



Kafka and Learning: Deterritorialized Identity in Education

Edgar Martirosyan

College of Liberal Arts and Sciences, University of Florida

Dr. Eric Kligerman, Department of Languages, Literatures, and Cultures

Abstract

“A Report to an Academy” is a short story by Franz Kafka that presents a first-hand narration of an ape’s humanization through learning to speak and behave as an average early 20th century European. Red Peter, who receives his name after a bald red scar he got on his cheek during a hunting expedition, tells the academy how he learned to leave his apeness behind for a way out of captivity. He then confronts the reader with overt examples of ways in which notions of identity appear and are altered in education and growth. Critical of the colonial context that gives Red Peter his new identity of the oppressed and upon which most current Western education systems are built, this research project aims to identify the challenges that a close and informed reading of “A Report to an Academy” brings into the conventional understandings of identity, thus enabling a fight against the impact of colonialism for all who learn, apes or otherwise.

Keywords: Franz Kafka, A Report to an Academy, learning, education, identity, decolonization

Identity in American Education Systems

Most international students, when arriving in the United States, enroll in campus programs aimed at providing freshmen with a smooth transition to college life. Many programs of this nature ask students to introduce themselves in a manner quite economical, using a variable tool called an identity chart, familiar to those from the U.S., but alien to others. An identity chart may assume a vast range of forms, the most universal of which is but a configuration of two concentric circles that hold at their center the name of whoever is laying down their identity, and in the annulus—the ring enclosed by the two circles—several divisions where the unimaginable takes place: through the light hand of a given survey taker or a campus program participant, the ultimate mystery of a human being, an identity, who a person is, conveniently maps itself onto these ring-sections, under titles like age, race, ethnicity, religion, gender, sexuality, social class, and more. After filling out these graphs with words that constitute their “categorical identities,” everyone reflects on their chart and shares it with others. Every word (e.g., nineteen, POC,

Armenian, non-religious, gay, etc.) must have a distinct meaning as pertaining to the life of the person it represents.

This task of reflecting is more costly than one can imagine. Students are made to think of themselves in terms of externalities of their being in the world—foggy memories of experiences that have befallen them and required reactions. But to use this chart to convey an understanding of a person, their identity, seems an unaccomplishable task despite the tool’s prevalence in American educational spaces. Some try to use it regardless, and some refuse to define themselves by concoctions of remembrances, hazy promises of origins left behind. Are they nothing more than performers of identities? Actors on stage who say, “Yes, and...?” Memories that fail to come alive but make their way smoothly onto pieces of paper, where they remain, as ever, unchanged?

Despite its common use as a signifier of individuality, the word identity is, in origin, tied to the meaning of sameness within the Latin stem of *idem*. By reducing individuals to categories of “self” as supposed to define their being (age, race, gender, etc.), the notion of categorical identity, then, does not necessarily violate the linguistic system that brings the word into being, but does go against the symbol that it represents in convention. It locates the being of a person onto external plains of familiarity, shared and known or recognized by others, but fails to capture the elements of particularity that make up a human essence—who a person is as an individual.

Someone who protests what is externally recognized as his identity is Red Peter, an ape who is the main protagonist of Franz Kafka’s story “A Report to an Academy” (2007). Having mastered the language and the ways of an average European of the early 20th century, Red Peter is invited to give a report to academicians on his life. He speaks about his capture, the circumstances that inspired his decision to leave his apehood behind, and the subsequent process of learning to be like humans. By exposing the text as a critique of the colonial Western concept of categorical identity, the reason for Red Peter’s evolution as a fight against this concept, and his outcome as an undesirable succumb to its prevalence, this paper invites readers to identify Red Peter outside of what an identity chart could possibly ever communicate and to consider the challenges that a close reading of “A Report to an Academy” brings into current understandings of identity as applied to all who learn. The interpretation of the story in the way presented not only allows deeper insight into the epistemological thought of Franz Kafka as a major cultural

figure, but also paves the way for a fight against the impact of colonialism in current education systems.

Red Peter's Capture: "A Report to an Academy" as a Critique of Colonialism

The reader's limited access to the chronology of Red Peter's life begins at his capture during a hunting expedition by the Hagenbeck company: "I come from the Gold Coast" (Kafka, 2007, p. 226). Carl Hagenbeck, a 19th century German merchant, supplied many zoos in Europe, including human zoos, of which he was an early proponent. The Gold Coast, a British colony in the historic Ghana, was home to the largest "slave castles" in West Africa, where enslaved Africans were detained right before they were forced into the Transatlantic slave trade. With these references, Kafka marks historical grounds in his tale of a transformed ape while exposing the thematic lens of the critique of Western colonialism that Paul B. Preciado mentions in his introduction to this story in *Can the Monster Speak?* (2021).

In the complete text *Can the Monster Speak?*, Paul B. Preciado, as a trans man, a non-binary body, addresses himself to a society of psychoanalysts at a conference on "Women in Psychoanalysis." In doing so, Preciado (2021) invokes "A Report to an Academy" by continually interweaving it with the content of his speech and introducing it as follows: "Kafka does not present this process of humanization as a story of emancipation or of liberation from animality, but rather as a critique of colonial European humanism and its anthropological taxonomies" (p. 14). An additional subtlety in our chronologically first point of contact with the character of Red Peter prompts a reading of the story through the mentioned lens. Narrating his capture, Red Peter describes receiving a shot that left a red scar on his cheek and earned him his name. Further, he says, "the second shot hit me below the hip. That was a more serious injury, as a result of which I still walk with a slight limp today" (Kafka, 2007, p. 227). With the evident echo of language, the shared detail of an injured hip, and the common theme of changing identity—symbolized, in this instance, by the changing name of the main character that occurs in both stories—Kafka makes a reference to the biblical story of Jacob from Genesis 32, which ends with the following lines: "The sun rose upon him as he passed Penuel, limping because of his hip. Therefore, to this day the Israelites do not eat the thigh muscle that is on the hip socket, because he [God] struck Jacob on the hip socket at the thigh muscle" (New Revised Standard Version, 1993, Gen. 32:31-32). Bringing the story of a patriarch from the Hebrew Bible, who receives a new, identity-

affirming name from God, in a somewhat contradictory relation with that of Red Peter, who receives his name from his captors, Kafka allows for a reading of this story as a Jewish text, dealing with the Jewish question of the early 20th century, which has much to do with the othering, alienating power of European imperialism.

However, to gain a comprehensive appreciation of “A Report to an Academy” as a critique of colonial European humanism and its anthropological taxonomies, which bear immense consequences to the way any Western subject refers to their identity to this day (i.e., through an identity chart), we must carefully consider Red Peter’s motivations for undergoing a world-shattering transformation, the method by which he accomplishes it, and the resulting identity he constructs.

Red Peter’s Decision to Renounce Identity

Following his capture, Red Peter finds himself caged on a ship, where the prospect of self-transformation appears to him. Describing the intense discomfort of the small cage, Red Peter mentions, “such accommodation for wild animals is thought to be suitable during the initial period, and, after my own experience, I cannot deny its efficacy from the human standpoint” (Kafka, 2007, p. 228). Red Peter recognizes that his confinement is determined by the captors’ perception of himself as a wild animal. The cruelty of his condition does not stem from his own idea of what an ape is, but from the captors’ exercise of power over himself as manifested in their hold of his body as well as his perceived identity, which they define in their own terms and adjudge to certain treatments in the name of efficacy.

Red Peter’s account reveals that his captors are also in control of his past and future: “I had had in my previous life so many ways out, and now I had none at all” (Kafka, 2007, p. 228). In his reading of this passage, Walter Sokel (2002) suggests that by removing him from the life he has known, Red Peter’s captors have made it obsolete: “his experiences as a ‘free ape’ have lost all bearing upon and cannot help guide him in his unprecedented situation” (p. 269). His future, too, is in their hands: “observers have subsequently told me I made unusually little noise, leading them to conclude that either I did not have long to live, or else, if I succeeded in surviving the critical first phase, I might turn out to be exceptionally responsive to training” (Kafka, 2007, p. 228). In the world of Hagenbeck’s men, there are two possible outcomes for a quiet ape in a cage: death or effective training. Red Peter feels differently:

I know that what I felt at the time as an ape I can only describe in human words and so I do, but even if I am unable to reach the precision of the old ape truth, it is broadly correct [...] I had no way out, but I had to find one, for without it I wouldn't be able to live. Pressed against the wall of that crate – it would inevitably be the end for me. (Kafka, 2007, p. 228)

Red Peter shows a powerful acknowledgement of a truth in the experience of a former “free ape” that is inaccessible to the human or the human-like, the humanized. As a confined ape, oblivious to his surroundings and direction, unaware of a second possibility that his future holds, namely training, Red Peter feels the immediate concern for the body and can consider only two outcomes: death or life outside of his cage in whatever form, a “way out.” “But at Hagenbeck’s, the place for apes is against crate walls – well, and so I quite simply ceased being an ape” (Kafka, 2007, p. 228).

Red Peter’s Assimilation

When discussing his plan for a “way out,” his project of assimilation, Red Peter mentions, “now there was nothing intrinsically attractive to me about these people” (Kafka, 2007, p. 231). So, why does he choose to integrate into their society, become like his oppressors, instead of resisting their oppressive force?

Perhaps Hagenbeck’s men are not appealing—Red Peter continually mentions their jests, which he describes as “crude”—but they possess something much desirable. In his observations of the life around him, Red Peter notes, “I saw these people going back and forth, the same faces, the same movements; often I had the sense it was all just one man. So he or they could walk in peace” (Kafka, 2007, p. 231). Not only are his captors able to freely move around the ship, but they also have, in their uniformity as men, access to a peaceful life. Looking at the text from a sociohistorical perspective, Sokel (2002) succinctly assesses Kafka’s fabrication of such disparity:

“A Report” demonstrates the extreme two-sidedness that modern Western humanity presented to its victims in the rest of the world. Hated and resented as the source of unspeakable misery, dislocation, deracination, and heartbreak, on one side, it showed, on the other, the beacon of individual rights, equal security from aggression, and limitless opportunity for the future of an individual capable of gaining admission into it. (p. 280)

Besides the appeal of a promise of security, the process of assimilation presents another factor that inspires Red Peter's project: "It was so easy to copy them" (Kafka, 2007, p. 231). This is Kafka's ingenious way of satirizing the colonial society of early 20th century Europe. To successfully assimilate, all that Red Peter needs to learn is to handshake, spit, smoke a pipe, and drink rum. To the reader, the question of possible resistance may still seem relevant. Could Red Peter assume a form of manhood that did not imply assimilation into the crude society of the ship? To answer this question, consider his perception of Hagenbeck's men as one and his discussion of a "way out" as compared to "freedom on all sides."

In the singular archetype of human that Red Peter knows from his time in cage, he observes no capacity for individual differences. In view of no possibility for manhood that is different from his captors' and that would allow him admission into their society, his dominating concern for the body declares a necessity to assimilate. In retrospect, Red Peter stresses that he wished for a way out, not freedom: "I don't mean the great feeling of freedom on all sides. As an ape I may have known such a feeling, and I have met people who yearn to have it. As for me, I demanded freedom neither then nor now" (Kafka, 2007, p. 229). In his understanding of the term, freedom belongs to apehood, to the "old ape truth" of which he has set himself to riddance. Thus, in his conscious pursuit of a "way out" through "that [human] yoke," Red Peter recognizes that he has made an exchange of cages, shifting from the threatened to a compatriot of the threateners. Red Peter challenges what is externally recognized as his identity, but he cannot challenge his condition of a captive. Whatever he presents as his new identity must stand the judgement of his captors, which will ultimately determine his faith. Thus, the identity Red Peter chooses to develop—a choice that already introduces certain fluidity and challenges conventional understandings of identity as a static concoction of categories—must nevertheless fit into the world of his captors and not go beyond the forms of life they recognize. In other words, he exchanges "the identity chart" that presents him as a wild animal with one that can earn him better treatment and secure the continued life of his body within his captors' framework.

Red Peter Now

Red Peter's initial use of "freedom" in terms of its spatiality, "freedom on all sides," allows for the inference that his original use of the term, in accord with his "old ape truth," referred to his ability to interact with his physical surroundings autonomously and indefinitely. Such

conception explains his early non-desire for freedom in the face of his demanding concern for the body. In fact, for an ape onboard a ship, the attempt to physically access its surroundings would mean certain death: “Had I been a devotee of the just-described freedom, I should certainly have thrown myself upon the ocean wave as my way out rather than the unappealing prospect of these people” (Kafka, 2007, p. 231). The former “free ape” with no moral appreciation of freedom in the modern understanding of the term, almost instinctually prefers assimilation.

Having mastered human language by the time of his report, however, he certainly recognizes the moral significance of freedom as a desirable notion. He claims human freedom is “among the most exalted of feelings,” so why, despite acknowledging his own lack of freedom, does he not recognize his position as one of the oppressed (Kafka, 2007, p. 229)? Why does he not strive for freedom himself? Before answering this question, one must satisfy another it may raise: is Red Peter, the celebrity, the lector, truly oppressed?

The answer is yes. From the violent colonial interruption of the course of his life, and thus of his own identity and autonomy over it, from his displacement into a world where he may find security only as the object of the other’s will, an entertainer, Red Peter is oppressed. When he gratefully steps on a stage as a carrier of a deterritorialized identity to give a report to academicians of his captors’ society, his oppressors, and uses their language—which bears domineering, authoritarian power over his own self—to communicate clear sense without challenging that power or his surrender to it, Red Peter is oppressed. He is not a Kafka, who rises before the world as a political representative of a deterritorialized identity himself to redefine, thus deterritorialize further the use of the language of his people—“the German language in Prague as it is and in its very poverty” (Deleuze & Guatarri, 1986, p. 16)—in the manner of constructing an intensive, minor literature, marking the historical presence of an oppressed people in an inventive, sovereign fashion, “opposing the oppressed quality of this language to its oppressive quality” (Deleuze & Guatarri, 1986, p. 27). Red Peter is a proud assimilationist who has renounced his freedom in bad faith.

Blinded by the public’s praise, Red Peter fails to translate his lack of freedom into an understanding of his sociopolitical position as oppressed. In his book of critical pedagogy, Paulo Freire provides an appropriate explanation for such orientation:

The oppressed, at a certain moment of their existential experience, adopt an attitude of “adhesion” to the oppressor. Under these circumstances they cannot “consider” him sufficiently clearly to objectivize him — to discover him “outside” themselves. This does not necessarily mean that the oppressed are unaware that they are downtrodden. But their perception of themselves as oppressed is impaired by their submersion in the reality of oppression. (Freire, 2014, p. 3)

So, his acculturation into the European reality with its unbalanced networks of power has proven fruitful to Red Peter. He may have developed a full conceptualization of freedom, but prefers to conveniently doom it a “self-deception among people,” who have caged him in an identity within their purview and over which they continue to wield power (Kafka, 2007, p. 229). Much like a modern participant in Western education, who accepts categorical identity as a true representation of their self, Red Peter rejects the possibility of freedom because his primal care for the body is secured and because contriving a form for it would demand, unlike assimilation, difficult inventiveness.

Red Peter and Us: Discussion of Relevance

The relevance of Kafka’s ape from the Gold Coast to anyone involved in Western(ized) education systems today may well be explained in Darwinist terms. In his transformation of a disrupted, deterritorialized identity into an assimilated, conforming member of the oppressive society of its masters, Red Peter becomes the mirror of Western imperialism, from which we evolve. He enters the cage of the “human yoke” of colonial Europe, where the modern subject is born within its depths, or which, conversely befalls them like a trap at their first, nearly inevitable contact with the Western world. It appears in a variety of forms, one of which should be especially familiar to participants of Western(ized) education as the two concentric circles of an identity chart.

Despite their diversity, the non-Western learners’s condition as modern subjects of Western influence forces them into inherently deterritorializing interactions with Western power. These manifold individuals are reduced to their politically problematized, othered and minoritized, racialized, gendered, sexed historical contacts with their ancestral Red Peters (i.e., the categories of their identities), who have depended on the false generosity of their own oppressors for “advice, applause and orchestra music,” to ensure their own as well as the species’ survival

(Kafka, 2007, p. 225). Individuals' voluntary affirmations of these essentialist reductions, however, their internalized succumb to these external identifiers, have once and again proved to be dangerous. When, meeting the gaze of the empirical Western eye, individuals are immediately granted access to sociocultural spaces of belonging that are not of their own making, they are forcibly subjected to the assessment of a categorical identity. They are put, like Red Peter, into an in-between state where their past identity becomes obsolete, and the newly assigned one, defined by the dominant authority is inauthentic and alienating. Such imposed deterritorialization of identity begets a well-known oppressor-oppressed dichotomy, wherein the former assumes control of the latter's being due to their self-declared authoritarian knowledge of them. As the designer of the other's oppressive cage, their categorical identity, the oppressor claims absolute knowledge of, and thus power over it. So, it is interesting that this notion of categorical identity must infiltrate educational spaces.

In his discussion of oppressive education, Paulo Freire describes a system that he calls the "banking" concept of education. In this, "the students are the depositories, and the teacher is the depositor," who fills them with knowledge that is "a gift bestowed by those who consider themselves knowledgeable upon those whom they consider to know nothing" (Freire, 2014, p. 21). The colonization of the oppressed mind follows the same principle of assuming non-knowledge on the side of the oppressed, which becomes a further justification to their removed autonomy, even when it comes to matters of establishing themselves, their own identities. So, an educational system in which an assigned categorical identity, serving as the colonizer's tool, prevails, speaks to the principle Freire describes as follows: "the interests of the oppressors lie in 'changing the consciousness of the oppressed, not the situation which oppresses them;' for the more the oppressed can be led to adapt to that situation, the more easily they can be dominated" (2014, p. 24). By enforcing thinking of themselves through the lens of their categorical identities, the modern subjects of Western colonial influence have themselves progressed towards adapting to the situation of oppression. So, how does one challenge such adaptation?

Freire poses a question, "but if the implementation of a liberating education requires political power and the oppressed have none, how then is it possible to carry out the pedagogy of the oppressed prior to the revolution?" (2014, p. 8) His response follows, "one aspect of the reply is to be found in the distinction between systematic education, which can only be changed by political power, and educational projects, which should be carried out with the oppressed in the

process of organizing them” (Freire, 2014, p. 8). Unable to exercise political power over systematic education,

The educated individual [like Red Peter himself] is the adapted person, because she or he is a better “fit” for the world. Translated into practice, this concept is well suited to the purposes of the oppressors, whose tranquility rests on how well people fit the world the oppressors have created, and how little they question it. (Freire, 2014, p. 24)

Hence, a challenge to the internalization of the oppressive system to a new system that benefits those oppressed will mean assuming control of their own education through educational projects, as this paper does engaging with Kafka’s epistemological thought. Liberating education, thus, will aim at promoting more personal, meaningful ways for individuals to define themselves outside of the pre-established formula, the Western model of identity, with its external descriptors of how they appear in the world or perform the role of their being as determined by the social conventions, the norms, the law of the Western culture, whose structure is undeniably imbued with its colonial legacy.

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