Kafka's Children

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This article examines the elusive status of the child in Franz Kafka's work as a way of looking back at the future. Unlike Kafka's bachelorhood, his childlessness has received less critical attention. In Kafka's oeuvre, the closest we get to paternity is the mysterious, childlike specters that haunt the apartments of lonely bachelors, staging not only the problem of what Lee Edelman terms "reproductive futurism" but also the collision between literary modernism and realism. Yet, Kafka's unfinished novel Amerika: The Missing Person [Der Verschollene] *introduces a counterweight to the proliferation of childless bachelors: the juvenile but absent father. Kafka's America represents a prelapsarian state both by allowing Karl to escape his primordial sin—a child born out of wedlock—and by indefinitely extending his youth, thus transforming the precocious father into a perpetual child. Like Kafka's bachelor stories,* The Missing Person *is pervaded by strange bodily gestures that highlight the fantastical contortions of Kafka's narrative world and his departure from the conventions of literary realism. These gestures are Kafka's way of contemplating another possible world—or future—not bound by the quotidian, heteronormative teleology of family life.*

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In his influential *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive* (2004), Lee Edelman introduces the term "reproductive futurism" to refer to the prevailing cultural narrative of linear temporality that is anchored in the figure of the child. The child is the embodiment of innocence and promise through "whatever norms

the prevailing order cherishes and enforces: heterosexuality, homogeneity, affluence" (Brenkman 174). Edelman argues that the "Child remains the perpetual horizon of every acknowledged politics, the fantasmatic beneficiary of every political intervention" (3). According to Edelman, "That figural Child alone embodies the citizen as an ideal, entitled to claim full rights to its future share in the nation's good though always at the cost of limiting the rights 'real' citizens are allowed" (11). The child's promised fulfillment is linked to "a better future, which inevitably turns out to be the present social and cultural order purged of its troubling and threatening elements" (Brenkman 175). Not only does Edelman's argument anticipate the central role of procreation in American politics exemplified by the moral panic about "childless cat ladies" during the 2024 presidential elections, it also foregrounds the extent to which the child is the centrifugal force in nearly every aspect of culture. The child "marks the fetishistic fixation of heteronormativity: an erotically charged investment in the rigid sameness of identity that is central to the compulsory narrative of reproductive futurism" (Edelman 21). *No Future* provides a powerful framework for reexamining the works of Franz Kafka through the lens of queer theory, and it also sheds light on one of Kafka's central concerns: the familial struggle between parents and children.[1]

The bachelor Kafka had no known children. Almost all of Kafka's major protagonists are grown men—usually childless bachelors—with varying levels of (im)maturity.[2] While Kafka often depicts the struggles between fathers and adult sons like Gregor Samsa in *The Metamorphosis* or Georg Bendemann in "The Judgment," he rarely portrays paternity from the forward-looking perspective of a protagonist. Even the few short stories that feature paternity present it as an abstract and emotionally unfulfilled relationship, such as in "Eleven Sons," where the narrator indifferently lists his offspring, speculating that one son "belonged" to another "family which he has now lost forever" and is as a result "often melancholy" (163). The fact that scholars like Breon Mitchell have speculated that "each" of these eleven "sons describes one of his stories" in *A Country Doctor* [*Ein Landarzt*] collection suggests that Kafka's literary representations of

paternity should not necessarily be read literally (192).[3] In "The Cares of a Family Man" [Die Sorge des Hausvaters], another story in the *Country Doctor* collection, the father is not so much concerned with the future of his own progeny as with Odradek, an enigmatic object which will likely outlive his "children's children." The exception that proves the rule is Kafka's unfinished novel *Amerika: The Missing Person* [*Amerika (Der Verschollene)*] in which the premature paternity of a teenage boy is the result of a sexual assault. As a result, the young father flees his familial responsibilities by escaping to America, where he spends the rest of the novel regressing back into a child.

Through a close reading of Kafka's short stories, this article suggests that two surrogate children—a ghost child and a set of celluloid bouncing balls that haunt the apartments of lonely bachelors—stage not only the problem of reproductive futurism but also the collision between literary modernism and realism particularly through its preoccupation with gesture.[4] Like his childless bachelors, gestures in Kafka's texts contemplate another form of existence beyond the heteronormative family life he was expected to embrace. Kafka's ghost child also dovetails with Edelman's rereading of the death drive. Building on the work of Sigmund Freud and Jacques Lacan, Edelman argues, "the death drive names what the queer, in the order of the social, is called forth to figure: the negativity opposed to every form of social viability" (9).[5] Edelman invokes the death drive not only in reference to the catastrophic HIV/AIDS epidemic but to describe the absence of futurity in the body politic. Beyond the obvious sexual connotations, Edelman's use of the word "queer" includes non-normative, anti-patriarchal lifestyles that are just as relevant to Kafka's ambiguously heterosexual bachelor.

Kafka's own sexuality has been the subject of much speculation, partly fueled by his literary executor Max Brod's decision to excise explicitly homoerotic entries from Kafka's diaries. Mark Anderson convincingly shows that Kafka's homosocial bonds and attraction to men represented an escape from his familial environment: "Normative homosexuality was represented to him by the world of his parents, by their 'Jewish' household, by the injunction to marry and have

children within the community" (85).[6] Rather than weigh on these debates, this article builds on Edelman's queer reading of the death drive to explore the conspicuous absence of reproductive futurism in Kafka's work. Anticipating Edelman, Kafka's childless protagonists are granted "neither identity, nor survival, nor any promise of a future and thus insist on "the impossibility of Symbolic closure" granted by heterosexual reproduction (48). Much like Kafka's "ghost" stories, *Amerika: The Missing Person* is pervaded by strange corporeal gestures that highlight Kafka's departure from the conventions of literary realism and reveal his contemplation of other worlds—or futures—beyond this one. Instead of reading Kafka through Edelman's theories, this article uses *No Future* as a point of departure to examine the way Kafka's texts envision alternative temporalities not bound up with the heteronormative family romance.

Old Bachelors

By turning to ineligible bachelors, Kafka signals a departure from the proliferation of children in nineteenth-century realist European fiction, from the Bildungsroman to the Victorian cult of childhood to the orphan who populates novels from *Great Expectations* to *Heidi*. In these various manifestations, literary realism is invested in a kind of reproductive futurism that is predicated on a continuity with future generations. Even the hapless but resilient orphan becomes the surviving seed for subsequent generations—a vibrant, living link between the dead past and the unwritten future.

In their oft-cited work *Kafka: Toward A Minor Literature*, Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari expand on the concept of the "bachelor machine" explored by the French writer Michel Carrouges in his analysis of Marcel Duchamp's artwork to describe the literary representations of fantastical machines.[7] Deleuze and Guattari state:

> With no family, no conjugality, the bachelor is all the more social, social-dangerous, social-traitor, a collective in himself ("We are outside the law, no one knows it and yet everyone treats us accordingly")… The highest desire desires both to be alone and to be connected to all the machines of

> desire. A machine that is all the more social and collective insofar as it is solitary, a bachelor, and that, tracing the line of escape, is equivalent in itself to a community whose conditions haven't yet been established" (71).

On the one hand, Deleuze and Guattari imply that once the bachelor voluntarily eschews his own reproductive bonds, he no longer has a family, obviating the fact that the bachelor himself presumably had—or still has—parents, siblings, and other relatives. We could say that bachelors function as the orphans of Kafka's texts—threatening precisely because they are isolated and outside of the social fabric.[8] On the other hand, Deleuze and Guattari suggest that by disavowing traditional familial structures, the bachelor is a social being par excellence who forms the basis of a new "community whose conditions haven't yet been established" (71).[9] The temporal marker "yet" seems to offer an alternative to heteronormative "reproductive futurism" by imagining communities rooted in other social structures.

Unlike Kafka's bachelorhood, his childlessness has received less critical attention. While the bachelor has a mysterious social status, childlessness is usually gendered as a female problem, both due to patriarchal assumptions and the narrower reproductive span of women. In the Anglophone context, the qualification of "eligible" invests the bachelor with a possibility and futurity foreclosed by the asocial, potentially queer associations of the word bachelor. In German, in contrast, the word "Junggesellen" already has the temporal marker of youth by virtue of its prefix "jung" [young], meaning, "(junger) Mann, der noch nicht verheiratet ist" [young man who has not yet married] ("Junggesellen," DWDS). The qualifying adverb "noch" [yet] indicates the anticipation of the conventional, heteronormative fate in the future. It as if the German word's etymology tries to preclude the fate that Kafka bemoaned in his unfinished short story "Blumfeld, an Elderly Bachelor" [Blumfeld, ein älterer Junggeselle] thought to be written in 1915.[10] According to his biographer Reiner Stach, Kafka "was sometimes taken for a schoolboy, which was humorous but odd. He was an old bachelor in the form of a child, a social monster" (47). Stach suggests that Kafka

"was not even thirty when he projected the image of the old bachelor onto himself. His fear of remaining alone to the end turned into the certainty that he would be unable to avoid this fate" (47).[11] In Edelman's terms, it is as if Kafka preemptively projects the antidote to reproductive futurism onto his future self.

Along similar lines, "The Bachelor's Misfortune" [Das Unglück des Junggesellen]—the fifth prose piece in the 1913 collection *Contemplation* [*Betrachtung*] opens with the following lines: "It seems so dreadful to remain a bachelor, to become an old man struggling hard to preserve his dignity while pleading for an invitation when he wants to spend an evening with people, being ill and spending weeks staring into an empty room from the corner of a bed" (46).[12] Even here, the lamented bachelor status is tied to a lack of offspring: "having to admire other people's children [fremde Kinder] and not able to keep repeating, 'I have none of my own'" [Ich habe keine] (42). The narrator envisions no future—the lack of reproductive futurism—as his own future. Yet, the ending of this short piece transforms this musing into reality: "That is how it will be, except that in reality [auch in Wirklichkeit], today and later, he will stand there in the flesh, with a body and a head, a forehead, that is, for hitting with his hand" (46).[13] This strange intrusion of the corporeal at the end of an imagined future serves to heighten the reality of the situation while arresting the flow of the narrative. As its repetition indicates, "Wirklichkeit" quite literally puts an end to the story driven by his nightmarish projection.

The fate of the lonely bachelor is also the subject of "Unhappiness" [Unglücklichsein], the final story of *Betrachtung* and one of the few works by Kafka that prominently features a child. With their emphasis on "Unglück" or misfortune, both story titles about bachelors mirror one another. Positioned at the end of the collection, "Unglücklichsein" seems to be a realization of the abject fate envisioned in "Das Unglück des Junggesellen" [The Bachelor's Misfortune]. It begins as follows:

> When it had already become unbearable [unerträglich]—once towards evening in November—and I went pacing down the strip of carpet in my room as if on a racetrack, shrank from the sight of the brightly lit street, to

> find a new goal at the opposite end of the room in the depths of the wall mirror, and I screamed aloud, only to hear the scream which meets with no answer and which nothing can diminish in its power… (33).[14]

The ghost appears right after the narrator shrinks in horror from the street to find "new purpose" in the depths of the mirror. As the narrator relates, "Like a small ghost a child blew in from the pitch-dark corridor" [Als kleines Gespenst fuhr ein Kind aus dem ganz dunklen Korridor] (33). The construction "like a small ghost" [Als kleines Gespenst] is particularly striking because the child is figuratively introduced "like" a ghost even before it is revealed as one. The emphasis is on the child, who happens to be a ghost rather than the ghost who is revealed to be a child. This formulation makes more sense later in the story, when it turns out that the child's visit had been expected by the narrator.

Although the ghost is a child, it is always addressed in the formal "Sie" and appears to be everything but childlike in its tone and diction. After the child protests that it is "just a child," the narrator responds, "Naturally, a child [Natürlich, ein Kind]. But you're not so very small [Aber gar so klein sind Sie nicht]. You're quite grown up already. If you were a girl, it would hardly be right to lock yourself into a room with me like this" (34).[15] This strange quip is the only possible clue to the child's gender that is referred to with the neuter pronoun "es" throughout the rest of the story. Yet, it is unclear whether the narrator uses the conditional "if" [Wenn] because he is referring to a ghost or male child. At this moment, the power dynamic of the story shifts to the ghost who should be frightened of a potentially predatory man rather than vice versa. As Rainer Nägele persuasively argues, not only is the ghost child more frightened of the narrator than vice versa, but the ghost is also far less threatening to the narrator than the "scream which meets with no answer" and the "sight of the illuminated street" in the opening lines of the story (Nägele 24).[16] Instead, it is the titular "Bachelor's Misfortune" and aching "Unhappiness" from which the ghost provides temporary respite.

The fact that the ghost child appears once the narrator loses himself in his mirror reflection gives rise to the most straightforward interpretation that it is simply a projection of the narrator's alter ego or childhood self. As the child reminds him, "No stranger could come any nearer to you than I am already by nature [schon von Natur aus]" (35). The narrator angrily retorts, "You say your **nature** compels you to speak to me like that. Really? Your **nature** compels you? That's kind of your **nature**. Your **nature** is mine, and if I'm being friendly by **nature** to you then you're not allowed to be otherwise" (35)."[17] Repeated five times in rapid succession in the narrator's reply, the word "nature" [Natur] seems to shed new light on the narrator's response, "Naturally [Natürlich], a child" mentioned in the aforementioned paragraph. While on the one hand, the "natural" proximity between the narrator and child seems to support the fact that they are the same person, it could also be an indicator of paternity. This reading is given additional credence when combined with the bachelor narrator's melancholic reference to "other people's children [fremde Kinder]" in "The Bachelor's Misfortune." When examined in the context of this companion piece, the ghost child could also be interpreted as an embodiment of the bachelor's anxiety about "no future" which mirrors Kafka's biographical ambivalence about marriage and family life. In its absolute negation of life and corporeal reality, this immaterial specter is the perverse manifestation of "reproductive futurism." Even more than the lonely bachelor or childless cat lady, the ghost child is, quite literally, a personification of Edelman's adoption of the death drive.

The intertextual connections between "Unhappiness" and "Blumfeld, an Elderly Bachelor" bolsters this interpretation of the ghost child. One evening, as the lonely bachelor Blumfeld climbs to his sixth-floor walk-up after work, he mulls over getting a dog, but concludes they are too dirty, needy, and onerous for his orderly lifestyle.[18] Upon entering the apartment, he is suprised by the uncanny appearance of "two small white celluloid balls [weiße blaugestreifte Zelluloidbälle] with blue stripes jumping up and down side by side on the parquet" (209). The bouncing balls follow Blumfeld around the apartment, playfully taunting him as he tries to find various ways to rein them in. Alternatively characterized as children

or naughty pets, the celluloid balls are the perverse fulfillment of Blumfeld's wish for company—the industrial progeny of the bachelor machine.[19] This is how they are described: "Like children pushing away blankets that annoy them at night, the balls have apparently spent all night pushing the rugs, with tiny twitching movements, so far away from under the bed that they are now once more on the parquet, where they can continue making their noise" (215).[20] Like an angry parent, Blumfeld yells, "'Back onto the rugs!" (215). Just as the bachelor in "Unhappiness" laments that the ghost child "has come so late," Blumfeld expresses regret that the balls did not appear when he was younger.[21] The bouncing balls further draw Blumfeld into the world of childhood as he tries to entice the neighbor children to take them off his hands.

If realism is constructed around myths of viability and progeny, these mechanical surrogate children, like the ghost child, signify the unreproductive, queer teleology of modernism.[22] On both a thematic and formal level, Kafka challenges the German tradition of "Bildung" by exposing the futility of its investment in reproductive futurism. At the same time, the hilariously matter-of-fact way that the narrator of "Unhappiness" treats the ghost child attests to the specter of realism in Kafka's work. After escaping his apartment in the final scene of the story, he encounters another tenant in the stairwell who ridicules him for believing in ghosts. As the narrator nonchalantly responds, "You don't think I believe in ghosts, do you? But how can my not believing help me?" [Meinen Sie denn, ich glaube an Gespenster? Was hilft mir aber dieses Nichtglauben?] (36). He challenges the conventions of literary realism through his own pragmatic realism that treats the ghost at face value under the assumption that "a ghost is a ghost" [ein Gespenst ist ein Gespenst]. Like fairy tales or myths, Kafka depends on the conventions of realism to make the extraordinary encounter seem ordinary within the economy of the text. Whether the ghost child is a figment of the narrator's imagination or a "real" character in the story, it embodies the problem that haunts realism and its twentieth-century descendants, namely how to represent subjective, imagined, or dream states.[23] The fact that this exchange takes place in the stairwell, just as both Blumfeld and the narrator of "The

Bachelor's Misfortune" are described in their solitary climb upstairs, suggests that bachelors inhabit a liminal space as they move beyond the familial, domestic sphere—a point of no return. Like ghosts, bachelors are threshold figures with one foot in the living world and another in the realm of the dead.

While conventions of realism often undergird the fantastical, they can also act as a deliberate impediment to Kafka's narrative structure on other occasions. On the way out of his apartment, the narrator trips: "On my way out, I got caught in the leg of a chair" [Beim Hinausgehen verfing ich mich in ein Sesselbein] (35). The intrusion of the corporeal in a story about an immaterial specter recalls the aforementioned reference to the hand that smacks himself in the forehead in "The Bachelor's Misfortune," an aside that seems equally strange and out of place.[24] Although at first glance, this detail heightens the realism of the scene, this bodily gesture paradoxically interrupts the flow of the narrative. Following the narrator, the reader also stumbles. It is here that Kafka's realism becomes entangled [verfangen] with literary modernism, making us aware of the constructedness of the text.

The Missing Father

In Kafka's oeuvre, there is one major exception to the proliferation of childless bachelors that proves the rule, namely the juvenile father. Kafka's unfinished novel *Amerika: The Missing Person* [*Amerika (Der Verschollene)*] famously opens with the following lines: "As he entered New York Harbor on the now slow-moving ship, Karl Rossmann, a seventeen-year-old youth who had been sent to America by his poor parents because a servant girl had seduced him [verführt] and borne a child by him, saw the Statue of Liberty, which he had been observing for some time, as if in a sudden burst of sunlight" (3).[25] In other words, as soon as Karl's illegitimate offspring is born, he is shipped off to America by his "poor," humiliated parents. What is often left out of the discussions about this meandering, enigmatic sentence is the syntactical link it forges between the equivocal promises of American liberty and Karl's escape from the shackles of parenthood in the old world through the conjunction "as."[26] The grammatical

imbalance between the "as" [als] versus the "for some time" [schon längst] represents the colliding forms of temporality in *Amerika* that are given new definition by Edelman's concept of reproductive futurism.[27] Hardly equipped to be a father, Karl is himself more of a child, attested to by the fact that he is alternately depicted by Kafka as sixteen or seventeen years old.[28] As a juvenile father, Karl is the diametric opposite of Blumfeld, the "Elderly Bachelor," yet, both could be characterized as what Stach labels "social monsters" or deviants (47).

Before he even disembarks from the steamer in New York, Karl is improbably reunited with his wealthy uncle Jakob who narrates the scandalous circumstances leading to Karl's departure: "to avoid those childcare support payments and the whole scandal [zur Vermeidung der Alimentenzahlung und des Skandales], his parents shipped off their son, my dear nephew, to America and, as one can see, made such inadequate and indeed irresponsible provision for him that if they boy had been left to fend for himself in this manner… he would no doubt have gone to seed quickly in some alleyway or other in New York Harbor" (26).[29] As Jakob's usage of the word "Junge" [son] suggests, the impressionable Karl has not yet reached the age of maturity. After meddling in Karl's discussions with the stoker [Heizer] and other crew members, Jakob declares that these conditions are "precisely what gives me the right to whisk you away" (31).[30] Although his uncle quickly becomes his guardian, Karl finds himself wondering "whether this man could ever take the place [ersetzen] of the stoker" in the closing pages of the first chapter (34). Karl's own logic sets up a series of paternal substitutions whereby the stoker who has replaced Karl's father is replaced by the uncle. Along similar lines, at the end of the novel, the obese, imperious singer Brunelda becomes a monstrous mother figure who alternates between treating Karl as a child and a servant.

The uncle's account triggers a flashback to Karl's "seduction" by Johanna Brummer, a thirty-five-year-old "servant girl" employed by the Rossmann household (25). Yet, the details of Karl's flashback reveal that what took place would today be called sexual assault: "it felt as if she were part of him; hence perhaps the terrible helplessness that overcame him [eine entsetzliche

Hilfsbedürftigkeit ergriffen]. In tears, after listening to repeated wishes that they should meet again, he reached his bed" (27).[31] The bewildered, terrified boy returns to his bed crying in another expression of immaturity. This sexual violation seems to have further infantilized Karl, who is depicted in a perpetually passive, dependent role in his various familial, personal, or collegial relationships throughout the rest of the novel. In his reading of the traumatic episode, Mark Anderson comments:

> Two aspects are worth noting about this scene. The first is the disgust that intimate heterosexual relations inspire in Karl – a trait we find at various points in Kafka's own diaries and letters.... The tender physical affection he [Karl] feels for the ship's stoker must be seen in contrast with this initial rape-like seduction. The second aspect is Karl's passive, victim role. Indeed, the trauma of the events that set the novel into motion – the violent sexual encounter plus the punitive gesture of the family casting him out – provides the blueprint for his subsequent adventures in America, where a temporary home is provided and then arbitrarily snatched away: a series of seductions and banishments mimicking the initial heterosexual violence and culminating in the sadomasochistic scenes of Brunelda's abuse of her male servants (2017, 229).

Like the elderly bachelor, Karl's physical and social state are mismatched: although he is sexually mature enough to impregnate a woman, he is far from socially or emotionally mature enough to be a husband or father. The "Verschollene" or missing person in question is the deadbeat dad who runs away to America to escape his paternal responsibilities.[32] Somewhere between father and son, child and adult, new world and old world, Karl, like the ghost child of "Unhappiness" is defined by his liminality and spectrality. The titular "Verschollene" might just as well refer to the abandoned child who disappears from the text altogether. This dynamic is exemplified by the contemporary notion of "ghosting," whereby the young father effectively ghosts his own child, who becomes a kind of spectral presence in the novel.

Kafka, who never traveled to America, represents it as a prelapsarian state that not only allows Karl to escape the ramifications of his primordial sin but that also indefinitely extends his youth. In his 1934 essay "Franz Kafka: On the Tenth Anniversary of His Death," Walter Benjamin observes that in Kafka's works, "The fathers punish, but they are at the same time the accusers. The sin of which they accuse their sons seems to be a kind of original sin…. But who is accused of this inherited sin—the sin of having produced an heir—if not the father by the son? Accordingly the son would be the sinner" (114). Not merely guilty by virtue of becoming a father out of wedlock, Karl was already guilty as a son through the "original" sin inherited from his own father. Karl's inherited, old world guilt stands in contrast to Edelman's figure of the child who represents innocence par excellence.

His premature, coerced paternity seems to obviate the possibility of any consensual reproductive future. As psychoanalytic theory has established, traumatic events can often trigger age regression in both children and adults (Lokko & Stern, 2015). Over the course of the novel, Karl becomes more and more youthful. As Karl recounts to Mr. Green and Mr. Pollunder, his uncle's friends, "Uncle Jakob always watched over Karl and how his uncle's love for him was so great that it was more than the love of an uncle" (53).[33] At the Occidental Hotel, Karl is given the job of a liftboy [Liftjunge] (117), a good job for "assiduous youths" (123) and lives in a "boys dormitory" (129) in the hotel. Throughout his employment, he is referred to as "boy," [Junge], "a little fellow" [Kleiner] (104) and even an "angelic youth" [Engelsjunge] (156) by various supervisors and co-workers. Far from the young father he was forced to become in Europe, Karl is transformed into an innocent, pre-sexual child while staying with Brunelda and her two admirers turned servants, Robinson and Delamarche—Karl's former scheming, good-for-nothing acquaintances. After Robinson boasts that he once saw Brunelda naked, Karl blurts out, "Robinson, you're absolutely crazy!" Robinson responds, "You're really still only a child, Rossmann," [Du bist eben noch ein Kind, Rossmann], gesturing toward Karl's apparent sexual naivité (203). With similar condescension, Brunelda always refers to Karl as "the little one" [der

Kleine], sneering, "it's getting the little fellow so excited" [wie es den Kleinen aufregt] (227) or declaring, "just look at the little fellow [den Kleinen], he's staring so hard, he's forgotten where he is" (224). *Amerika: The Missing Person* is not only an anti-bildungsroman in its opposition to the traditional novelistic structures of *Bildung*, but by quite literally prompting the regression of Karl back into a child rather than tracing his development into a mature adult in accordance with the conventions of the genre. While Europe seems to be the provenance of the elderly bachelor, America epitomizes an state of extended childhood and infantile regression.

Not coincidentally, Edelman's *No Future* begins by locating this obsession with the child as an emblem of heteronormative futurity in the American political discourse. He posits:

> As Lauren Berlant argues forcefully at the outset of *The Queen of America Goes to Washington City*, 'a nation made for adult citizens has been replaced by one imagined for fetuses and children.' On every side, our enjoyment of liberty is eclipsed by the lengthening shadow of a Child whose freedom to develop undisturbed by encounters, or even by the threat of potential encounters… terroristically holds us all in check and determines that political discourse conform to the logic of a narrative wherein history unfolds as the future envisioned for a Child who must never grow up (21).

By projecting the Peter Pan syndrome onto the seemingly limitless geographic terrain of America, *The Missing Person* simultaneously contemplates alternatives to the model of family life provided by heteronormative temporality. If Karl's future resides in eschewing the reproductive futurism that threatens to ensnare him in his European past, might the future be potentially queer or at the very least non-heteronormative? According to Edelman, "[f]ar from partaking of this narrative movement toward a viable political future, far from perpetuating the fantasy of meaning's eventual realization, the queer comes to figure the bar to every realization of futurity, the resistance, internal to the social, to every social

structure or form" (4). Like Kafka, Karl seems to find that "heterosexual love and marriage were always a struggle for him" (Anderson 2017, 227). In Kafka's literary imagination contra Edelman, the possibility of alternative social structures only seem to exist in America.

In *Amerika: The Missing Person*, this struggle is staged by the physically coercive, non-consensual contortions of Karl's heterosexual relationships. In a memorable scene during Karl's visit to Pollunder's "country house outside of New York," Karl is wrestled to the ground by Klara, the daughter of Pollunder: "With a body steeled by athletics, she actually seized Karl, who was so bewildered that for a moment he forgot to go limp, and carried him to the window" (59).[34] The German word "actually" [wirklich] injects the semblance of realism into the text that recalls the narrator's gestures in *Contemplation* [*Betrachtung*]. After a tussle with Karl described in great detail, Klara "caught him in a skillful tackle, warded off his legs with footwork from some unfamiliar wrestling technique, and drove him toward the wall while still taking splendidly even breaths. By the wall, however, was a settee, where she deposited Karl; then, bending down only slightly toward him, she said, 'Now see if you can move'" (59-60). Karl's physically subordinate position is reinforced in a later scene in which Pollunder "put an arm around Karl and drew him between his legs. Karl endured this gladly, although he did in general feel too grown up for such treatment" (69).[35] Not only does the strangeness of this gesture draw Karl into a different—although not altogether unsatisfactory—temporality, it fundamentally questions the realism of Kafka's texts.

As these scenes indicate, Karl is perpetually trapped or hemmed in by various characters—a dynamic which is first set into motion by the servant Johanna who locks Karl in her room and "put her arms around his neck and seized it in a stranglehold [würgend umarmte sie seinen Hals]" and then proceeds to sexually violate him (27). Throughout the novel, men but particularly women become the embodied bachelor machines who imprison and torture Karl in various physical or emotional ways.[36] Finally, as Karl tries to escape from Brunelda's nightmarish apartment, Robinson "put his arms around Karl's neck,

hung on to him with his entire weight, and locking [umklammerte] his legs around Karl's, pulled him quickly to the ground" (217-18).[37] In this scene, Robinson literally repeats the gestures of Johanna's assault. Later, when Karl "sought with all his strength to free himself from Brunelda's grip and said: 'Please let me go [Bitte, lassen Sie mich weg],'" she orders imperiously, "He'll stay, all right.' And she pressed Karl even more firmly against the balustrade; he would have had to put up a fight to extricate himself. And even if he succeeded, what would he accomplish. Delamarche still stood on the left; Robinson just lined up on the right; he was truly imprisoned [er war in einer regelrechten Gefangenschaft]" (225).[38] Almost verbatim, Karl's refrain to Brunelda ["lassen Sie mich weg"] echoes his earlier pleas to Klara ["Lassen Sie mich"] as she throws him against the wall in her country house (64). These forms of bodily entrapment and torment in *Amerika: The Missing Person* prefigure Kafka's mechanistic constructions in "In the Penal Colony," written in 1914 and published in 1919.[39] Anderson connects these scenes with Kafka's "interest in non-normative sexuality, rape, bondage, and self-mutilation—sexuality as the site of power relations" (228). For Kafka, sexuality becomes tied to destruction and the death drive rather than heterosexual procreation and reproductive futurism.

These corporeal intrusions highlight the strange, fantastical contortions of Kafka's narrative world that breaks with the conventions of literary realism. In his Kafka essay, Benjamin argues that Kafka's work constitutes "a code of gestures which surely had no definite symbolic meaning for the author from the outset" (120). He concludes, "Each gesture is an event—one might even say a drama—in itself" (121). Taking Benjamin's analysis as a point of departure, Lucia Ruprecht contends, "Kafka's gestural agents do not express their soul. They perform—jokingly and yet strangely mechanically—in the name of a code whose underlying script remains beyond our reach. In Kafka, then, gestures are not authentic or natural; they rarely give direct access to lived experience. Instead, they are 'second-hand' gestures; they function as performed record of the way in which life is not lived but (re-) enacted" (2017, 97).[40] Ruprecht's statement highlights the fact that gestures are not part and parcel of Kafka's realism, but

rather a way to represent or signify the fantastical.[41] They are Kafka's way of gesturing towards another possible world—whether "future" (Edelman) or "community" (Deleuze and Guattari) or "prehistory" (Benjamin)—beyond this one. In keeping with Edelman's reading of the death drive, these gestures insist on "the impossibility of Symbolic closure" granted by heterosexual reproduction (48).[42] Like his childless bachelors, Kafka's gestures contemplate another form of reality that is not bound up with the pressures of family life—one that hovers at the margins, threshold, or in the stairwell between different realms. One hundred years after Kafka's death, this reality—often described as Kafkaesque—is his biggest bequest.

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[1] There is no shortage of criticism of Edelman's *No Future*, which has become a mainstay in queer theory. Feminist theory offers a particularly powerful rejoinder, Anca Parvulescu observes: "When, in 2004, Edelman's queer man said no to reproduction without asking the question of who, pursuant to his refusal, would engage in reproductive labor, Edelman implicitly reassigned it to women. By reiterating his refusal to acknowledge and work through neoliberal complicity, he inevitably participated in what materialist feminism has analyzed under the rubric of 'the oppression of women'" (89). For his own part, Edelman acknowledges that many queer people also sought forms of reproductive futurism by having or adopting children (Parvulescu 89).

[2] See *Franz Kafka Encyclopedia*, "Bachelors" (25). Notable examples include Josef K (*The Trial*), Gregor Samsa (*Metamorphosis*), K (*The Castle*), and Georg Bendemann (*The Judgment*).

[3] According to Mitchell, "Although the order was intentionally obscured in the final printed version of the collection *Ein Landarzt* (one of the many son/stories was even omitted), the table of contents as it finally appeared (and as requested by Kafka in a letter to Kurt Wolff of August 20, 1917), is also much closer to a reverse reading of the column of titles for 'Elf Söhne' than it is to a reading from top to bottom" (192).

[4] Nevertheless, as Stanley Corngold observes, "ejaculation and birth are the chief metaphors of Kafka's early writing" (80). Corngold argues that much of Kafka's ambiguous sexuality was "sublimated in literature" (81).

[5] Edelman states, "The death drive as which the queer figures, then, refuses the calcification of form that is reproductive futurism… the 'death drive' designates the dimension of what horror fiction calls the 'undead,' a strange, immortal, indestructible life that persists beyond death'" (48). He concludes, "The death drive's 'immortality,' then, refers to a persistent negation that offers assurance of nothing at all: neither identity, nor survival, nor any promise of a future. Instead, it insists both on and as the impossibility of Symbolic closure, the absence of any Other to affirm the Symbolic order's truth, and hence the illusory status of meaning as defense against the self-negating substance of jouissance" (48).

[6] See Mark Anderson 1996, 2002, and 2017. Anderson shows that "Kafka's sexual drives, including a physical attraction to men, emerged from and were sustained by a structure of social relations peculiar to fin-de-siècle German culture" (1996, 79).

[7] The term "bachelor machine" was first used by Duchamp around 1913 in a note written in preparation for his piece *The Large Glass* (1915-1923). In his book *The Bachelor Machines* (1954), Carrouges argues that the basic structure of Duchamp's work echoed in other fantastic machines envisioned by writers like Kafka, Raymond Roussel, and Edgar Allan Poe. Carrouges argues that Bachelor Machines embody "the denial of women and even more of procreation as a basic condition for a break with cosmic law […] and still more as a condition of enlightenment, freedom and magical immortality." In a 1975 exhibition entitled "The Bachelor Machines," the Swiss curator Harald Szeemann expanded on Carrouges's argument and displayed Duchamp's *The Large Glass* and fabricated full-scale models of other bachelor machines, including the torture device Kafka described in "In the Penal Colony." See also Rosalind Krauss's *Bachelors* (2000).

[8] Deleuze and Guattari conclude, "the bachelor is a state of desire much larger and more intense than incestuous desire and homosexual desire" (70).

[9] For more on the role of bachelors and masculinity in Kafka's work, see Werner Garstenauer, 2008 and 2010. Garstenauer focuses "on the result of the interaction between different masculinities, such as the maladjusted bachelor [unangepassten Junggesellen] and the adjusted youth or, to generalize, between the 'afamilial' man [afamilialen Mann] and male representatives of a family-oriented society" (2010, 93). He concludes, "Kafka's contribution to the tradition of bachelor portrayal consists in demonstrating that the bachelor, together with his peculiar lifeworld, cannot be integrated into conventional patterns of life management [konventionelle Lebensführungsmuster]. His inherently deficient system can no longer be made fruitful [fruchtbar] for the community in a symbolic way" (102). Translations mine.

[10] Kafka's "Blumfeld, an Elderly Bachelor" [Blumfeld, ein älterer Junggeselle] was first published in the 1936 collection *Beschreibung eines Kampfes*. The story opens with Blumfeld realizing "how unpleasant this utterly lonely life was" [daß dieses vollständig einsame Leben recht lästig sei].

[11] Ultimately, as Stach observes, "The community speaks with the voice of life, but the bachelor has withdrawn from life. Kafka was well aware that the fear of no longer being regarded as a member of the human family was more than the worry of a young man imagining his eventual retirement. An old bachelor could mean not an old man in chronological terms but one who had let the time to start a family slip past. Blumfeld, the 'elderly bachelor' whose climb upstairs to his desolate room Kafka would depict in an extended fragment, has twenty years of office work behind him and figures that he has three more decades of solitude still to come; he is about forty" (47).

[12] "Es scheint so arg, Junggeselle zu bleiben, als alter Mann unter schwerer Wahrung der Würde um Aufnahme zu bitten, wenn man einen Abend mit Menschen verbringen will, krank zu sein und aus dem Winkel seines Bettes wochenlang das leere Zimmer anzusehen" (169). Translation of "The Bachelor's Misfortune" is by Shelley Frisch from *The Decisive Years*.

[13] "So wird es sein, nur daß man auch in Wirklichkeit heute und später selbst dastehen wird, mit einem Körper und einem wirklichen Kopf, also auch einer Stirn, um mit der Hand an sie zu schlagen" (169).

[14] All translations of "Unhappiness" are slightly modified versions of the translations made by Willa and Edwin Muir. The German original states: "Als es schon unerträglich geworden war – einmal gegen Abend im November – und ich über den schmalen Teppich meines Zimmers wie in einer Rennbahn einherlief, durch den Anblick der beleuchteten Gasse erschreckt, wieder wendete, und in der Tiefe des Zimmers, im Grund des Spiegels doch wieder ein neues Ziel bekam, und aufschrie, um nur den Schrei zu hören, dem nichts antwortet und dem auch nichts die Kraft des Schreiens nimmt…(294)."

[15] "**Natürlich**, ein Kind. Aber gar so klein sind Sie nicht. Sie sind schon ganz erwachsen. Wenn Sie ein Mädchen wären, dürften Sie sich nicht so einfach mit mir in einem Zimmer einsperren" (309). Emphasis mine.

[16] According to Nägele, the ghost is thus not the traditional form of the uncanny [das Unheimliche] because it does not evoke feelings of the "horror and chills" [Grauen und Schauer] (22).

[17] "Sie sagen, Ihre **Natur** zwinge Sie, mit mir in dieser Weise zu reden. Wirklich? Ihre **Natur** zwingt Sie? Das ist nett von Ihrer **Natur**. Ihre **Natur** ist meine, und wenn ich mich von **Natur** aus freundlich zu Ihnen verhalte, so dürfen auch Sie nicht anders" (325). Emphasis mine.

[18] According to Garstenauer, "The bachelor's return home in the evening is a Kafka topos that heralds the confrontation with the very personal arrangement of the world, and the events that follow take place almost exclusively in clearly defined interior spaces in which Blumfeld believes he has the exclusive power of order [Ordnungsgewalt]" (96).

[19] As Tahia Reynaga observes, "Particularly confounding is the origin of these inanimate objects; they have not reached Blumfeld through a patriarchal lineage or through the law, as Odradek and the crossbreeds have. The failure here, then, is even more extreme, for even in bachelorhood Blumfeld is forced to 'adopt the cares of a family man,' though with no recourse to the sharing of the burden with the progeny" (73). Reynaga concludes, "Their spherical form is the most rudimentary of all these prehistoric visitors, but their substance, celluloid, is a purely modern, industrial product. So it is these celluloid balls stand beyond the evolutionary spectrum" (74).

[20] "Wie Kinder, die in der Nacht die lästigen Decken von sich schieben, haben die Bälle wahrscheinlich durch kleine, während der ganzen Nacht fortgesetzte Zuckungen die Teppiche so weit unter dem Bett hervorgeschoben, daß sie selbst wieder das freie Parkett unter sich haben und Lärm machen können."

[21] The narrator notes: "Ich bin ja so froh, daß Sie endlich hier sind. Ich sage ‚endlich', weil es schon so spät ist. Es ist mir unbegreiflich, warum Sie so spät gekommen sind."

[22] The modernist preoccupation with infertility is exemplified by texts like T.S. Eliot's "The Wasteland" or Robert Walser's *Der Spaziergang*.

[23] Anderson reads Kafka as a gothic writer "precisely because technology and superstition, knowing and not knowing, mastery and victimhood, are presented not as mutually exclusive categories, but as parts of the same entity. The uncanny paternity of the Gothic lies in this recognition of a divided, self-warring inheritance, at work even when we may not initially recognize it: the Gothic as shadow of the modern" (2002, 384).

[24] This strange corporeal intrusion could be thought of another example of what Nägele describes as the "uncanniness of the body," namely "the strangeness of an unfamiliar body [die Fremdheit eines ungeheuren Körpers], the body as the strangest thing one has and is" (22). Although his article does not focus on realism, Nägele nevertheless concludes, "Thus the child as ghost is closer to Brecht's and Neher's stage characters" who alienate the "pseudo-realism of the known" (28-29).

[25] "Als der siebzehnjährige Karl Roßmann, der von seinen armen Eltern nach Amerika geschickt worden war, weil ihn ein Dienstmädchen verführt und ein Kind von ihm bekommen hatte, in dem schon langsam gewordenen Schiff in den Hafen von New York einfuhr, erblickte er die schon längst beobachtete Statue der Freiheitsgöttin wie in einem plötzlich stärker gewordenen Sonnenlicht."

[26] Most of the discussion about the opening lines of the novel focuses on the fact that the Statue of Liberty is holding a sword rather than a torch. Anderson, for instance, notes that "potent references to Sacher-Masoch can be seen in the opening image of Lady Liberty holding a sword rather than a torch" (2017, 227).

[27] Oliver Simons argues, “Kafka’s if-then sentences are in fact neither logical inferences nor rhetorical figures; they have become mere syntactical forms that Kafka uses to connect words and sentences, beginnings and endings” (167).

[28] Translator Mark Harman notes that Kafka’s editor “Max Brod corrected obvious slips” such as “conflicting indications as to whether Karl Rossmann is sixteen or seventeen” when he published it after Kafka’s death (xxvii).

[29] “da also die Eltern zur Vermeidung der Alimentenzahlung und des Skandales ihren Sohn meinen lieben Neffen nach Amerika haben transportieren lassen, mit unverantwortlich ungenügender Ausrüstung, wie man sieht—wäre der Junge… wohl schon gleich in einem Gässchen im Hafen von Newyork verkommen…. (30).

[30] “aber gerade das gibt mir das Recht Dich eilends von hier fortzufahren” (35).

[31] “…ihm war als sei sie ein Teil seiner selbst und vielleicht aus diesem Grunde hatte ihn eine entsetzliche Hilfsbedürftigkeit ergriffen. Weinend kam er endlich nach vielen Wiedersehenswünschen ihrerseits in sein Bett” (31).

[32] This vision of long-distance fatherhood may have some biographical basis in Kafka’s relationship with his fiancée Felice Bauer. According to Elizabeth Boa, Kafka’s “vision of parenthood purged of biology has a distinctly patriarchal note. Three times over Kafka lays claim to a disembodied fatherhood… A long-distance father, he sits in peace well away from the noise of children: Kafka unabashedly admitted that for all his admiration for Felice’s work, he had no wish to become involved himself” (56). Even as he wrestled with his engagement to Felice, Kafka could only conceive of a marriage that would be “the absolute antithesis of the chain of propagation” (60).

[33] “wie der Onkel über Karl wache und wie die Liebe des Onkels zu Karl zu groß sei, als daß man sie noch die Liebe eines Onkels nennen könne” (57).

[34] Translation altered slightly. “Und wirklich umfasste sie ihn und trug ihn, der verblüfft sich zuerst schwer zu machen vergaß, mit ihrem vom Sport gestählten Körper fast bis zum Fenster” (63-64).

[35] “…legte den Arm um Karl und zog ihn zu sich zwischen seine Beine. Karl duldete das gerne, trotzdem er sich im allgemeinen doch für eine solche Behandlung allzu erwachsen fühlte” (73).

[36] For more on Kafka’s complex representations of women including the New Woman, the obese matriarch, and the lower-class seductress, see Boa’s *Kafka: Gender, Class and Race in the Letters and Fictions* (1996).

[37] “Und er legte Karl die Arme um den Hals, hing such mit seiner ganzen Last an ihn, umklammerte mit den Beinen Karls Beine und zog ihn so im Augenblick auf die Erde nieder” (223).

[38] “… suchte er sich nun mit aller Kraft vom Druck Bruneldas zu befreien und sagte: ‘Bitte, lassen Sie mich weg.’… Und sie drückte Karl noch fester ans Geländer, er hätte mit ihr raufen müssen, um sich von ihr zu befreien. Und wenn ihm das auch gelungen wäre, was hätte er damit erreicht. Links von ihm stand Delamarche, rechts hatte sich nun Robinson aufgestellt, er war in einer regelrechten Gefangenschaft” (229-230).

[39] In June 1914, Kafka wrote “In the Penal Colony,” while working on the “Theater of Oklahoma” chapter in *Amerika: The Missing Person*, a chapter which only exists as a fragment.

[40] Elsewhere, Ruprecht argues that “Benjamin certainly detects gestural crisis. Kafka’s protagonists, Benjamin holds, busy themselves with performing a lost or forgotten gestural script, so that their expressive corporeality remains unreadable. Gestural codes are deprived in the writings of Kafka of a commonly shared system of reference” (2019, 87). Thus, for Benjamin, “Kafka’s gestures thus constitute the ‘cloudy part’ at the heart of the latter’s writings” (2019, 97).

[41] Ruprecht states, “when Benjamin describes Kafka’s work as a ‘code of gestures’, he acknowledges that Kafka was not in the first instance concerned with questions of authentic, healthy or indeed pathological expression” (2017, 94).

[42] Ultimately, Ruprecht concludes, “More often than not… the events that are presumably alluded to in Kafka’s gesturality indeed seem to stem from agents in ‘another world’, whose reasoning is not ours. What makes this author’s gestural negotiations unique, therefore, is the fact that they are reflective of a body which behaves according to codes of conduct whose foundations remain inaccessible” (2017, 98).

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