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<i>ADDITIONAL NOTES</i>	

Chapter 9

Disidentifying with Futurity

The Unbecoming Child and its Discontents

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The child as the youngest member of its social and political community has become invested with a potentiality that marks it as the locus of a set of hopes and fears about the future. Embedded within a discourse of national belonging and becoming, the child represents a figure of futurity through which the majoritarian sphere simultaneously props up and disciplines its minor subjects. As a figure of potentiality thus relegated to the future, the child asks us to engage with the workings of power and representation inherent to the construction of childhood: What ends does a discourse on the child as *potential* citizen serve, and how does this discourse affect the national belonging as well as the present and envisioned future of actual children? To what extent does the child's construction as ante-political—as a subject whose entrance into the political realm is delayed until it leaves the realm of childhood—simultaneously represent the condition for and yet a threat to the continued formation and naturalization of the normative discourses foundational to the nation-state?

As a figure of futurity, this chapter suggests, the child is haunted by the presence of those “unbecoming” children who are denied recognition in both the present and the future. Excluded from the vision of the national future, the unbecoming child does not represent the ideal adult citizen in potential form, nor is it groomed to carry the nation forward; rather, this child's presence unveils the normative framework that delimits not only *how* but also *if* a child gets invited into the national fold and to become a member of its political community. I use “unbecoming” here to refer to this child's exclusion from the process of becoming part of the body politic, and furthermore as a term that, as Sara Ahmed observes, “can have a range of senses and all of them matter to create a sensibility: something is unbecoming when it is not flattering, or when it does not fit.”¹ Hence the unbecoming child is a special sort of misfit: failing

to fit the parameters of childhood and lacking the potentiality normative children are invested with, it highlights the exclusions inherent to constructions of childhood and the discourse of becoming on which such constructions rest.

THE CHILD AS FIGURE OF FUTURITY

In the contemporary nation-state that grants citizenship first and foremost on the basis of nativity, the child born within the national borders serves as the quintessential member of the citizenry. Yet despite this value of birth as a marker of nationality, the child is relegated to a space that effectively places it within a deferral, with full national membership granted only once the child has reached the age of maturity and the enfranchisement it entails: for the child to enjoy the political rights associated with citizenship, it must first grow out of and leave childhood behind. Prior to becoming a member of the national community, the child is socialized as a *homo nationalis*, primarily through the family and the education system, so as to obtain the prerequisites for full citizenship in the nation-state. Thus occupying the space of private rather than public life, the child does not have political agency or self-determination, nor can it represent or speak for itself. Rather than rights, the child enjoys protections, based on its presumed and actual vulnerability, and the moment in which the child is granted a political voice upon entering the age of majority is the time when it steps into adulthood.

Giorgio Agamben's analysis of citizenship and human rights helps to shed further light on the peculiar, temporary status of the child as citizen excluded from political life, even as the figure of the child effectively calls for a new modality of the biopolitical fracture that Agamben identifies. In *Means Without End*, he shows that rights that are granted based on nativity and citizenship rather than by virtue of being human are intrinsically tied up with the nation-state system in which "so-called sacred and inalienable human rights are revealed to be without any protection precisely when it is no longer possible to conceive of them as rights of the citizens of a state."² In exploring the contradictions inherent to this system of rights, Agamben employs the figure of the refugee who, despite having lost all rights, is nonetheless granted particular rights within the nation-state where she seeks *refugium* due to the specific legal definition of the refugee's status. The refugee thus exists in a temporary condition of "quasi-citizenship," typically associated with rights such as residency and the possibility of employment, while awaiting naturalization or repatriation. As such, the figure of the refugee, and particularly of the stateless refugee, points toward the biopolitical fracture in the nation-state, a fracture that is also, I argue, exposed by the figure of the child, though with different implications.

Drawing on Aristotle's distinction between the private and the public, or natural life and political life, as the foundation of Western politics, Agamben posits that the concept of the *people* illustrates the ambiguity inherent to this fracture since we speak, "on the one hand, [of] the *People* as a whole and as an integral body politic and, on the other hand, [of] the *people* as a subset and as fragmentary multiplicity of needy and excluded bodies."³ He goes on to explain that this division pervades Western politics as "naked life (*people*) and political existence (*People*), exclusion and inclusion, *zoē* and *bios*. *The concept of people always already contains within itself the fundamental biopolitical fracture.*"⁴ The nation-state is thus based on internal exclusion, and the refugee highlights and hence problematizes that exclusion, since she is granted specific rights that are usually bound up with citizenship in a nation-state in which she does not, however, belong to the *People*. Although citizenship and access to rights are intimately bound up with nativity, as Agamben emphasizes and critiques, and the child should thus have access to these rights, the child presents a further challenge to the nation-state's internal exclusions despite its legal status as citizen: though the child's status differs, of course, from that of the refugee, the child, too, effectively occupies a temporary space of quasi-citizenship and does not enjoy the same rights as the adult citizen, the citizen who is "of age."

The child is, in fact, the occupant *par excellence* of the biopolitical fracture, and the child/adult binary represents an additional modality of this fracture that further underlines Agamben's critique of the access to rights in the modern nation-state system. Even as nativity serves as the guiding principle for the assignment of citizenship, the child finds itself in a temporal in-between space, at the precarious threshold between the *people* and the *People*, as the child does not fit within either category. Holding the place of (or serving as a placeholder for) the citizen but not the political rights associated with that status, children lack the right to self-determination and free movement, and they are legally prevented from voting, working, entering into contracts, owning property, and engaging in sexual acts. The rights the child does enjoy are social rather than political, founded on a notion of needs-based protectionism that treats the child as a potentiality, a future adult, and thus not as an end but as a means to the end of becoming an adult citizen with full rights. Yet unlike the *people's* relegation to what Agamben has termed naked, or bare, life, the child's marginalization and treatment as only quasi-citizen is a temporary condition—the condition of childhood—as the child is expected to become literate in national codes and norms as it is growing into a full, adult citizen who is in turn expected to transmit this literacy to the next generation of children.

Due to the importance placed on literacy in normativity as a condition for full national citizenship, children cannot simply *be* children, but they enter a

process, beginning at birth, of *becoming* adults, with adulthood signifying not a biological life-stage as much as a symbolic accomplishment. Neil Postman has traced the development of literacy in the West, showing how it has helped to shape the modern nation-state model while enforcing a clear distinction between the spheres of childhood and adulthood. Drawing on Rousseau, who has called reading “the scourge of childhood, for books teach us to talk about things we know nothing about,” Postman argues that “[r]eading is the scourge of childhood because, in a sense, it creates adulthood.”⁵ The child now has to earn adulthood by learning how to read and to write the national codes and norms, and education has become compulsory precisely for the purpose of teaching the child this literacy that is required for achieving full adult citizenship. While print culture has ultimately resulted in written knowledge becoming more accessible to adults, it has created a different form of knowledge monopoly as children have come to be subjected more and more to the supervision of teachers and parents and what these authorities deem suitable, age-appropriate reading material. Such texts are chosen based not only on the child’s reading level but also on their perceived ability to foster a sense of national literacy in the young reader. Print turned the vernacular into a “fixed and visualizable language” that “played an enormous role in the development of nationalism,”⁶ and the texts made available to the child continue to be selected based on their potential for helping the readers become literate adult citizens of a given nation-state.

If childhood is a time characterized by illiteracy, or the unfamiliarity with national and cultural codes, then the child’s agency is posited as a future possibility only; the child must be interpellated by and enter the normative discourses of its nation before it can effectively speak and be heard. As Claudia Castañeda puts it, the child is conceptualized “as a potentiality rather than an actuality, a becoming rather than a being,” and it “is by definition not yet that which it alone has the capacity to become.”⁷ But not all children are invited to participate in this process of becoming members of the body politic, nor do those who receive an invitation necessarily follow the process to its intended completion. “Should a given child either fail to possess or to realize its potential (as in the notion of ‘stunted growth’), he or she remains a flawed child and an incomplete adult,” Castañeda writes, and she further reminds us that “the form that the child’s potentiality takes is consistently framed as a normative one, in relation to which failure is always possible.”⁸ The child that “fail[s] to possess . . . its potential” is unbecoming, perceived as lacking the prerequisites for future membership in the body politic, and hence not issued an invitation to become a part of this body.

The unbecoming child thus stands in stark contrast to the child as the embodiment of the (national) future. The latter is a figure of illiteracy and potentiality, positioned at the cradle of the nation, and has become an icon

of futurity. In *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive*, Lee Edelman discusses how “we are no more able to conceive of a politics without a fantasy of the future than we are able to conceive of a future without the figure of the Child. That figural Child alone embodies the citizen as an ideal, entitled to claim full rights to its future share in the nation’s good.”⁹ Edelman posits the figure of the Child as “the obligatory token of futurity,” which dominates the political sphere that operates under the terms of a reproductive futurism and perpetuates the construction of childhood as a space of innocence in need of protection.¹⁰ Characterized by sentimental notions of purity, this Child is an empty vessel onto which an idealized vision of the future is projected and which faces the constant danger of becoming tainted by encounters with non-normative signs, objects, and bodies. A child’s “freedom to develop undisturbed by encounters . . . with an ‘otherness’ of which its parents, its church, or the state do not approve,” Edelman argues, delimits not only what is deemed appropriate for and hence accessible to children, but also the rights and the liberty of adults who are placed in the service of that Child on whose behalf political discourse becomes framed.¹¹ This political discourse, defined by reproductive futurism and the privileging of heteronormativity, detracts from the needs and struggles of the nation’s present, adult citizens, as Lauren Berlant has observed as well: “the nation’s value is figured not on behalf of an actually existing and laboring adult, but of a future American, both incipient and pre-historical: especially invested with this hope are the American fetus and the American child.”¹² The Child as a figure of futurity hence serves as an alibi and justification for practices in the present that curtail the rights of adult citizens—and, as I intend to show, those of actual children as well.

Paradoxically, this Child on whose behalf the future is envisioned, a vision that shapes the present conditions for adults and children alike, is always only a potential, a not-yet citizen who can neither act nor speak politically. It is important to distinguish the Child as a symbol, a national icon, and a figure of futurity from the actual, living child who may or may not have a future but certainly exists in the present. Berlant reminds us that

[s]ometimes, when the little girl, the child, or youth [are] invoked in discussions of pornography, obscenity, or the administration of morality in U.S. mass culture, actually endangered living beings are being imagined. Frequently, however, we should understand that these disturbing figures are fetishes, effigies that condense, displace, and stand in for arguments about who ‘the people’ are.¹³

As a construction that bears nothing more than an imagined resemblance to the heterogeneous group of people captured by the term “children,” the figure of the Child can speak only in the figurative, not the literal sense; the words put in this national icon’s mouth are not the unadulterated

words of real children. Yet this figure is invested with the power of worlding since, as Castañeda observes, a “figuration of the child not only condenses particular material-semiotic practices, but also brings a particular version of the world into being.”¹⁴ Far from empowering children, the figure of the Child shapes a world that actually harms the child who lacks the capital “C” and who cannot keep the promise of the future the Child has made.

While the future is thus imagined and protected for the Child, not all children are included in this vision of futurity, nor do all children get to survive and escape from the childhood that has been imposed on them. The figure of the Child is implicitly white and orientated towards heterosexual procreation, as José Esteban Muñoz puts it so succinctly: “The future is only the stuff of some kids. Racialized kids, queer kids, are not the sovereign princes of futurity.”¹⁵ Responding directly to Edelman’s assertion that the future rests on the shoulders of the Child and is figured on its behalf, Muñoz critiques this monolithic framing of the Child that goes hand in hand with the framing of the future as a normative white affair from which queer youths and children of color are excluded.¹⁶ Rather than place the present of both children and adults in the service of the future symbolized by the Child, Muñoz asks us to think of the present and the future not as a “rigid binary” and to imagine a futurity that is not bound up in the “fantasy of heterosexual reproduction” but that allows non-normative children actually to grow up.¹⁷ Whereas the Child as a figure of futurity is sheltered from the present-day violence of class, race, gender, sexuality, capitalism, and neoliberalism, real children and their presents as well as futures do not enjoy this shelter, even as a symbolic war is waged presumably on their behalf and to protect their innocence. The figure of the Child, in other words, does not fit the experiences of real children who, measured against this icon, become misfits as they try to negotiate their place and carve out spaces that fit better. One such misfit is the unbecoming child, which is not called upon to participate in reproductive futurism but excluded from a potential future as a member of the body politic that Agamben calls the *People*.

Despite the prominence of the Child in the national discourse on futurity, then, the lives of children do not matter in the way this discourse has us believe, and they certainly do not matter equally. Rather, the value assigned to the lives of actual children and their potential futures is measured based on their conformity to and resemblance of the symbolic Child. In an untitled poem written for the Black Words Matter project of the non-profit organization Writers in Baltimore Schools, eleventh-grader Jaida Griffin laments the rendering silent and invisible of black youth. The last few lines of her poem especially highlight the struggles faced by those children whose presence cannot be reconciled with the discourse surrounding the Child:

It's great to see a woman beating her child. A child throws rocks at stores on his block because he is not here today. There is no one listening to him read poetry or spit bars about who he is and what we are going through.

It is great to see a woman beating her child. She will do their job for them. Silence him. It's not assault if it's for a good cause.

From behind the camera they will tell you that blue lives matter, and new lives matter, but tell me; does mine?¹⁸

A literary representation of the lived experiences of some racialized children within a specific geographical and national context, Griffin's poem underscores the exclusions by which the figure of the Child operates. The child depicted by Griffin derives no benefit from the cultural and political capital of the Child and is presumed to be not innocent or pure but threatening to the social order, presenting a public danger that must be subdued and controlled. This child in the poem marks a troublesome presence that has no place in either the present or the future: "he is not here today" as his presence is undermined by the absence of an ear that will listen and thus remains unacknowledged, preparing him for a future of silence in which he, too, cannot speak. The poem's final line directly juxtaposes the value assigned to the Child as futurity—"new lives matter"—with the value assigned to the life of the speaker, who demands recognition when asking for his or her life to matter even as this concluding line implicitly responds to that question with a resounding "no"—only some new lives matter. The child in this poem does not fit the normative parameters delineated by the figure of the Child and is not the innocent and pure empty vessel to be socialized into an adult citizen: whereas the Child loudly proclaims its future with the words it is made to speak, this other, unbecoming child is consigned to a place of silence that renders as unspeakable both its present and future.

THE CHILD THAT DOES NOT FIT

The unbecoming child, which fails to inhabit the normativity of childhood, haunts the figure of the Child as that which remains excluded and left behind, a persistent reminder of those misfit children that cannot comfortably gather under the sign of the iconic Child. This failure to fit does not render the unbecoming child inconsequential as much as it casts it outside the cycle of reproduction: inhabiting childhood differently, pushing at the borders of a national literacy in normativity, this child can be a productive—rather than reproductive—force. That the failure to reproduce can produce different effects is, perhaps, particularly pronounced in the case of the child that does

not inhabit the category of heterosexuality and thus refuses the gift of the future. As Ahmed observes, “Heterosexuality becomes a social as well as familial inheritance through the endless requirement that the child repay the debt of life with its life. The child who refuses the gift thus becomes seen as a bad debt.”¹⁹ Hence, “[t]he queer child can only, in this wish for the straight line, be read as the source of injury: a sign of the failure to repay the debt of life by becoming straight.”²⁰ Deviating from the straight line means that the queer child cannot fit comfortably, and this discomfort resonates in the world around it: when you fail to inhabit categories, “when you fidget and move around, then what is in the background becomes in front of you, as a world that is gathered in a specific way. Discomfort, in other words, allows things to move.”²¹ That the queer child fails to fit exposes the tacit requirement that children, despite the dominant narrative about their sexual innocence and asexuality, be heterosexual and cis-gendered since “all children are first presumed straight.”²² The queer child furthermore confuses and muddies the often violently drawn borders between the categories of the “degenerate queer” and the “innocent child,” spheres that are typically presented as mutually exclusive. Here, the queer and the unbecoming child exist in close proximity, their spheres touching and converging, as both are excluded from the future promised by the Child.

Edelman’s analysis of the Child posits this figure of futurity as inherently opposed to the figure of the queer, which in refusing the mandate of collective reproduction threatens the continuation of any given social order. Queerness, he asserts, “names the side of those *not* ‘fighting for the children,’ the side outside the consensus by which all politics confirms the absolute value of reproductive futurism.”²³ The unbecoming child, however, is also “not fighting for the children”—at least not in the sense of fighting for the future of Edelman’s Child—nor is it subsumed within the category of the Child. The unbecoming child, rather, exposes the exclusion and violence perpetrated in the name of the Child precisely by making its own presence felt, and by thus highlighting that the future is envisioned on behalf only of those children who can, or who are made to, fit seamlessly. As such, the unbecoming child is, perhaps, inherently queer, if we take “queer” to refer not only to inhabiting specific sexual and gender identities that have been marginalized within heteronormativity but also, and more broadly, to inhabiting a space of resistance to the normal. Such an understanding of queer as that which troubles, disturbs, and haunts normativity accounts for the preference of “queer,” as a more flexible term, over “gay” in much of queer theory: Michael Warner, for instance, has argued that “‘queer’ gets a critical edge by defining itself against the normal rather than the heterosexual,” thus “pointing out a wide field of normalization, rather than simple intolerance, as the site of violence,”²⁴ and Ahmed reminds us that “if we return to the root of the word ‘queer’ (from the

Greek for cross, oblique, adverse) we can see that the word itself ‘twists,’ with a twist that allows us to move between sexual and social registers, without flattening them or reducing them to a single line.”²⁵ The unbecoming child is, then, closely aligned with the queer, as it troubles the sign of the Child from which it is excluded, exposing childhood as an imposed, even violent, sphere that leads to full adult citizenship only for those children who (can) survive their childhood by becoming literate in normativity and finding a place to fit.

The existence of this unbecoming child points to the ambivalences and anxieties that underlie contemporary constructions of childhood, highlighting the potential threat that the child can pose to normativity and the foundations of the nation. The Child as figure of futurity has significant cultural and political capital, as Edelman and Berlant have shown, and the discourse surrounding this Child is indeed dominant in and foundational to the nation-state, but the presence of the unbecoming child, despite the space of silence to which it is relegated, has nonetheless been felt and continues to matter. The ambivalence of the notion that “[t]he [c]hild can be the phantasm that ensures the status quo, or the [c]hild can be the nit that undoes it”²⁶ characterizes the contemporary Western construction of and relation to childhood, and it underscores the need for the figure of the Child to help ensure the continued reproduction of a particular national future while defusing the threat to normativity that the unbecoming child represents. The Child, in other words, serves to maintain and ensure the reproduction of the status quo not only by subjugating the present-tense rights of adults to a vision of the future, but also by disciplining the unbecoming child and making sure it stays in line and invisible. The unbecoming child’s failure to conform and to embody the potentiality of childhood results in its exclusion from the future, a future that offers it no place: this is the child that does not grow up, that exists in the shadowy margins, that has no political voice waiting for it at the threshold to adulthood.

DISIDENTIFYING WITH THE FUTURE

It is perhaps not surprising that children’s literature has been instrumental in propagating the figure of the Child while imposing childhood on its young readers. After all, as Maria Nikolajeva puts it, “nowhere else are power structures as visible as in children’s literature, the refined instrument used for centuries to educate, socialize and oppress a particular social group. In this respect, children’s literature is a unique art and communication form, deliberately created by those in power for the powerless.”²⁷ Yet despite this function of children’s literature as a socializing genre, scholars and writers of texts for children continue to be troubled by an understanding of the child reader as inherently “divided, both teachable and incorrigible, savage

and innocent—eternally ambivalent,²⁸ The notion of an “incorrigible” and “savage” child—a description that echoes the unbecoming child—suggests that the child is not always a willing reader whom the text can shape. The child may also disidentify with the text, a process that, as Muñoz explains, allows “identities-in-difference [to] emerge from a failed interpellation within the dominant public sphere” and that works on ideological constructions in order to transform their logic and to point towards the possibility of identities that oppose dominant subjectivities.²⁹

Muñoz draws on both Louis Althusser’s analysis of ideology and Stuart Hall’s identification of the encoding/decoding process to argue that disidentification reworks the meaning encoded in texts, “expos[ing] the encoded message’s universalizing and exclusionary machinations” while at the same time empowering identifications that are not foreseen by the ideologies the given text is steeped within.³⁰ Disidentification thus provides a strategy of resistance as this practice recycles and restructures the dominant ideology that is at work in cultural texts in order to represent an identity-in-difference. Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick emphasizes the importance of such a reading “against the grain” as a survival strategy for queer children in particular:

I think that for many of us in childhood the ability to attach intently to a few cultural objects, objects of high or popular culture or both, objects whose meaning seemed mysterious, excessive, or oblique in relation to the codes most readily available to us, became a prime resource for survival. We needed for there to be sites where the meanings didn’t line up tidily with each other.³¹

Disidentification thus allows the minority subject to invest with new, or different, meaning the majoritarian signs and codes through which national belonging and normative citizenship are conferred.

R. Zamora Linmark’s *Rolling the R’s*, which Sedgwick has called a “novel created out of the necessities of queer self-formation in an atmosphere of violence and dispossession,”³² follows a group of fifth-grade children who, failing to inhabit the sign of the Child, engage in the practice of disidentification as they negotiate how and where they fit. These predominantly Filipino children are growing up poor in 1970s Kalihi on the island of O’ahu, Hawai’i, speak pidgin rather than hegemonic English, and are experimenting with and figuring out their gender and sexual identities. Far from representing the Child as futurity, these main characters—queer Edgar Ramirez and pregnant Katherine Cruz especially—are depicted as unbecoming children, those that incur violence and oppression in an effort to diminish and silence the threat they pose to the iconic Child. As the report cards that teachers sent to parents in the novel make clear, Edgar and Katherine represent not the potential future citizen but rather an obstacle to their classmates’ possible futures: “[W]ill

you . . . discourage him from associating with Edgar Ramirez and Katherine Cruz?" the teachers ask of Vicente's parents, convinced "that they are the primary cause of Vicente's inattentiveness."³³ The comments on Florante's report similarly include a note "that the other students Florante does associate with are Katherine Cruz and Edgar Ramirez. Will you discourage him from further associations with these two? Their use of pidgin endangers Florante's appreciation and skillful usage of the English language."³⁴ The school system, designed to impart literacy in normativity (and hence in hegemonic English) in the service of the nation's future, casts aside Edgar and Katherine in an effort to protect the Child as potential national citizen from the disruptions that these unbecoming children represent.

The occupant par excellence of the sign of the Child in Linmark's text is Stephen Bean, depicted in stark contrast to Edgar, Katherine, and the other queer, racialized, indigenous, and poor child characters. Stephen, an only child whose parents are rich, heterosexual, and married, insists that he is more American than the other children who come from immigrant families, not least because of the white color of his skin. Yet when his classmates call him *haole*, a Hawaiian word for foreigner that in contemporary pidgin usage commonly refers to white people, he quickly and angrily corrects them, positing the hegemonic English term as superior to the one used in Hawaiian Creole English: "I'm not haole, I'm Caucasian."³⁵ When this declaration is met with ridicule by his pidgin-speaking classmates, the teacher promptly protects Stephen and asserts his higher status, punishing the other children with detention; Stephen's telling Edgar to "[s]hut up, faggot" in the ensuing discussion, however, carries no consequences for this privileged child.³⁶ It is the other children who are disciplined since their pasts as well as their failure to become literate in normativity render them undesirable as not just present but also future members of the nation, whereas Stephen's potential for full citizenship is fostered and nurtured at the expense of these unbecoming children.

These differences between Stephen, the Child on whose shoulders the future rests, and the other child characters, whose present is infringed upon and even violated in the name of this iconic Child, become especially pronounced in an episode that has the children go to Stephen's house in the hopes of selling boxes of cookies to his well-off parents. Situated at the end of Kalihi Valley, this "biggest house in the valley" looks to the children like "a dreamhouse," similar to "Iolani Palace with department store windows."³⁷ There is no answer when the children first ring the buzzer at the gate, but they do see, at one of the large windows,

the Beans appear like breathing mannequins on display. Stephen and his mother smile blankly, and his father blows smoke from the cigarette clipped between

his fingers. Loata presses the buzzer and waits with his face pushing against the bars. But not one of the Beans budge. They stand like a Sears family portrait until Stephen's mother walks out of the picture and the drapes begin to close.³⁸

As the all-American, white, heteronormative family, the Beans exist apart from the other children both literally and figuratively: just as the children cannot make it past the gate and only stare at Stephen and his parents from afar, so, too, do they remain outside the imagined American nation this family personifies. Described as "mannequins on display" arranged "like a Sears family portrait," the Beans are nothing if not iconic; they are the image of the family that circulates in and dominates the public and political sphere as the backbone of the nation. Absurdly, it is this all-American family, complete with the Child that will carry the family line into the future, that is so frequently invoked in national discourse as the primary resource of society and hence in need of protection and preservation. The other children and the other families are not afforded that same protection, but, not fitting into the family portrait frame, remain on the outside, at the margins, with their faces pressed against the gate.

Faced with a present in which their presence is at best a nuisance and at worst a threat to be violently subdued, and moving towards a future that has no place mapped out for them, the unbecoming children in Linmark's novel resort to disidentifying with hegemonic English and pop-culture objects and texts. Edgar, a queer child fascinated by television shows, disco music, and celebrities, frequently reenacts performances by his favorite stars alongside the other children, but his practice of disidentification is perhaps most obvious and succinct in a chapter titled "The Sentencing of Lives, or Why Edgar Almost Failed Mrs. Takemoto's Class." Asked to compose sentences that incorporate hegemonic English vocabulary terms while refraining from the use of pidgin, Edgar twists and queers the words he has been given, pushing at the boundaries of the signs and reinvesting them with different meaning, as the following examples illustrate:

clandestine, adj. In this class is a clandestine boy who freaked out after I gave him a torrid kiss.

calamity, n. When I think of the hapa-haole fox I make Trina and Loata spy on in the arcade in Mitsukoshi building, my hands get all calamity inside.

testimony, n. My testimony is to someday windowshop at Ala Moana Center with his hand in mine.³⁹

Disidentification, according to Muñoz, "is a step further than cracking open the code of the majority; it proceeds to use this code as raw material for

representing a disempowered politics or positionality that has been rendered unthinkable by the dominant culture.”⁴⁰ As a misfit child, Edgar reworks the terms he is assigned, these majoritarian codes, so that they are made to fit his experience instead, thus announcing and claiming his presence by reshaping the very signs on which his exclusion rests, with a twist and with a difference. He inhabits the failed interpellation, asserting his presence in this very failure, and Edgar’s mixing and mingling of Hawaiian pidgin with hegemonic English further shapes this identity-in-difference that emerges from his sentences. Edgar practices a disidentification that “negotiates strategies of resistance within the flux of discourse and power,” fraying the edges and opening the fissures of the discourse of the dominant sphere.⁴¹

But it is the last of the words on Edgar’s list to which he offers the most poignant twist and which most clearly illustrate his status as not only a misfit but an unbecoming child, one whose failure to fit deprives him of a future: “destiny, n. I know this word so close to my heart that it hurts.”⁴² Edgar, the brown, queer, poor, pidgin-speaking child is not represented by the figure of the Child, this icon of futurity and national belonging. His destiny is not the future. If the adults around him are any indication, then survival of childhood for Edgar would not mean crossing the threshold into full adult citizenship but rather joining the ranks of the *people*, to return to Agamben’s term, a status of “naked life” to which he, as an unbecoming child, has effectively already been assigned. Judith Butler suggests that one consider “the possibilities of politicizing *disidentification*, this experience of *misrecognition*, this uneasy sense of standing under a sign to which one does and does not belong,” and she posits that “it may be that the affirmation of that slippage, that failure of identification is itself the point of departure for a more democratizing affirmation of internal difference.”⁴³ In failing to fit the discursive parameters of the iconic Child, the misfit child points us to its identity-in-difference, as well as to the manifold exclusions by which the figure of the Child operates. It makes its presence felt through a practice of disidentification and lays bare the violent effects that reproductive futurism, which flies the figure of the Child as its flag, has on children, and on the unbecoming child especially. If the future were not already Stephen Bean’s, after all, then maybe Edgar Ramirez’s destiny could be different.

NOTES

1. Sara Ahmed, *Willful Subjects* (Durham: Duke UP, 2014), 126.
2. Giorgio Agamben, *Means Without End: Notes on Politics*, trans. Vincenzo Binetti and Cesare Casarino (Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 2000), 20.
3. *Ibid.*, 31.

4. *Ibid.*, 32; emphasis in original.
5. Neil Postman, *The Disappearance of Childhood* (New York: Delacorte P, 1982), 13.
6. *Ibid.*, 33.
7. Claudia Castañeda, *Figurations: Child, Bodies, Worlds* (Durham: Duke UP, 2002), 1.
8. *Ibid.*, 4; order reversed.
9. Lee Edelman, *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive* (Durham: Duke UP, 2004), 11.
10. *Ibid.*, 12.
11. *Ibid.*, 21.
12. Lauren Berlant, *The Queen of America Goes to Washington City* (Durham: Duke UP, 1997), 6.
13. *Ibid.*, 66–67.
14. Castañeda, *Figurations*, 4.
15. José Esteban Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity* (New York: New York UP, 2009), 95.
16. *Ibid.*
17. *Ibid.*, 49.
18. Quoted in Amy McDaniel, “Black Words Matter: Poems by Baltimore Students,” *Real Pants*, accessed May 12, 2015, <http://realpants.com/black-words-matter-poems-by-baltimore-students/>.
19. Sara Ahmed, *Queer Phenomenology: Orientations, Objects, Others* (Durham: Duke UP, 2006), 86.
20. *Ibid.*, 91.
21. *Ibid.*, 154.
22. Kathryn Bond Stockton, *The Queer Child, or Growing Sideways in the Twentieth Century* (Durham: Duke UP, 2009), 158.
23. Edelman, *No Future*, 3; emphasis in original.
24. Michael Warner, “Introduction” in *Fear of a Queer Planet: Queer Politics and Social Theory*, ed. Michael Warner (Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 1993), xxvi.
25. Ahmed, *Queer Phenomenology*, 161.
26. Andrea Smith, “Queer Theory and Native Studies: The Heteronormativity of Settler Colonialism,” *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies* 16, no. 1–2 (2010): 50.
27. Maria Nikolajeva, *Power, Voice and Subjectivity in Literature for Young Readers* (New York: Routledge, 2010), 8.
28. Perry Nodelman, *The Hidden Adult: Defining Children’s Literature* (Baltimore: John Hopkins UP, 2008), 243.
29. José Esteban Muñoz, *Disidentifications: Queers of Color and the Performance of Politics* (Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 1999), 7.
30. *Ibid.*, 31.
31. Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, “Queer and Now,” in *Tendencies*, Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick (Durham: Duke UP, 1993), 3.
32. Quoted in R. Zimora Linmark, *Rolling the R’s* (Los Angeles: Kaya P, 1995), back cover.

33. Linmark, *Rolling the R's*, 51.
34. *Ibid.*, 53–54.
35. *Ibid.*, 69.
36. *Ibid.*, 70.
37. *Ibid.*, 110.
38. *Ibid.*, 111.
39. *Ibid.*, 122–23.
40. Muñoz, *Disidentifications*, 31.
41. *Ibid.*, 19.
42. Linmark, *Rolling the R's*, 123.
43. Judith Butler, *Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of "Sex"* (New York: Routledge, 1993), 219; emphasis in original.

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