must forget not only her humiliations as a Masarwa; she must also forget that Maru took her bed from her, that he orchestrated the marriage of Moleka and Dikeledi in order to keep her for himself, that he tormented her with visions of the future in order to construct a mythological basis for his new nation.

The irony, however, lies in the fact that this “obligation to forget” is necessary for the nation to create some sort of unified image of itself. When we recognize that the notion of “nation” is based on this will exercised by the people, the ironies of historical essentialism emerge; Bhabha argues, “To be obliged to forget—in the construction of the national present—is not a question of historical memory; it is the construction of a discourse on society that performs the problematic totalization of the national will” (311).
When attention is drawn to the fact that performance points to the “minus in the origin” of the nation and that participants are “obliged to forget,” then the solidity of the national identity is in question. Here is the open space for minority discourse to emerge, to speak its ambiguity. When the moment is recognized for its possibilities, “Being obliged to forget becomes the basis for remembering the nation, peopling it anew, imagining the possibility of other contending and liberating forms of cultural identification” (Bhabha 311). Rather than seeing the rent in the fabric of national time as a flaw, minority discourse can assert itself in that moment, demonstrating possibilities for a better future.

Maru’s attempt to make Margaret forget her former, quiet happiness on the hill in Dilepe is thwarted by his inability to completely control her dreams. Although the narrator posits that “Most certainly, no memory remained in her heart and mind of previous suffering” (8), some memory of the love she had for and received from Moleka remains. She awakens, crying over Moleka, with no conscious memory of her dreams, but Maru knows she remembers. This is the sign of a competing narrative—opposed to the fairy-tale love story Maru prefers—that still exists, hidden under the “official” story of ideological progress and mutual love. In spite of his power of persuasion and his way of insinuating his ideas into others’ minds, Maru cannot banish this “room” where Margaret “totally loved Moleka” (8).

While the final pages of the novel offer a “happy” ending, where Maru’s plan to liberate the Masarwa from their depravity is instigated, the “real” ending of the novel—the beginning pages that depict the “ever after”—suggest that there are many competing
stories rumbling below the surface. The novel ends with a metaphorical image of the Masarwa enclosed in a dark room until the marriage of Maru to a Masarwa opens a door on the small, airless room in which their souls had been shut for a long time. The wind of freedom, which was blowing throughout the world for all people, turned and flowed into the room. As they breathed in the fresh, clear air their humanity awakened. They examined their condition. There was the fetid air, the excreta and the horror of being an oddity of the human race, with half the head of a man and half the body of a donkey. They laughed in an embarrassed way, scratching their heads. How had they fallen into this condition when, indeed, they were as human as everyone else? They started to run out into the sunlight, then they turned and looked at the dark, small room. They said: ‘We are not going back there’. (126-7)

However, the novel begins with a vision of “black storm clouds,” and the rumbling thunder and lightning are described as “prisoners, pushed back, in trapped coils of boiling cloud” (5). The sunshine does not penetrate here, apparently, where one lonely Masarwa woman lives, out of touch with her own dreams, living within someone else’s narrative.

This, then, is the shortcoming of Maru’s plan for a beautiful future where people can live as individuals: his own wife remains subservient, alienated, and representative of a people. Margaret was able to live independently in Dilepe, implicitly offering a complementary story of Masarwa-ness, but in her situation with Maru, her difference is subsumed by his vision. Perhaps Maru’s unwillingness to address other possible
narratives lies in his own fear of losing power. When renegotiation is allowed, the
instability of the group or person in power necessarily is examined. Bhabha says,
“Cultural difference marks the establishment of new forms of meaning, and strategies of
identification, through processes of negotiation where no discursive authority can be
established without revealing the difference of itself” (313). Despite his claims of disdain
for political position, Maru clearly holds on to some of the trappings of the power with
which he was born and bred. He does not wish to justify his power by securing the
consent of others. His continual harkening back to his “gods” as an excuse for his actions
reveals his reliance on the mystification of power, and gives him the kind of “excuse” he
needs to justify his many ethically questionable actions. Therefore, the year in which he
was almost paramount chief, when Moleka loved Margaret from afar, and Margaret lived
her quiet life on the hill, was a time of dis-ease for Maru. Being still tied into his idea of
what his nation will represent, he becomes impatient with others’ competing visions and
must exile himself to ensure the success of his own. According to Bhabha, to recognize
that the basis for a symbol such as the “nation” is based on an “arbitrary sign […] means
that we cannot contextualize the emergent cultural form by explaining it in terms of some
pre-given discursive causality or origin” (313). Emergent discourses trouble the stability
of a nation, revealing no familiar signs that the nation recognizes. In such times, the idea
of the nation must be renegotiated. Just as Morafi’s assertion that the Masarwa are a
“millstone” for the country cannot be justified simply because of tradition and royal
position, neither can Maru’s vision of individualism be justified by his invocation of the
“gods” in his head, who tell him what to do.
In the end, it is important to note that each iteration of the sign “Masarwa” is necessarily singular and individual. The extreme example of Margaret—the “English” Masarwa—is only a blatant reminder that people are not symbols, whether they “act” their assigned part or not. Although there are many Masarwa, many Batswana, and many English, each individual performance of affiliation differs. The notion of the nation remains only through the will of the people to sustain it. Each nation is, finally, made up of individuals who love, fear, and hate in their everyday lives. Always on the cusp of the future, performed at will by thousands (millions) daily, saturated with historical ideals and mythology, a nation can only be ambivalent.
Chapter Three

The Ordinary Outsider: J. M. Coetzee’s Life and Times of Michael K

In order to keep stability in an unjust state, the people must, to some degree, accept the laws and statutes given by the government. Whether passing through schools or prisons, job bureaus or labor gangs, people must come to terms with the system, even if that means accepting an unfavorable label. Therefore, idiots, the mentally deranged, and the handicapped can exist within the system—if they accept its terms. In his novel Life and Times of Michael K, J. M. Coetzee explores the interior landscape of a man, at some unidentified time in a future South African civil war, who is shuffled from institution to institution. Much like the harelip that keeps his mouth from ever fully closing, Michael K has always been a misfit, unassimilable, seemingly incomplete. Over the course of the novel, Michael grows to accept himself as an outsider, as abject, in spite of all of the discomfort he causes every person he comes in contact with. His interior journey to a level of self-consciousness unallowed by the state demonstrates the personal in the political, the individual consciousnesses within the masses, and shows that ordinary life can, in fact, be a form of rebellion.

In her essay, “Approaching Abjection,” Julia Kristeva formulates her notion of the abject as that which is both desired and repelled. The abject is not harmless and simply rejected, however; it serves to remind us of the psychic losses that, in fact, provide the boundaries of our selves. There is danger in the abject: “There looms, within abjection, one of those violent, dark revolts of being, directed against a threat that seems to emanate from the exorbitant outside or inside, ejected beyond the scope of the
possible, the tolerable, the thinkable. It lies there, quite close, but it cannot be assimilated” (Kristeva 1). That which is abject refuses definition, assimilation, and acceptance. It rejects language, laws, and structures. Because of its familiarity, we are drawn towards it, but our sense of loyalty to the father, the lawgiver, recalls the possibility of punishment for straying into its realm. Kristeva says, “from its place of banishment, the abject does not cease challenging its master” (2).

Such banishment can be individually or socially enacted. In the apartheid society on which Life and Times appears to be founded, Michael is first excluded by his own mother, who, on his birth, “did not like the mouth that would not close and the living pink flesh it bared to her. She shivered to think what had been growing in her all these months” (3). Having expelled the child from her body, she soon sends him to a school for boys who are disfigured or otherwise unfortunate. Here, at Huis Norenius, Michael can learn his place in society without confronting her daily with the physical evidence of her failure to produce a properly formed child. At Huis Norenius, “at the expense of the state [Michael] spent the rest of his childhood in the company of other variously afflicted and unfortunate children learning the elements of reading, writing, counting, sweeping, scrubbing, bedmaking, dishwashing, basketweaving, woodwork and digging” (4). Here the state prepares him for his predestined future of manual labor and simple silence, apparently the only means by which children like him may find a place in society. To find safety and comfort within the world of the novel, people who are “undesirable” according to the laws must accept that they represent the abject for the privileged.
Michael’s mother, Anna K, lives this life of domestic servitude, but her physical presence alone seems to threaten the stability of the home of her employers. They banish her to a windowless room under the stairs meant for air conditioning equipment that was never installed: “On the door was a sign: a skull and bones painted in red, and underneath the legend DANGER – GEVAAR – INGOZI” (6). Poor and ill, she must live in the tiny, concrete-slab room, keeping house for her employers in Sea Point, her “cage” symbolically rendering her a danger to the stability of the neighborhood and society at large, yet keeping her close enough to remind her employers of all they have, comparatively.

Despite never being emotionally close to his mother, Michael accepts his duty to care for her after she spends some time in the hospital. However, the situation entails his staying with her in her tiny room under the stairs. Aware of the incest taboo, “Michael K did not like the physical intimacy that the long evenings in the tiny room forced upon the two of them” (7). Nevertheless, his sense of duty remains stronger than any fear of the blurring of boundaries between himself and his mother. He accepts her poorly-considered idea of traveling to the Karoo, to a farm where she spent her childhood, in order to try to recapture some of the essence of that simpler time: “Just as he had believed through all the years in Huis Norenius that his mother had left him there for a reason which, if at first dark, would in the end become clear, so now he accepted without question the wisdom of her plan for them” (8-9). Michael wants to please his mother, to be accepted into her society, to be acceptable and useful; for these reasons, he allows her—a figure of authority—to plan their future. In this instance Michael’s harelip is not the issue; he is
Anna K’s son, and must act within his prescribed role. Michael is both drawn by the desire for closeness with his mother and repelled by the possibility of losing his identity, his manhood in the body of his mother. Michael recognizes that following the rules is an important part of guaranteeing the borders of his self are not penetrable; living in close quarters with his mother challenges his identity as “good” son, but his allegiance to the laws of the father confirm his loyalty to the status quo. Kristeva says, “It is thus not lack of cleanliness or health that causes abjection but what disturbs identity, system, order. What does not respect borders, positions, rules” (4). Michael wants to be acceptable and respectable, and in this case, it means caring for his mother despite the dis-ease it makes him feel.

Michael carries out the role of the good son diligently, fashioning a barrow in which to carry his mother the many miles to Prince Albert. He attempts to secure the necessary passes for travel and contrives methods for evading highway robbers. However, he cannot keep his mother healthy. When they arrive in Stellenbosch, Anna K must enter the hospital, and shortly thereafter, she dies. Michael remains in Stellenbosch for days; “Though he had no more business there, he found it hard to tear himself from the hospital” (33). In his mother’s absence, the institution that swallowed her up, spitting out ashes, seems the place to be. After a time, however, the hospital “was smaller than it had once seemed, merely a long low building with a red tiled roof” (34). When Michael realizes that this institution has nothing for him, that it is not going to give him a plan of action, an agenda, or a mission, he can see it as a simple building. The authority that passed from his mother to Huis Norenius and back to his mother has now come directly
to Michael’s hands. Thus, “He tore a black strip from the lining of his mother’s coat and pinned it around his arm. But he did not miss her, he found, except insofar as he had missed her all his life” (34). Michael submits to the convention of mourning, but comes to realize that his sense of loss is merely continued from the moment of his birth, when he lost the safe confines of his mother’s womb.

Thus, Michael chooses to leave, continuing his journey to Prince Albert and the oasis of peace his mother has described it as. On the way, a soldier who steals his money and rifles through his suitcase confronts him. In self-defense, relying on the rules and laws he was taught to obey, Michael says, “‘What do you think the war is for? […] For taking other people’s money?’ ‘What do you think the war is for,’ said the soldier, parodying the movements of K’s mouth. ‘Thief. Watch it. You could be lying in the bushes with flies all over you. Don’t you tell me about war’” (37). In defending the so-called ideals of wartime, Michael is derided and threatened with the image of his own corpse, rotting in the bushes. The image of one’s own body rotting away highlights the very permeable line between life and death, between person and thing, human and corpse. Kristeva says, “The corpse, seen without God and outside of science, is the utmost of abjection. It is death infecting life. Abject. It is something rejected from which one does not part, from which one does not protect oneself as from an object. Imaginary uncanniness and real threat, it beckons to us and ends up engulfing us” (4). The soldier knows, no matter how marginal Michael already is, he can always become even more offensive, more excluded, more repellent. In death, not only would Michael lose the boundaries that make up his already fragile sense of self, but he would serve as
motivation for others to remain solidly opposed to the abject, to remain within the law, within language and structure.

Michael now sees that he must play his own game in order to succeed within an order that feels free to break its own rules. When Michael next comes upon a checkpoint, he reasons, “If I look very stupid, [...] perhaps they will let me through” (40).

Nevertheless, the government has a place for “stupid vagrants”: the labor gang. Even within this group, however, Michael is avoided, “his fellows shuffling aside as if to avoid contamination” (41). For the first time in his life, perhaps, he asks why: “‘Why do I have to work here?’” (42). No one seems to have a satisfactory answer for him; his coworker’s response denies Michael any “special” privilege, any reason why he—or any of them—should have any say in their lives. Michael refuses this explanation, however, and, slyly and quietly escapes.

In town, having gained his freedom, Michael is unable to buy food from the local store; the owner won’t let him in, despite his show of money. Therefore, “From a feeding trough beside a dam he scooped up half a tinful of crushed mealies and bonemeal, boiled it in water, and ate the gritty mush. He filled his beret with more of the feed, thinking: At last I am living off the land” (46). Despite the fact that the food is meant for animals, Michael feels pride in his accomplishment; he can support his body without the interference of the state and its institutions. A hope is awakened in him that there are spaces out here in the wilderness that remain unclaimed by others:

He could understand that people should have retreated here and fenced themselves in with miles and miles of silence; he could understand that
they should have wanted to bequeath the privilege of so much silence to their children and grandchildren in perpetuity (though by what right he was not sure); he wondered whether there were not forgotten corners and angles and corridors between the fences, land that belonged to no one yet. Perhaps if one flew high enough, he thought, one would be able to see.

(47)

Having lived always within the space of others, by the rules of others, listening to the ideology of others, Michael is enchanted by the silence of the Karoo and wants to disappear in its vastness. His own internal boundaries are beginning to crumble, as he feels affinity with the land that has always been claimed by others by some unknown right.

When he arrives at the farm matching his mother’s vague description of her childhood memory, Michael is pleased to see that it has been abandoned. Nevertheless, he quickly recognizes that he must feed himself. In order to do so, he chases the half-wild goats that remain until he finally catches and drowns one. The activity leaves him spent, and he leaves the goat in the pond to be retrieved the following day: “The mud-brown hump of the goat’s flank stuck out of the water. He waded in and, using all his strength, hauled the corpse out by its hind legs. Its teeth were bared, its yellow eyes stood wide; a trickle of water ran out of its mouth. It was a ewe. The urgency of the hunger that had possessed him yesterday was gone” (55). In confronting this corpse, Michael is again confronted with his own fragile borders. Rather than seeing the corpse as food that can sustain him, Michael is repelled, seeing the undesirable. Kristeva notes “in true theater,
without makeup or masks, refuse and corpses show me what I permanently thrust aside in order to live” (3). Because he has seen the goat as corpse, rather than “meat,” Michael cannot assimilate it; he cannot accept the nutrients it has to offer him. He eats some of the meat, but without pleasure, and most of it rots away while he hallucinates in a fever.

In this period of illness, Michael recognizes the worthlessness of language in this place of solitude. Where communication has always been a problem for him out in the world, due to his harelip, here words are not necessary. In his daze, “He coughed, and gave a little hoot like an owl, and heard the sound depart from him without trace of an echo. Though his throat hurt, he made the sound again. It was the first time he had heard his own voice since Prince Albert. He thought: here I can make any sound I like” (56). In this place, where he does not serve as abject for all of those privileged enough to be owners and to have a stake in the society, Michael can create his own signifying system—or not. However, after he has symbolically “planted” his mother’s ashes, along with some pumpkin seeds, Michael’s solitude is shattered. The grandson of the Visagies, a deserter from the army, shows up in an attempt to hide. Confronted with another person, with language, “[Michael] felt the old hopeless stupidity invading him, which he tried to beat back” (60). Michael cannot communicate effectively with this man, and at the first contact reverts to his mask of stupid silence.

In desperation, unable to visualize sharing the farm, Michael escapes to the mountains and hides in a cave. In this womb-like place, he considers that “there had always been someone to tell him what to do next; now there was no one, and the best thing seemed to be to wait” (67). In the cave, Michael lives almost without food and
water; he dreams expansively, watching the sun rise and set again every day. In this time, he experiences a kind of rebirth: “I am becoming a different kind of man, he thought, if there are two kinds of man. If I were cut, he thought, holding his wrists out, looking at his wrists, the blood would no longer gush from me but seep, and after a little seeping dry and heal. I am becoming smaller and harder and drier every day” (67). Having lived one lifetime within the order imposed by the state, as the son of a flesh and blood mother, Michael now becomes a child of the earth. Rather than wishing for acceptance and understanding, Michael has come to prefer solitude; rather than obsessing about the food his body desperately craves, he prefers the mystical insights of starvation. Having recognized, outside the hospital in Stellenbosch, that his sense of grief concerning his mother is simply a continuation of all of the losses he has endured, Michael is freed from want. According to Kristeva,

The abjection of self would be the culminating form of that experience of the subject to which it is revealed that all its objects are based merely on the inaugural loss that laid the foundations of its own being. There is nothing like the abjection of self to show that all abjection is in fact recognition of the want on which any being, meaning, language, or desire is formed. (5)

Michael learns, alone and only partly-conscious, that the pain of life in the society of the novel depends on his desire for acceptance and belonging. Without his mother, without a companion, without food, Michael can finally explore his own self, without the words that were never made to issue properly from his mouth.
Realizing that he is starving, Michael therefore gives birth to himself, sending his new, smaller, drier, harder body into the world. In the hospital he feels the first pangs of hunger, but “He was not sure that he wanted to become a servant to hunger again” (71). Nevertheless, having thrust himself back into the world, Michael must again be socialized, and the state has a suitable place for him: the Jakkalsdrif work camp. Here he must survive another childhood, living in a “hot dark hut, [full of] strangers lying packed about him on their bunks, the air thick with derision. It is like going back to childhood, he thought: it is like a nightmare” (77). Now, without the belief that his mother was doing what was best for him, the institution seems ominous, with a meaning Michael does not grasp and does not want to participate in. Understanding is not necessary within this signifying system, however. He is affected by the system erected around him without his participation. Such a feeling of a lack of power is well explained when Kristeva says, “To be sure, if I am affected by what does not yet appear to me as a thing, it is because laws, connections, and even structures of meaning govern and condition me (10). Instead of welcoming the definition that the state has conferred upon him, Michael resists; he doesn’t want to work, he doesn’t want to stay, in spite of the guard’s insistence that he’s got it good. The guard asks him, “‘Why do you want to run away? You’ve got a home here, you’ve got food, you’ve got a bed. You’ve got a job. People are having a hard time out there in the world, you’ve seen it, I don’t have to tell you. For what do you want to join them?’” (85). But Michael resists. He sees the state’s conception of him as an imposter, undesirable, different, abject. In a state where some are painted as “undesirables,” abjection becomes a social disease. In Kristeva’s words,
I experience abjection only if an Other has settled in place and stead of what will be ‘me.’ Not at all an other with whom I identify and incorporate, but an Other who precedes and possesses me, and through such possession causes me to be. A possession previous to my advent: a being-there of the symbolic that a father might or might not embody. (10).

The state, in the guise of the work camp, sees Michael as another laborer, a savage who must be kept busy and fenced in for the protection of everyone. Rather than accepting his assigned place and the judgments that go along with it, Michael turns the situation around, seeing his ambiguous, earth-bound self as preferable to the laboring, quiet hands the state expects and trains him to be.

In Jakkalsdrif, Michael wonders if he is “at last learning about life” (89). He is puzzled by the mixed messages the agents of the state constantly give. On the one hand, he and the others in the camp are offensive, dirty, immoral. On the other, they are important, necessary cogs in the wheel of production, which cannot continue without them. He sees that this is why they are caged in on the outskirts of town and let out only to work. Nevertheless, he also understands that “Dead bodies could be as offensive as living bodies, if it was true that a living body could be offensive” (94). If they really wanted to get rid of them once and for all, he realizes, they would have them dig their own graves, make them lie down in them, and then cover them with a layer of dirt (94). Just as the townsfolk don’t want to see the living bodies of the poor and disenfranchised, they also don’t want to be confronted with their corpses, the reminder of their own impending deaths.
However, Michael decides he does not want to serve this function for the outside world; he chooses to escape the camp, return to the Visagie farm, and begin life on his own terms. Since he has freed himself from the desires that chain humans to the system—hunger, the quest for companionship, sex—Michael can live in another way altogether. According to Kristeva, “there are lives not sustained by desire, as desire is always for objects. Such lives are based on exclusion. They are clearly distinguishable from those understood as neurotic or psychotic, articulated by negation and its modalities, transgression, denial, and repudiation” (6). Michael transgresses laws by living on his own on someone else’s property; he denies the hunger that others try to attribute to him; and he repudiates the realm of language. Michael returns to the farm, but with the distinct purpose of living there in his own way; he doesn’t want to found his own line that will claim the land in its perpetuity, as owners, seeing the land as object. He thinks, “Whatever I have returned for, it is not to live as the Visagies lived, sleep where they slept, sit on their stoep looking out over their land” (98). Instead, Michael digs himself a hole in the earth itself, a shelter that is indistinguishable from the surrounding land, a den that he knows will be washed away by the first big storm, which he will constantly be rebuilding. Michael doesn’t wish to challenge the Visagie ghosts and their sense of ownership; he wants to live in harmony with the land, unnoticed. He is, in Kristeva’s words, “The one by whom the abject exists [...] a deject, who places (himself), separates (himself), situates (himself), and therefore strays instead of getting his bearings, desiring, belonging, or refusing” (8). He cannot securely establish himself because the boundary between himself as subject and his objects is not stable; it wavers. He is of the earth, not
Emerging only at night to water his plants and make needed repairs, Michael is “A tireless builder […] the deject is in short a stray. He is on a journey, during the night, the end of which keeps receding” (Kristeva 8). His plans are ambiguous; he has no real goal, other than to see his pumpkins and melons grow to maturity.

When there are signs of people visiting his farm, Michael struggles with the urge to present himself to them, once he realizes that they are rebels fighting against the state. However, when he remembers his unsatisfying earlier life surrounded by others, he thinks, “Would it not be better to hide day and night, would it not be better to bury myself in the bowels of the earth than become a creature of theirs?” (106). Recognizing that they would attempt to fashion him in respect to their own needs, their own system of signification, Michael chooses to remain on his own terms, like an animal underground. It is because of the fragile state of the deject’s boundaries between ego and object that he may act with the unfettered instincts of an animal, in self-preservation. Kristeva argues, “The abject confronts us, on the one hand, with those fragile states where man strays on the territories of animal” (12). Language, the signifying system of humanity, has never served Michael well, and he is happy to be able to live without it. Something within his experience has never fit into language: “Always, when he tried to explain himself to himself, there remained a gap, a hole, a darkness before which his understanding baulked, into which it was useless to pour words. The words were eaten up, the gap remained. His was a story with a hole in it: a wrong story, always wrong” (110).
Nevertheless, Michael has no internal resistance to this gap; he revels in it. Without the posted rules at Huis Norenius, he is free to be silent without having to be; he grows 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 flower-bed 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.

(115)

Without someone telling him what to do (and what not to do), the law has no power or influence over him. Having escaped the chains of repression, Michael can dally freely in all things, disregarding the injunctions to stay in his place, keep his mouth shut, and most of all, work. Now, rather, he can choose to do all of these things. Such an attitude mocks the essential point of the work camps: lowlifes are not supposed to want to work. Kristeva says, “The abject is perverse because it neither gives up nor assumes a prohibition, a rule, or a law; but turns them aside, misleads, corrupts; uses them, takes advantage of them, the better to deny them” (15). This is why the abject is so feared in society; people must be afraid to transgress those borders, to venture to the other side, if the system is to stay intact and powerful.

It is easy for Michael to reject the rules of the system when he is all alone in his ditch on the Karoo. He deconstructs the very notion of charity and welfare that the
apartheid state is founded on, in his mystical, half-starved state: he thinks, “What if the hosts are far outnumbered by the parasites, the parasites of idleness and the other secret parasites in the army and the police force and the schools and factories and offices, the parasites of the heart? Could the parasites then still be called parasites?” (116). Obviously such an idea, if Michael was capable of uttering it intelligibly, could be seen as subversive. The soldiers that finally find him at the farm certainly think he knows more than he lets on, and they take him straight to the reeducation camp to learn to be a decent member of society. They recognize intuitively that, as Kristeva says, “An unshakable adherence to Prohibition and Law is necessary if that perverse interspace of abjection is to be hemmed in and thrust aside” (16). Michael, living as much as possible outside of law and order, must be retrained.

At the camp hospital, the Medical Officer (narrating this section of the book) sees the irony that “[Michael] needs a graduated diet, gentle exercise, and physiotherapy, so that one day soon he can rejoin camp life and have a chance to march back and forth across the racetrack and shout slogans and salute the flag and practice digging holes and filling them again” (133). Michael reveals nothing to this officer in spite of his prodding and pleading. The silence, the blankness, the absence of hunger or desire causes the medical officer to reflect:

He is like a stone, a pebble […] hardly aware of its surroundings, enveloped in itself and its interior life. He passes through these institutions and camps and hospitals and God knows what else like a stone. Through the intestines of the war. An unbearing, unborn creature. (135)
Despite his desire to understand Michael’s “story,” the medical officer remains entrenched in the terms of the system by which he is employed. He is intolerant of Michael’s “gaps” and “holes”: he wants something complete and coherent. His work in the camp has opened his eyes to the ironies of indoctrination, and he is looking for a counter-story, another perspective on these many “Michaels” that come through the camp every six months. However, Michael will not give it to him. Instead, the medical officer constructs his own story of “Michaels,” wordy, poetic, and full of symbolism. In the end he envisions Michael as a mystic, telling his absent form (having once again escaped the system), “Your stay in the camp was merely an allegory, if you know that word. It was an allegory—speaking at the highest level—of how scandalously, how outrageously a meaning can take up residence in a system without becoming a term in it” (166). His statement challenges the reader directly with the (typically) unspoken desire to find meaning in a story or a character. Unwittingly, we have been privy to his darkest desire to cage Michael in a stable meaning that we can understand.

Michael’s reflections in the final chapter of the book demonstrate extreme self-consciousness, as well as a determination to remain his own man. Most of all, he resents that “They want me to open my heart and tell them the story of a life lived in cages. They want to hear about all the cages I have lived in, as if I were a budgie or a white mouse or a monkey” (181). We, the readers, are “they.” We have participated in this novel, hoping for some insight or at least a glimpse into humanity. However, Michael leaves us dissatisfied and confused, unsure what may happen next. We have only a sense that
Michael’s artistic endeavor—his gardening—may support him spiritually and physically, if he is only left alone long enough for his crops to fully mature, like any ordinary garden.
Conclusion

The literature that followed the era of the “protest novel” sometimes seems to have little to do with the concrete nature of day-to-day politics. The possibilities for resistance should be broadened to allow for subtle challenges through conflicted characters, complications of format, and futuristic allegories. Understanding that such writing can have powerful affects on readers opens up space for individual members of the oppressed class to recognize their own complex subject positions and the power of the affiliations they perform daily. A variety of formats, styles, characters, and situations can be used to suggest the complications of living in a world that is closely monitored by the state.

The depiction of the underground movement represented by Beukes and Elias in In the Fog of the Seasons’ End is essential for the success of such movements. For those on the inside, simply seeing their reality in print, along with a variety of characters and their responses to the system, validates their existence and their emotions. Seeing that those involved in the “movement” have families, doubts, and fears, readers can cast off both the government’s portrayal of such persons as “terrorists” and the common popular idea of them as selfless “heroes.” In revealing the everyday life of those in the underground, La Guma is able to demonstrate the reach of the colonial power’s psychic subjugation and the resultant inferiority complexes that Frantz Fanon explores in his work.
Although Bessie Head’s *Maru* reads, on the surface, as a fairy tale, the textual signals that point to a concern with issues of national belonging complicate and interrogate the form. Suggestions of supernatural interference are undercut by the very real, material power of Maru, a man of privilege and wealth. While the gods in his head ostensibly motivate his scheme, his real desire for power, along with jealousy and anger, motivate his plans. Maru’s awakening of Margaret is not due to a kiss that breaks a spell, but to his reaching out a friendly, helping hand to a lonely, depressed woman. Beneath all of Maru’s schemes there lies a plan for power, an idea of a nation where he can rule peacefully, where his own ideals are law. Through Homi Bhabha’s idea of national narration, Head’s novel emerges as a critique of the postcolonial attempt to fashion an ideal state. The emotional attachments and insecurities of Head’s characters demonstrate the ambiguity and instability of the very idea of the nation as well as demystifying positions of power.

J. M. Coetzee’s *Life and Times of Michael K*, on the other hand, deals directly with those at the very lowest level of society. Michael’s experience as a ward of the state and his dissatisfaction with that life once he reconnects with the earth—his other mother—show just how unnatural the structures of the state can be. The restrictions of social labeling serve, in Michael’s case, to stunt the growth of his consciousness. Until he is freed of other people and the structures that they represent, his mind and actions are not his own. Only in escaping from the realm of the symbolic, by embracing the earth and its pre-linguistic communication, does Michael become his own man. Without desire,
without language, Michael welcomes the abjection of self as the ultimate, individual protest.

Although these texts truly expand the realm of possibility for fiction that responds to politics, only La Guma’s offers a plan of action: violent uprising. While it may be argued that Michael has escaped (or will continue to escape) the structures that attempt to hem him in, his individual, private victories are not effectively communicated to others. Maru also questions the possibility of change without the platform necessary for marginal voices to emerge. With Margaret sequestered, playing her role as Maru’s unacceptable wife, her voice is muted.

Now that apartheid has ended and the many ethnic groups in South Africa live side by side, the literature that responded to such injustice may seem to be at an end. Nevertheless, there are always injunctions of the state to resist. Many people will not discard notions of racial superiority simply because of the fall of the system. In the Cape area, for instance, “coloured” people retain a strong sense of identity and use that for political movement, in spite of the term’s association with injustice. Simplification of the complex nature of human affiliation by the powers-that-be remains a force to be resisted. The literature that is emerging in the post-apartheid era recognizes the inevitability of hybridity as well as the old prejudice against “mixing.” Through an exploration of performative acts of affiliation South African novelists may reveal new means for resistance.
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