

## Immunity, the Impersonal, and the Self

### OUTSIDE ALL THE CAMPS: IMMUNITY AND THE IMPERSONAL IN COETZEE'S *LIFE AND TIMES OF MICHAEL K*

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#### *Abstract*

*This paper attempts to read J. M. Coetzee's *Life and Times of Michael K* through the lens of Esposito's theories of community/immunity and the impersonal. For Esposito, community implies a shared lack, void, gift or duty (munus); immunity is an exclusionary mechanism intended to protect from this exposure to the munus. While immunity is necessary, it can often become excessive, or autoimmunitary. In this context, the camps in the novel, notably Jakkalsdrif, are read in terms of (auto)immunity, often excessive, attempts to isolate those considered to pose a threat to the State in the context of a civil war. For Esposito, immunization is closely connected with the 'dispositif' of the person, which always excludes those designated as non-persons, who are hence deprived of rights. Here, for Esposito, the impersonal, in terms of justice, writing and animal life, may form the basis of a new type of community based on tolerance and diversity rather than exclusion. In this context, *Michael K* can arguably be read as an 'impersonal' hero.*

*Life and Times of Michael K*, Nobel prizewinning author J. M. Coetzee's fourth novel, tells the story of the eponymous character's (mis)adventures in a semi-imaginary South Africa riven by civil war. The novel was written in 1983 in a South Africa which, as Atwell notes, was going through a "cycle of insurrection and repression threatening a bloody outcome."<sup>1</sup> More specifically, the White government's attempts to broaden the base of democracy without endangering the authority and interests of the White minority did not substantially affect the racial basis of rights, and thus failed to address the crisis the country was facing.<sup>2</sup>

In this context, the novel can be understood in terms of the "speculative futurity of Coetzee's fictional worlds," in that it resembles a fictional and philosophical thought

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<sup>1</sup> David Atwell, *J.M Coetzee: South Africa and the Politics of Writing* (California: University of California Press, 1993), p. 88.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 90-91.

experiment<sup>3</sup> regarding the consequences of the government's failure to deal with the crisis of the 1980s. The South Africa depicted in the novel, therefore, is one of accelerated militarism in response to sporadic yet increasing guerrilla violence and insurrection. Michael K, then, inhabits a world of civil war and state repression characterized by,

nightly curfews; restrictions on movement between districts; labor, resettlement, rehabilitation, and internment camps ... squatting by the destitute and demolition of abandoned buildings by the state; armored patrols and protected civilian convoys; widespread lawlessness, including looting by the poor and corruption on the part of the rich.<sup>4</sup>

Michael K, a man with a hare-lip whose mind “was not quick”<sup>5</sup> can be described as a marginal character in several respects. As well as his physical deformity and his (supposed) mental slowness, he is also marginalized by his race – he is described as “coloured” – his working-class background, unemployment and vagrancy.<sup>6</sup> Michael's life is dominated by institutions, in the form of the camps in which he is interned, and by his resistance to those institutions, which arguably represent the South African apartheid regime of the time.<sup>7</sup> Rather than direct confrontation with the regime, however, Michael refuses to eat the camp food and to work and, ultimately, succeeds in escaping from the various attempts to confine him, seeking to live life on his own terms, to “cultivate his own garden” in harmony with nature. On this basis, this paper aims to develop Atwell's suggestion that *Life and Times of Michael K* attempts to project “a posthumanist, reconstructed ethics” which nevertheless rests upon “a recognition of the pervasive intrusiveness of totalitarian violence”<sup>8</sup> through a reading informed by the philosophy of Roberto Esposito, with a particular focus on his concepts of immunity, community, and the impersonal.

Firstly, the system of camps and restrictions depicted in the novel is read through the lens of Esposito's interrelated concepts of community and immunity. For Esposito, as discussed in more detail in the following section, community is not based on a shared identity; as its etymology suggests, it is instead based on the *munus*, a shared lack, void, or obligation. Immunity, in this respect, implies an exemption from the *munus*. In other words, immunization can be understood as an attempt to isolate and protect the ‘proper’, implying a discriminatory classification of ‘us’ versus ‘them’. It is, thus, argued that the camps in the novel can be understood as immunitary mechanisms according to which the State, and the South African elite, seeks to protect itself from supposed ‘undesirables’ such as Michael. For Esposito, the “dispositif of the person” is key to the immunitary apparatus; although rights are granted to persons, personhood is never granted to all, so that some people are regarded as non (or perhaps

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<sup>3</sup> Richard A. Barney, “On (not) Giving Up: Animals, Biopolitics, and the Impersonal in J.M. Coetzee's Disgrace,” *Textual Practice* 30, no.3 (2016), p. 523.

<sup>4</sup> David Atwell, *J.M Coetzee*, p. 91.

<sup>5</sup> John Maxwell Coetzee, *Life & Times of Michael K* (London: Penguin, 1983), p. 4.

<sup>6</sup> Jane Poyner, *J. M. Coetzee and the Paradox of Postcolonial Authorship* (Surrey: Ashgate, 2009), p. 69.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 70.

<sup>8</sup> David Atwell, *J.M Coetzee*, p. 97.

incomplete) persons.<sup>9</sup> This is emphasized by the fact that the authorities frequently compare Michael and the other inmates to animals, such as ‘monkeys’ or even ‘parasites’, in an attempt to depict them as non-persons, as less-than-human.

In contrast to the immunitary “dispositif of the person,” however, Esposito posits the concept of the impersonal, a form of life that excludes “proper names”<sup>10</sup> and is immanent and common to all. The impersonal, or the third person, thus represents a philosophy of life that favors “a logic that privileges multiplicity and contamination over identity and discrimination.”<sup>11</sup> In contrast to rights, which belong only to ‘persons’, justice is connected with impersonal life in that it is “universal, and belongs to everyone and is for everyone.”<sup>12</sup> Arguably, such immanent life can only be narrated in the third person as the third person disrupts the immunitary mechanism that “introduces the I into the simultaneously inclusive and exclusive circle of the ‘we’.”<sup>13</sup> Notably *Life and Times of Michael K* is narrated mainly in the third person; it is thus differentiated from the majority of Coetzee’s works, in which the empowered, white middle-class protagonists narrate, in the first-person, the disturbing effects of their encounters with the (barbarian, black, outcast or animal) Other.<sup>14</sup> Instead, with the exception of its middle section which is narrated in the first person by an anonymous medical officer, *Life and Times of Michael K* is largely narrated in the third person from the perspective of Michael, “the other itself.”<sup>15</sup>

For Esposito, the impersonal is also intimately connected to Deleuze’s concept of “becoming animal,” which refers to a form of being human that overcomes the “ontological difference that metaphysics wanted to establish between man and animal.”<sup>16</sup> This helps to shed light on Michael’s own connection with an immanent, impersonal life which, as discussed further in the final section of the paper, is evident most notably through his deep connection and affinity with animals and even plants. It is this impersonality that ultimately enables Michael, as the anonymous camp medical officer notes, to pass through the immunitary system of camps almost untouched, “like a stone.”<sup>17</sup>

### Esposito on *Communitas* and Immunitas

“Community, in communal, communitarian, [and] communicative” variants of contemporary political philosophy<sup>18</sup> is often understood as based on a common attribute, definition or

<sup>9</sup> Roberto Esposito, *Third Person: Politics of Life and Philosophy of the Impersonal*, translated by Zakiya Hanafi (Cambridge: Polity, 2012), p. 122.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 122.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 145.

<sup>12</sup> Tom Frost, “Community and The Third Person in Esposito and Agamben,” *Journal of Italian Philosophy*, Vol. 5 (2021), pp. 9-12.

<sup>13</sup> Roberto Esposito, *Third Person*, p. 101.

<sup>14</sup> Daniele Monticelli, “From Dissensus to Inoperativity: The Strange Case of J. M. Coetzee’s Michael K,” *English Studies*, Vol. 97, no. 6 (2016), p. 619.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 619.

<sup>16</sup> Matias Sidel & Diego Hernan Rossello, “Deconstructing the Dispositif of the Person: Animality and the Politics of Life in the Philosophy of Roberto Esposito,” in Felice Cimatti and Carlo Salzani (Eds.), *Animality in Contemporary Italian Philosophy* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2020), p. 132.

<sup>17</sup> Coetzee, *Life & Times of Michael K*, p. 135.

<sup>18</sup> Roberto Esposito, *Communitas* (Palo Alto: Stanford University Press, 2009), p. 2.

predicate seen as “originating from and reflecting individual identity”; in this sense it is frequently understood as a wider subjectivity, something like a quality that is added to a subject’s nature.<sup>19</sup> <sup>20</sup> Thus, members of the community are perceived as “owners of what is common to them all,” such as “a good, a value, an essence.”<sup>21</sup>

In contrast to this view, through an examination of the etymology of the term community, Esposito argues that it is based on a shared lack or debt, rather than a shared possession or identity. The Latin term *communis* signifies *cum* (with) *munus*. *Munus* refers to a debt or obligation, an “obligatory kind of gift, a gift which one cannot not give.” In this sense, then, community can be understood as “a totality of persons united not by a shared property but by a shared lack, a debt or an obligation”<sup>22</sup>; it is “a void, a debt, a gift to the other that also reminds us of our constitutive alterity with respect to ourselves.”<sup>23</sup> Rather than magnifying the individual identity of its members, therefore, community deprives them of it, so that community “isn’t the subject’s expansion or multiplication but its exposure to what interrupts the closing and turns it inside out: a dizziness, a syncope, a spasm in the continuity of the subject.”<sup>24</sup>

Based on a common lack, then, community is inherently related with, indeed constituted by, violence and death, as suggested by mythological depictions of communities founded on battles or, notably, on fratricidal violence<sup>25</sup> based on a fatal mimetic desire,<sup>26</sup> so that “original man, who is dominated by the unlimited desire for everything and by the fear of being killed, can’t help but destroy himself.”<sup>27</sup> In this context, for Esposito community’s “heart of darkness” is found in the fact that it is essentially limitless, with neither an inside nor an outside, and therefore nothing to protect its members from each other.<sup>28</sup>

In this regard, immunization, “the explicative key of the entire modern paradigm,”<sup>29</sup> can be broadly understood as a mechanism intended to protect from the violence of the *munus*. However, community and immunity are intimately linked, as the origin of both concepts in the word *munus* suggests. In contrast to community, however, immunity implies exemption from the *munus*, so that immunity can be understood as the “purely negative right of each individual to exclude all others from using what is proper to him or her.”<sup>30</sup> On this basis, immunity for Esposito refers to any situation where there is a protective response in the face of a risk, particularly a risk of trespassing or the violation of borders.<sup>31</sup> Once the community is identified,

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<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 2.

<sup>20</sup> Tom Frost, “Community and The Third Person,” p. 7.

<sup>21</sup> Roberto Esposito, *Communitas*, p. 2.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 3-8.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 6-7.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 7.

<sup>25</sup> Cain’s murder of Abel, Romulus’ killing of Remus, or the double murder of Eteocles and Polynices at Thebes are cases in point.

<sup>26</sup> Roberto Esposito, *Terms of the Political: Community, Immunity, Biopolitics*, translated by R.N. Welch (Fordham: Fordham University Press, 2013), pp. 123-124.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 125.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 125-126.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 12.

<sup>30</sup> Roberto Esposito, *Immunitas: The Protection and Negation of Life* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2011), p. 25.

<sup>31</sup> In this sense, the body’s defences against infectious disease, barriers to immigration and antiviral computer programs can all be classified as immune responses to a threat to the (personal, political, or electronic) body’s

then, with a specific people, territory or essence, so that it is marked with “patriotism and local and factional interest”<sup>32</sup> it becomes walled in within itself and separated from the outside, effectively immunized.

Immunity is, therefore, a necessary part of life, so that there is no community without an immune response. However, the immune response can become excessive; thus, finding the right measure of immunity or the correct balance between immunity and community is vital. In the context of the COVID 19 pandemic, for instance, Esposito notes that,

all human and social bodies need a certain degree of immunization, but should be cautious of extremes. There is not one individual or social body that does not have an immune system...The immunitary system is necessary for survival, but when it crosses a certain threshold, it starts destroying the body it aims to defend.<sup>33</sup>

This latter point can be understood in the context of what Esposito refers to as a “global autoimmunity crisis,” which, in his view, has overtaken the world since September 11, 2001.<sup>34</sup> Thus, Esposito asserts that immunization measures have increasingly often tended to be disproportional, even being deployed in the absence of an obvious threat.<sup>35</sup> Esposito compares this situation to autoimmune disease, the *horror autotoxicus*, where the immune system turns against the very body it is supposed to protect. For Esposito, Nazi Germany constitutes the prime example of a (biopolitical) autoimmunity crisis<sup>36</sup>; however, he argues that immunization measures in the contemporary world have again become excessive.<sup>37</sup> This excessive immunization leads, in turn, to a decline in tolerance, and the diffusion of individualism and alienation,<sup>38 39</sup> so that “just as in the most serious autoimmune illness, so too in the planetary conflict presently underway: it is excessive defence that ruinously turns on the same body that continues to activate and strengthen it.”<sup>40</sup>

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integrity that is always located on the border between inside and outside, self and other, or the individual and the commonwealth. The interconnectedness of these different registers is suggested by the lexical slippage between them: immigration, for instance, is often presented as a biological as well as a public order risk, while, as has been particularly evident since the outbreak of the current pandemic, epidemic diseases have political, and even military, implications (Esposito, *Immunitas*, pp. 1-3).

<sup>32</sup> Roberto Esposito, *Communitas*, p. 16.

<sup>33</sup> Tim Christiaens & Stijn De Cauwer, “The Biopolitics of Immunity in Times of COVID-19: An Interview with Roberto Esposito,” *Antipode Online*, June 16, 2020, <https://antipodeonline.org/2020/06/16/interview-with-roberto-esposito/>.

<sup>34</sup> Roberto Esposito, *Bios: Biopolitics and Philosophy* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2008), p. xiii.

<sup>35</sup> Inge Mutsaers, *Immunological Discourse in Political Philosophy: Immunisation and its Discontents* (London: Routledge, 2016), p. 102.

<sup>36</sup> Roberto Esposito, *Bios*, pp. 116-117.

<sup>37</sup> For Esposito, the contemporary ‘autoimmunitary crisis’ is fueled in part by the ‘protection industries’, such as insurance and pharmaceutical companies, and also by globalization, in the face of which people turn to ‘preventative immunisation’ as a kind of compensation (Esposito, *Immunitas*, p. 102).

<sup>38</sup> Roberto Esposito, *Bios*, p. 148.

<sup>39</sup> Inge Mutsaers, *Immunological Discourse in Political Philosophy*, p. 102.

<sup>40</sup> Roberto Esposito, *Bios*, p. 148.

However, Esposito proposes a more hopeful way of thinking about immunity so that it can potentially form the basis of a politics of life rather than death<sup>41</sup>. While the immune system is traditionally described in military terms, as a 'war' between pathogens and immune cells, newer studies suggest that the immune system is also characterized by *tolerance*, so that "the body is understood as a functioning construct that is open to continual exchange with its surrounding environment."<sup>42</sup> From this point of view, as Esposito argues, "nothing remains" of the strict delimitation between self and other, or a strict opposition between immunity and community. Thus, this newer model of immunity suggests the genuine possibility of a community based on an intertwining of self and other which remains open to difference.<sup>43 44</sup>

At the heart of this conception of community is the impersonal or the 'third person'. For Esposito, the idea of the third person overcomes what he terms the "*dispositif*" of the person, according to which the being designated as a "person" possesses certain rights and dignity.<sup>45</sup> However, based on an etymological and genealogical study of the concept of the person in Roman law and Catholicism, Esposito argues that the personalization of some cannot occur without the depersonalization of others, "without pushing someone over into the indefinite space that opens like a kind of trap door below the person."<sup>46</sup> In his view, this differentiation between persons and non-persons is in evidence even today, as not everyone (such as small children, the mentally ill, the very old, non-citizens) has the rights of a person,<sup>47</sup> so that the project of human rights has failed because of, rather than in spite of, the "affirmation of the ideology of the person."<sup>48</sup> In this way, the legal concept of personhood and the regime of human rights can be understood as an extension of a logic of immunity, in the sense of a logic of exemption from the duties and responsibilities of common life.<sup>49</sup>

In this context, Esposito aims to deconstruct the *dispositif* of the person through an appeal to what he terms the 'impersonal', or the 'third person'. For Esposito, the impersonal is not merely the opposite of the person, but rather a limit term, in that it "points out the limits and contradictions of the concept."<sup>50 51</sup> In this regard, based on the work of thinkers including

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<sup>41</sup> Vanessa Lemm, "Introduction," in Roberto Esposito, *Terms of the Political: Community, Immunity, Biopolitics*, trans. R.N. Welch (Fordham: Fordham University Press, 2013), p. 11.

<sup>42</sup> Roberto Esposito, *Bios*, p. 148.

<sup>43</sup> For Esposito, the best example of this more optimistic model of immunity as hospitality is perhaps pregnancy, in which "difference and conflict are not necessarily destructive. Indeed, just as the attack of the mother protects the child, the child's attacks can also save the mother from her self-injurious [i.e., autoimmune] tendencies." (Esposito, *Immunitas*, pp. 169-171).

<sup>44</sup> Vanessa Lemm, "Introduction," p. 12.

<sup>45</sup> In ancient Rome, for instance, the *paterfamilias*, or father of the family, was the only member of the family who was considered a full person, with everyone else, such as women, children, clients or slaves, being granted various degrees of (non)personality. (Roberto Esposito, *Impersonale: La persona che esclude*, Festivalfilosofia 2019, September 15, 2019, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VIDzXK7qQBI>).

<sup>46</sup> Roberto Esposito, "The Dispositif of the Person," *Law, Culture and The Humanities*, Vol. 8, no. 1(2012), p. 24.

<sup>47</sup> Roberto Esposito, *Impersonale*.

<sup>48</sup> Roberto Esposito, "The Dispositif of the Person," p. 14.

<sup>49</sup> Matheson Russell, "The Politics of the Third Person: Esposito's Third Person and Rancière's Disagreement," *Critical Horizons*, Vol. 15, no. 3 (2014), pp. 224-225.

<sup>50</sup> Roberto Esposito, "The Dispositif of the Person," p. 14.

<sup>51</sup> Roberto Esposito, *Impersonale*.

Simone Weil, Maurice Blanchot, and Gilles Deleuze among others, Esposito focuses on “the impersonality of justice, writing and animal life.”<sup>52</sup> In the context of justice, for instance, Esposito refers to Weil, who questions the connection between personhood and rights, so that,

What is sacred in humanity is not their *persona*; it is that which is not covered by their mask. Only this has a chance of reforging the relationship between humanity and rights that was interrupted by the immunitary machine of the person and of making possible ... a ‘common right’ or a ‘right in common’.<sup>53</sup>

Esposito also links the impersonal to the concept of the third person. Here, he cites linguist Emile Benveniste, who contrasts the “subjectively fraught dialectic” between first and second person<sup>54</sup> with the third person, situated “precisely at the point of intersection between no-one and anyone: either it is not a person at all or it is every person. In reality it is both at the same time.”<sup>55</sup> Furthermore, via the work of Blanchot, Esposito then links the concept of the third person to the regime of writing, where its use leads to a de-centering of the narrative voice, which is “drowned out by the anonymous whirl of events, ... the loss of identity by the subjects of the action with regard to themselves.”<sup>56</sup>

The third semantic realm linked to the impersonal is that of life itself. For Deleuze, for instance, life takes the form of a “multiple, impersonal yet singular babble”<sup>57</sup> which “contradicts the hierarchical separation of humankind ... into two superimposed, or subjugated substances – the rational and the animal.”<sup>58</sup> In this regard, the impersonal can be understood as “something that, being of the person or in the person, stops the immune mechanism that introduces the ‘I’ into the simultaneously inclusive and exclusive circle of the ‘we’.”<sup>59</sup> Perhaps, then, Esposito suggests, the impersonal could be the basis of a new type of community, of a true ‘being-in common’, underscored by a more tolerant, inclusionary vision of immunity.

### ***The Immunitary Regime: Life in the Camps***

Based on the theoretical approach outlined above, *Life and Times of Michael K*, in its portrayal of a civil war-torn South Africa, can be read as depicting a society based on exposure to the void of the *munus*, on the one hand, and an immunitary state machine, on the other, in the form of an increasing network of camps, as well as other controls such as curfews and travel restrictions. This is reflected in Michael’s own story, as he is exposed both to the destitution and dangers of life on the road and, periodically, to internment in labor and rehabilitation camps.

At the beginning of the novel, Michael and his ailing mother can perhaps be understood as a micro-community based on lack rather than love or identity. Despite their obvious genetic

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<sup>52</sup> Vanessa Lemm, “Introduction,” p. 12.

<sup>53</sup> Roberto Esposito, “The Dispositif of the Person,” pp. 15-16.

<sup>54</sup> Richard A. Barney, “On (not) Giving up: Animals, Biopolitics, and the Impersonal in J.M. Coetzee’s *Disgrace*,” *Textual Practice* 30, no. 3(2016), p. 514.

<sup>55</sup> Roberto Esposito, *Third Person*, p. 107.

<sup>56</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 119-120.

<sup>57</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 121.

<sup>58</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 121.

<sup>59</sup> Roberto Esposito, *Communitas*, p. 102.

relation, there is little evidence of love between mother and son; indeed, they feel disgust at each other's physical deformities. In this sense, then, the mini-community formed by mother and son can be better understood as based not upon a common identity but upon a common *munus*, in the sense of "a shared lack, a debt or an obligation."<sup>60</sup> Michael's mother is disgusted by his hare-lip from the moment of his birth:

from the first Anna K did not like the mouth that would not close and the living pink flesh it bared to her. She shivered to think of what had been growing in her all these months ... She took the child to work with her and continued to take it when it was no longer a baby. Because their smiles and whispers hurt her, she kept it away from other children.<sup>61</sup>

Despite her sense of disgust and embarrassment at her son's disfigurement, however, Anna K. continues to care for him until he was committed to Huis Norenius, a state institution where, "in the company of other variously afflicted and unfortunate children"<sup>62</sup> he received a basic education. Anna's sense of duty towards Michael in the face of physical disgust is reciprocated years later when, in a Cape Town devastated by civil war, he takes care of his now sick and elderly mother. However, when he has to share a room with Anna he finds the "gross swelling" of her arms and legs<sup>63</sup> off-putting:

Michael K did not like the physical intimacy that the long evenings in the tiny room forced upon the two of them. He found the sight of his mother's swollen legs disturbing and turned away when he had to help her out of bed ... But he did not shirk any aspect of what he saw as his duty ... he had been brought into the world to look after his mother.<sup>64</sup>

Thus, until her death, his *munus* towards his mother defines Michael's identity: he cares for her out of a sense of obligation. As Esposito argues, "The *munus* opens up, transforms, and exchanges subjects: expropriates and diminishes them to the point that they are wholly lacking; and binds and indebts them to their contractual obligations."<sup>65</sup>

This sense of duty leads Michael to quit his job as a park-keeper in order to help the sick woman fulfill her wish to return to the countryside where she was born. The almost penniless pair, having given up waiting for a travel permit that may never come, thus set out on a long and harrowing journey, with Michael pushing his ailing mother in a makeshift rickshaw. They sleep rough, and on the road, Michael successfully fends off a "communitarian" attack, apparently based on the struggle for existence or "mimetic desire," when two robbers attempt to steal his suitcase at knifepoint.<sup>66</sup> Mother and son are, however, also subject to "immunitarian" interventions on the part of the state, who seek to prevent them continuing their journey in the absence of a permit.<sup>67</sup>

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<sup>60</sup> Ibid., p. 16.

<sup>61</sup> J. M. Coetzee, *Life and Times of Michael K*, p. 3.

<sup>62</sup> Ibid., p. 4.

<sup>63</sup> Ibid., p. 5.

<sup>64</sup> Ibid., *Life and Times of Michael K*, p. 7.

<sup>65</sup> Roberto Esposito, *Communitas*, p. 4.

<sup>66</sup> J. M. Coetzee, *Life and Times of Michael K*, p. 25.

<sup>67</sup> Ibid., pp. 22-23.

Anna K falls sick and dies in hospital on the way. Michael continues on his journey, where, again, he clashes with the state's immunitary apparatus. Caught without a permit, in a foreshadowing of his later internment, he is picked up and assigned to a labor gang working on the railways. After a day, however, he manages to escape by sneaking onto a train going in the opposite direction.<sup>68</sup> He eventually reaches the township of Prince Albert, where he finds an abandoned farm, owned by the Visagie family, which he thinks is the one where his mother was brought up. There, he attempts to survive by hunting, and begins to plant a small vegetable garden, and lives in relative peace until the grandson of the owners, a deserting soldier, returns to the farm. A "synecdoche for the history of South African colonialism,"<sup>69</sup> the Visagie grandson attempts to turn Michael into a manservant; faced with this threat to his liberty Michael decides to leave the farm for the mountains.<sup>70</sup> However, returning to the town to forage for food, he becomes prey to the growing (auto)immunitary apparatus of the state when he is picked up and taken to a labor camp, Jakkalsdrif.

The Jakkalsdrif camp has already been explored from biopolitical perspectives, notably via Foucault's account of disciplinary power and Agamben's concept of bare life. Head, for instance, argues that "The Jakkalsdrif labour camp is obviously Foucauldian, an anti-nomadic device to harness the utility of a homeless multiplicity,"<sup>71</sup> a reading which is supported by the association between Michael K's childhood experiences in Huis Norenius and the hospitals which appear in the novel.<sup>72</sup> Mills, however, offers an Agambenian reading of Michael's internment in Jakkalsdrif. She points out that in the camp he is essentially *abandoned to and by* the law,<sup>73</sup> rendering him a figure of "bare life," which, in Agamben's terms, is neither natural life nor political life but rather "the politicised form of natural life" which emerges through "the irreparable exposure of life to death in the sovereign ban."<sup>74</sup>

Building upon Mills' reading in particular, it is argued here that Jakkalsdrif can also be profitably understood in terms of Esposito's concept of (auto)immunity. Esposito does not fundamentally challenge Agamben's reading of the "sovereign exception as the aporia of Western politics"<sup>75</sup>; indeed he views his own work as 'providing a different interpretive key that is capable of reading [Agamben] ... this hermeneutic key, this different paradigm, is that of immunity.'<sup>76</sup> From the perspective of Esposito's immunitary paradigm, then, Jakkalsdrif can also be understood as a consequence of the state's desire to protect, or immunize, itself from the (perceived) void of the *munus*. Later in the novel, Michael reflects on the exponential growth in the (auto)immunitary apparatus of the camps:

<sup>68</sup> Ibid., p. 43-44.

<sup>69</sup> Catherine Mills, "Life Beyond Law: Biopolitics, Law and Futurity in Coetzee's *Life and Times of Michael K*", *Griffith Law Review*, Vol. 15, no. 1 (2006), p. 191.

<sup>70</sup> J. M. Coetzee, *Life and Times of Michael K*, pp. 60-65.

<sup>71</sup> Dominic Head, *J. M. Coetzee* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1997), p. 103.

<sup>72</sup> Catherine Mills, "Life Beyond Law," p. 180.

<sup>73</sup> Ibid., pp. 180-181.

<sup>74</sup> Ibid., p. 184.

<sup>75</sup> Tom Frost, "Community and The Third Person in Esposito and Agamben," p. 3.

<sup>76</sup> Timothy Campbell, "'Bios', Immunity, Life: The Thought of Roberto Esposito," *Diacritics*, Vol. 36, no. 2 (2006), p. 50.

Now they have camps for children whose parents run away, camps for people who kick and foam at the mouth, camps for people with big heads and little heads, camps for people with no visible means of support, camps for people chased off the land, camps for people they find living in storm-water drains, camps for street-girls, camps for people who can't add two and two, camps for people who forget their papers at home, camps for people who live in the mountains and blow up bridges in the night.<sup>77</sup>

As Robert, a Jakkalsdrif inmate who acts as a “critical consciousness”<sup>78</sup> tells Michael, the purpose of the camps is “to stop people from disappearing into the mountains and then coming back to cut their fences and drive their stock away.”<sup>79</sup> Based on Robert's interpretation, then, Jakkalsdrif can be understood as a symptom of an autoimmune crisis in that, in Esposito's terms, the immune reaction appears to be disproportional to the threat,<sup>80</sup> particularly as the majority of the camp's inmates are women, children or elderly.<sup>81</sup> In turn, the shopkeepers of Prince Albert, the nearest town, seek to ‘immunize’ themselves from the camp inmates by overcharging them in an attempt to keep them away:

They don't want a camp so near their town. They never wanted it. They ran a big campaign against the camp at the beginning. We breed disease, they said. No hygiene, no morals ... What they would really like ... is for the camp to be miles away in the middle of the Koup out of sight.<sup>82</sup>

One day, a fire at the local police station leads to a police raid on the Jakkalsdrif camp. Although the police had spotted and warned three strange men on bicycles near the camp just before curfew,<sup>83</sup> there was apparently no proof that the arsonists were inmates of the camp. Despite the lack of evidence, the police raid is a violent one:

They burst into the huts and beat the sleepers in their beds. A youth who dodged them and ran away was chased into a corner behind the latrines and kicked into insensibility; a small boy was knocked over by a dog and rescued screaming with fright, his head lacerated and bleeding.<sup>84</sup>

Following the incident, the police captain replaces the two Free Corps guards, whom he accuses of negligence, with his own men and imprisons them. He installs an even harsher immunity regime in the camp: “No-one leaves the camp except on labour calls ... Roll calls morning and evening, with everyone present to answer. We've been kind to you long enough.”<sup>85</sup>

Indeed, as Michael later remembers, the police captain had described Jakkalsdrif as “a nest of parasites, hanging from the neat sunlit town, eating its substance, giving no nourishment back.”<sup>86</sup> In the context of Coetzee's novel, then, the reference to parasites here “introduces a

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<sup>77</sup> J. M. Coetzee, *Life and Times of Michael K*, pp. 248-249.

<sup>78</sup> David Atwell, *J. M. Coetzee: South Africa and the Politics of Writing*, p. 93.

<sup>79</sup> J. M. Coetzee, *Life and Times of Michael K*, p. 80.

<sup>80</sup> Inge Mutsaers, *Immunological Discourse in Political Philosophy*, p. 102.

<sup>81</sup> J. M. Coetzee, *Life and Times of Michael K*, p. 80.

<sup>82</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 82.

<sup>83</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 93.

<sup>84</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 89-90.

<sup>85</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 92.

<sup>86</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 116.

reflection on categories of people and desires that the apartheid state had deemed 'unnecessary'.<sup>87</sup> The parasite, notably, can be viewed as the reverse of the *munus* and the communal duty to give, in that it always takes and never gives.<sup>88</sup> Perhaps ironically, as Pyyhtinen notes, the parasite is already always immune in that it exempts itself from the communal *munus*.<sup>89</sup> Serres, notably, posits a seemingly infinite chain of parasites, where, effectively, the parasite parasitizes the parasite<sup>90</sup>; a similar observation is reached by the supposedly half-witted Michael K, who notes that:

it was no longer obvious which was host and which was parasite, camp or town ... Perhaps in truth whether the camp was declared a parasite on the town or the town a parasite on the camp depended on no more than on who made his voice heard loudest ... What if the hosts were 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 still then be called parasites? Parasites too had flesh and substance, parasites too could be preyed upon.<sup>91</sup>

In this context, Michael's reflection challenges the immunitary, even thanatopolitical, logic of the camps by suggesting that these so-called parasites "were always already integral to the 'host' lives of the South African white electorate obliquely critiqued herein."<sup>92</sup> As Serres notes, "Death to the parasite, some say, without seeing that a parasite is put to death only by a stronger parasite."<sup>93</sup>

From the immunitary perspective, however, the parasite is potentially contagious, a threat to be contained. By describing the inmates as parasites,<sup>94</sup> then, the captain seeks to justify their isolation from the town under his new regime as an attempt to protect the town from a harmful parasitic infection. This is echoed in the townspeople's view of the camp as a source of disease.<sup>95</sup> For Esposito, the Nazi extermination camps were built on just such a biopolitical (or, rather, thanatopolitical) logic, which sought to "avoid at all costs ... the contagion of superior beings by inferior beings" described as "bacilli, bacteria, viruses, parasites and microbes."<sup>96</sup>

As Esposito argues, the dispositif of the person relies on such a separation of human life into a "personal" life and an "animal" life, according to which "a human being is a person if, and only if, he or she is the absolute master of the animal that dwells inside,"<sup>97</sup> so that "the

<sup>87</sup> Alicia Broggi, "What Does it Mean to Speak of —? Rudolf Bultmann, Biography, and J. M. Coetzee's *Life & Times of Michael K*," *The Review of English Studies*, Vol. 69, no. 289(2018), p. 354.

<sup>88</sup> Olli Pyyhtinen, *The Gift and its Paradoxes: Beyond Mauss* (London: Routledge, 2012), pp. 11-12.

<sup>89</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 77.

<sup>90</sup> Michel Serres, *The Parasite* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2007).

<sup>91</sup> J. M. Coetzee, *Life and Times of Michael K*, pp. 60-65.

<sup>92</sup> Alicia Broggi, "What Does it Mean to Speak of —?," p. 354.

<sup>93</sup> Michel Serres, *The Parasite*, p. 131.

<sup>94</sup> Interestingly, as Michel Serres notes, the parasite suggests a one-sided relationship to the gift – a parasite takes without giving – which is opposed to that of the common which, for Esposito, implies being subject to an obligatory kind of gift, a gift "which one cannot not give." (Roberto Esposito, *Communitas*, p. 4).

<sup>95</sup> J. M. Coetzee, *Life and Times of Michael K*, p. 82.

<sup>96</sup> Roberto Esposito, *Terms of the Political*, p. 86.

<sup>97</sup> Roberto Esposito, *Persons and Things: From the Body's Point of View*. Trans. Z. Hanafi. (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2015), p. 25.

animalization of man was the most devastating outcome of the dispositif of the person.”<sup>98</sup> This can be noted, for instance, in Michael’s experiences in the camps, when he, along with some of the other prisoners, is frequently compared to animals, most notably to monkeys, in an attempt to dehumanize him. A farmer for whom the Jakkalsdrif prisoners are working, for instance, regales Michael for not working efficiently enough by asking him “Where were you brought up, monkey?”<sup>99</sup> Similarly, when Michael is arrested as a supposed collaborator, the police assume he is guarding stores for the rebels, “otherwise why would they leave this monkey here?”<sup>100</sup>

In this sense, this simianization of Michael can perhaps be understood as an (immunitary) attempt to depersonalize him and, through denying his personhood, to deprive him of rights (or perhaps of the right to have rights). As Livingstone Smith and Paniatu point out,<sup>101</sup> simianization has been an especially widespread form of dehumanizing racial minorities. Such discourse, which contains a tension between the idea of simians as “primitive though innocuous creatures ... trained monkeys” and as “dangerous, hyperpredatory apes has, notably, been particularly prevalent in European depictions of people of colour,”<sup>102 103</sup> such as Michael.

### Michael K: “Becoming Animal” and The Third Person?

Despite the harsh, immunitary regime imposed by the police captain, Michael manages to escape from the camp relatively easily, by simply climbing the fence. He returns to the abandoned farm, where he survives on a minimal amount of food, which leaves him malnourished, exhausted, and sick. Suspected by the police of dealings with a gang of insurgents, Michael is interned again in a rehabilitation camp, Kenilworth, where, due to his weakened, emaciated condition, he is under the care of the camp’s nameless medical officer, the narrator of the second part of the novel.

Following his escape from Jakkalsdrif, as Mills points out, Michael begins to live increasingly like an animal, “nocturnal, hibernatory and silent”<sup>104</sup>: indeed, his proximity to animals is frequently emphasized throughout the novel.<sup>105</sup> Animals, as Barney, among others, notes, play an important role in much of Coetzee’s work; in *Disgrace*, for instance, “an intermediary space between the personal and non-personal emerges in order to accommodate human and non-human animals alike.”<sup>106</sup> Here, in contrast to the separation of the human and

<sup>98</sup> Roberto Esposito, *Third Person*, pp. 149-150.

<sup>99</sup> J. M. Coetzee, *Life and Times of Michael K*, p. 87.

<sup>100</sup> J. M. Coetzee, *Life and Times of Michael K*, p. 123.

<sup>101</sup> David Livingstone Smith & Ioana Paniatu, *Aping the Human Essence Simianization as Dehumanization* (2015), [https://www.researchgate.net/publication/282359877\\_Aping\\_the\\_Human\\_Essence\\_Simianization\\_as\\_Dehumanization](https://www.researchgate.net/publication/282359877_Aping_the_Human_Essence_Simianization_as_Dehumanization)

<sup>102</sup> It should be stressed, however, that Europeans are far from being the only ‘perpetrators’ of simianization, and people of African descent are certainly not the only people to have been compared to apes and monkeys. As Livingstone Smith and Paniatu point out, groups including “Jewish, Irish, and Japanese people - have been simianized at one time or another, and Arab, Japanese, and Chinese people have, at one time or another, been perpetrators of simianization.” (Livingstone Smith & Ioana Paniatu, *Aping the Human Essence*)

<sup>103</sup> Ibid.

<sup>104</sup> Catherine Mills, “Life Beyond Law,” p. 179.

<sup>105</sup> Ibid., p. 184.

<sup>106</sup> Richard Barney, “On (not) giving up,” p. 509.

animal in evidence in the discourse of the immunitary regime of the camps, Michael's proximity to animals can arguably be understood in terms of Deleuze's concept of 'becoming-animal', which, as Esposito argues, points to a way of being human that "is not coextensive with the person or the thing, or with the perpetual transfer between one or the other that we have been fated to until now."<sup>107</sup>

The focus on the impersonal, in *Life and Times of Michael K*, is emphasized, indeed enabled, by Coetzee's form of narration. Barney, for instance, notes Coetzee's "career-long use of narrative strategies that displace the authority of the person as writer or character"<sup>108</sup>; while Coetzee's pursuit of an impersonal mode of writing became more explicit after 1990, his earlier works, arguably including *Life and Times of Michael K*, also "explore a critique of subject-centred reasoning."<sup>109</sup> Unlike most of Coetzee's novels, *Life and Times of Michael K* is largely narrated in the third person, with the exception of the middle section, narrated in the voice of the anonymous medical officer at Kenilworth. As Esposito explains, the third person escapes the dialectic of the first and second persons,<sup>110</sup> and opens up "the possibility of a non-personal person ... of a non-person."<sup>111 112</sup> In this context, with reference to Blanchot, Esposito argues that it is only writing which can shatter the "interlocutory relation" that "within the dialogic word links the first person to the second." In this regard, writing (in the third person) creates "an opening into the impersonal," which lifts the text "out of its own margins," making it "spin on itself."<sup>113</sup> Esposito also cites Deleuze in this regard, who argues that,

Literature... exists only when it discovers beneath apparent persons the power of the impersonal – which is not a generality but a singularity at the highest point: a man, a woman, a beast, a stomach, a child ... literature begins only when a third person is born in us that strips us of the power to say 'I' (Blanchot's 'neuter').<sup>114</sup>

Free indirect discourse is particularly favored by Deleuze and Guattari as it "is not explained by the distinction between subjects; rather, it is the assemblage, as it freely appears in this discourse, that explains all the voices present within a single voice"<sup>115</sup>; it is like "the murmur from which I take my proper name, the constellation of voices, concordant or not, from which I draw my voice."<sup>116</sup>

<sup>107</sup> Roberto Esposito, *Third Person*, pp. 150-151.

<sup>108</sup> Richard Barney, "On (not) giving up," p. 509.

<sup>109</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 515.

<sup>110</sup> As Esposito argues, based on the work of Benveniste among others, in the classic scenario of the first/second person, the 'I' is always the one who defines the field of relevance, leading to an (interchangeable) relationship of self/other between the two interlocutors, so that the 'you' is conceivable only in relation to the 'I' (Roberto Esposito, *Third Person*, pp. 105-106).

<sup>111</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 105-106.

<sup>112</sup> Importantly, as Barney points out, Coetzee himself was influenced by Benveniste in his own engagement with the ethics of the writer's linguistic choices in essays such as "The Rhetoric of the Passive in English" and "The Agentless Sentence as Rhetorical Device." ["On (not) giving up," pp. 514-151].

<sup>113</sup> Roberto Esposito, *Third Person*, pp. 119-120.

<sup>114</sup> Cited in *ibid.*, pp. 145.

<sup>115</sup> Gilles Deleuze & Félix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1987), p. 80.

<sup>116</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 84.

As suggested above, then, the use of free indirect discourse in *Life and Times of Michael K*, arguably enables the depiction of the theme of the impersonal through the lens of Deleuze's concept of 'becoming animal'. As Esposito notes, the concept of 'becoming-animal'<sup>117</sup> provides an important "constitutive and countering force" to, or an "unravelling" of, this traditional dichotomy of the person in contrast to the animal, or the thing.<sup>118</sup> Importantly, becoming-animal "is above all the becoming of a life that is individuated only by breaking the chains and the prohibitions, the barriers and the borders that humankind has constructed."<sup>119</sup> Becoming-animal must be understood in the broader context of Deleuze's conception of impersonal life, which Agamben describes as a "principle of virtual indetermination in which the vegetative and the animal, the inside and the outside and even the organic and the inorganic, in passing through one another, cannot be told apart."<sup>120</sup>

Thus, becoming-animal neither implies a banal imaginary structure, nor becoming a real animal. Instead, becomings-animal can be understood as "blocks of becoming" which associate "heterogenous beings."<sup>121</sup> As Deleuze and Guattari put forward,

Becomings-animal are neither dreams nor phantasies. They are perfectly real. But which reality is at issue here? For if becoming animal does not consist in playing animal or imitating an animal, it is clear that the human being does not "really" become an animal any more than the animal "really" becomes something else.<sup>122</sup>

Thus, for Deleuze, as Esposito explains, "The animal – in the human, of the human – means above all multiplicity with what surrounds us and with what always dwells inside us"; this also means "plurivocity, metamorphosis, contamination." In this sense, becoming-animal refers to "the *living person* – not separate from or implanted into life, but coextensive with it."<sup>123</sup> In this context, life,

refers neither to a rational subject nor to a bare material substrate. But above all, if understood in its impersonal, singular dimension, life is what does not allow – what contradicts at its roots – the hierarchical division between these two entities within the separating dispositif of the person.<sup>124</sup>

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<sup>117</sup> While Esposito focuses on "becomings-animal," Deleuze repeatedly returns to the lack of distinction between "becomings-animal" and "becomings-molecular" in *A Thousand Plateaus*, where becoming does not signify "to imitate or identify with something or someone" but rather "the emitting of particles that take on certain relations of movement and rest because they enter a particular zone of proximity or ... to emit particles that enter that zone of proximity." (*A Thousand Plateaus*, p. 273).

<sup>118</sup> Roberto Esposito, *Third Person*, pp. 149-150.

<sup>119</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 182.

<sup>120</sup> Giorgio Agamben, "Absolute Immanence," in *Potentialities: Collected Essays in Philosophy*, edited and translated by Daniel Heller-Roazen (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1999), p. 233.

<sup>121</sup> Pascal Michon, "Gilles Deleuze & Felix Guattari and the *Rhuthmoi* of Individuation – Part 2," *Rhuthmos*, Vol. July 15, 2021, <https://rhuthmos.eu/spip.php?article2628>.

<sup>122</sup> Deleuze & Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, p. 238.

<sup>123</sup> Roberto Esposito, *Third Person*, p. 151.

<sup>124</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 147.

Importantly, becoming-animal thus involves a critique of “any claim to hereditary, ethnic or racial purity.”<sup>125</sup> Michael himself frequently compares himself to, or rather describes himself as, as an animal. However, in contrast to his simianization by the authorities, Michael’s depictions of himself as animal cannot be understood in terms of an internalized sense of (racial) inferiority. Instead they are becomings-animal, in that, in these experiences of metamorphosis or multiplicity, he emphasizes his unity with all life. Picking wild berries, for instance, Michael, in his becoming-animal, has no problem discerning between poisonous and harmless fruit. Similarly, as a gardener, he also feels an affinity with animals which burrow in the earth: “I am more like an earthworm, he thought. Which is also a kind of gardener. Or a mole, also a gardener, that does not tell stories because it lives in silence.”<sup>126</sup> Following his escape from the first camp, he plants pumpkins; he mainly subsists, however, on insects and roots, food that he “ekes out of the earth like an animal.”<sup>127</sup>

Michael’s affinity is not merely with animal life but also with plant life, and, indeed, with life itself. Thus, as Esposito notes, becoming-animal, “brings into relationship totally heterogenous terms – like a human being, an animal and a microorganism; but even a tree, a season and an atmosphere”; it is thus a life which individuates by breaking, rather than erecting, the “barriers and boundaries, that the human has etched within it.”<sup>128</sup> This is emphasized, for instance, in the affective pull Michael feels towards his garden on the old farm:

There was a cord of tenderness that stretched from him to the patch of earth besides the dam and must be cut. It seemed to him that one could cut a cord like that only so many times before it would not grow again.<sup>129</sup>

Similarly, his pumpkins and melons become his family, “his brothers and sisters,”<sup>130</sup> or his “children,” which he must raise and care for,<sup>131</sup> which suggests “in attenuated form, the possibility of community,<sup>132</sup> of a communitarian life invested with passion and pleasure.”<sup>133</sup>

However, Michael’s attempts at gardening are not enough to prevent him from suffering severe malnutrition, in spite of the joy that he obtains from eating, and from being interned in Kenilworth. As mentioned above, the story, in this second part of the novel, is narrated by an unnamed medical officer who first takes Michael for a half-wit. The officer grows frustrated with Michael’s seemingly inexplicable refusal to eat, while growing increasingly fascinated with him, perceiving how, despite his internment, he manages, in his impersonality, to elide the immunitary apparatus of classification and the camps. As he explains in a letter to Michael,

I am the only one who sees you for the original soul you are. I am the only one who cares for you. I alone see you as neither a soft case for a soft camp nor a hard case for a hard camp but a human soul

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<sup>125</sup> Ibid., p. 150.

<sup>126</sup> J. M. Coetzee, *Life and Times of Michael K*, p. 102.

<sup>127</sup> Catherine Mills, “Life Beyond Law“, p. 187.

<sup>128</sup> Roberto Esposito, *Third Person*, p. 150.

<sup>129</sup> J. M. Coetzee, *Life and Times of Michael K*, p. 90.

<sup>130</sup> Ibid., p. 113.

<sup>131</sup> Ibid., p. 117.

<sup>132</sup> David Atwell, *J.M Coetzee*, p. 97.

<sup>133</sup> Daniele Monticelli, “From Dissensus to Inoperativity,” p. 16.

above and beneath classification, a soul blessedly untouched by doctrine, untouched by history, a soul stirring in the wings within that stiff sarcophagus, murmuring behind that clownish mask.<sup>134</sup>

Notably, the medical officer, emphasizes K's lack of a personal identity and his affinity with the earth. Indeed, he sees Michael as a "prodigy" of obscurity,<sup>135</sup> a "rudimentary man" made of earth, someone with "no papers, no money, no family, no friends, no sense of who you are."<sup>136</sup> In this sense, Michael's life can be understood as "a life that coincides to the very last with its simple mode of being, with its being such as it is, a life that is precisely 'a life'."<sup>137</sup> Comparing Michael to a stone, the officer notes how unaffected he seems by the war and his experiences in the camps in spite of his obvious physical dereliction:

He is like a stone, a pebble that, having laid around quietly minding its own business since the dawn of time, is now suddenly picked up and tossed randomly from hand to hand. A hard little stone, barely 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.<sup>138</sup>

As the medical officer points out to K, "your story in the camp was merely an allegory ... of how scandalously, how outrageously a meaning can take up residence within a system without being a term in it."<sup>139</sup> Here, K arguably approaches what Deleuze and Guattari call *becoming-imperceptible*, the "immanent end of becoming, its cosmic formula," so that "after a real rupture one succeeds in ... being just like everybody else."<sup>140</sup> As Rosi Braidotti explains, becoming-imperceptible is "the point of fusion between the self and his/her habitat, the cosmos as a whole," of "merging with one's environment."<sup>141</sup>

Eventually, in spite of his physical condition, Michael also succeeds in escaping from Kenilworth. As the medical officer, who also comes to dream of escaping from the camp, notes almost enviously, Michael is protected by his very imperceptibility: "Perhaps we could make a start by discarding our uniforms and getting dirt under our fingernails ... though I doubt we will ever look as nondescript as Michaels."<sup>142</sup>

### Conclusion

As Esposito suggests, an impersonal yet singular life "cannot but resist whatever power, or knowledge, is arranged to divide it into two reciprocally subordinated zones."<sup>143</sup> Thus,

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<sup>134</sup> J. M. Coetzee, *Life and Times of Michael K*, p. 151.

<sup>135</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 142.

<sup>136</sup> *Ibid.*, *Life and Times of Michael K*, p. 142.

<sup>137</sup> Roberto Esposito, "The Person and Human Life," in *Theory after Theory*, Jane Elliott & Derek Attridge (Eds.) (London: Routledge, 2011), p. 218.

<sup>138</sup> J. M. Coetzee, *Life and Times of Michael K*, p. 135.

<sup>139</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 228.

<sup>140</sup> Gilles Deleuze & Félix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, p. 308.

<sup>141</sup> Rosi Braidotti, "The Ethics of Becoming Imperceptible," in Constantin Boundas (Ed.), *Deleuze and Philosophy*, (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2006), p. 159.

<sup>142</sup> J. M. Coetzee, *Life and Times of Michael K*, p. 164.

<sup>143</sup> Roberto Esposito, *The Person and Human Life*, p. 218.

Michael arguably resists the immunitary regime of the camps, emphasized by the comparison of the camp inmates to monkeys and parasites, through his connection with impersonal life, perhaps best depicted in the affinity he feels with plants and animals while gardening. As the medical officer writes to him,

the garden for which you are presently heading is nowhere and everywhere except in the camps. It is another name for the only place where you belong, Michaels, where you do not feel homeless. It is off every map, no road leads to it that is merely a road, and only you know the way.<sup>144</sup>

Thus, Michael's resistance is achieved, notably, through his becoming animal, indeed his unity with animal, vegetable and even mineral life. In this way, he succeeds in breaking down the (internal) barriers between the human and the animal or thing characteristic of the immunitary regime, and, at least temporarily, manages to become imperceptible to the regime. Michael is clearly "not the saviour of his people," nor does he "overturn the law in a radical gesture of overcoming."<sup>145</sup> However, *contra* Nadine Gordimer's argument that blacks are represented as hopeless victims in the novel,<sup>146</sup> he can be understood, through his attempt to live an impersonal life outside the biopolitical, immunitary regime of the camps as a "modest figure of hope"<sup>147</sup> who can be understood as displaying "a radical way of engaging power."<sup>148</sup>

Having succeeded in escaping from the second camp, Michael reaches a familiar beach; there, in the public toilets, he encounters a group of three people, two men and a woman who are later joined by another woman. The group first approaches him with hostility, although, when they notice Michael's emaciation and his ragged overalls, their hostility soon turns to hospitality.<sup>149</sup> They invite him to eat and drink with them, and one of the women even grants him sexual favors. However, Michael interprets the hospitality of the group as charity, reminding him of the supposed 'charity' of the camps and, ultimately, his childhood in Huis Norenius.<sup>150</sup> Filled with horror at the prospect of being dependent on charity, then, Michael leaves the group and returns to his mother's dilapidated room.<sup>151</sup> The novel does not end, therefore, with Michael participating in a new community based on tolerance and impersonality as, perhaps, the reader might be led to expect when the group first takes him under its wing.

Despite the fact that Michael flees from the group on the beach, however, he does not completely discard the possibility of forming a new makeshift community, this time based on a model of immunity characterized by tolerance and openness to difference rather than exclusion. Thus, he imagines a stranger, perhaps "a little old man with a stoop and bottle in his pocket who muttered all the time into his beard,"<sup>152</sup> who would share his impersonal life, a life outside all the camps, with him. Armed with seeds, the pair would set out on their journey, and

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<sup>144</sup> J. M. Coetzee, *Life and Times of Michael K*, p. 194.

<sup>145</sup> Catherine Mills, "Life Beyond Law," p. 189.

<sup>146</sup> Nadine Gordimer, "The Idea of Gardening," *New York Review of Books*, 2 February 1984.

<sup>147</sup> Catherine Mills, "Life Beyond Law," p. 189.

<sup>148</sup> Daniele Monticelli, "From Dissensus to Inoperativity," p. 635.

<sup>149</sup> J. M. Coetzee, *Life and Times of Michael K*, pp. 171-175.

<sup>150</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 181-182.

<sup>151</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 183.

<sup>152</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 183-184.

Michael would dig for water with a teaspoon; “When he brought it up there would be water in the bowl of the spoon; and in that way, he would say, one can live.”<sup>153</sup>

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<sup>153</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 184.