In the essay «Structure, Sign, and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences,» Jacques Derrida makes the following aside concerning the origin of ethnology:

[O]ne can assume that ethnology could have been born as a science only at the moment when a decentering had come about: at the moment when European culture—and, in consequence, the history of metaphysics and of its concepts—had been dislocated, driven from its locus and forced to stop considering itself as the culture of reference. (282)

Conversely, as a practitioner of a «primarily [...] European science employing traditional concepts,» the ethnologist «accepts into his discourse the premises of ethnocentrism at the very moment when he denounces them» (282). For Derrida, ethnology emerges as a divided subject that must constantly contend with the contradictory acentric and ethnocentric impulses that gave rise to the discipline.

More recently, Stanley Corngold discerns a similar conflict in what he terms the «anthropological moment in literature.» This term represents the instant when one human being, to his or her consternation, «perceives another as inhuman while struggling to conclude that this strangeness is part of a design.» According to Corngold, «the anthropological moment corresponds to an empirical moment in the practice of anthropology, which describes culture remotest from the observer’s own while struggling to produce an idea of this other humanity» (156). Thus Derrida and Corngold perceive, in the fundamental theory and practice of anthropology, the same essential conflict between the acentric and ethnocentric impulses, between the desire to dismantle cultural boundaries and embrace the essential sameness of the exotic Other, and the urge to reject that Other as unintelligible, irredeemably alien, and intrinsically inhuman.

Derrida and Corngold’s observations on anthropology offer insights into the fictional intercultural encounters depicted by Franz Kafka. Intercultural exchange, or more often the lack of it, represents an abiding topic of interest for Kafka. One only has to think of the emigrant Karl Rossmann’s bewilder-
ment at his new home in the novel Der Veschollene or the difficulties encountered by K in negotiating the arcane cultural practices of Das Schloß to realize that the struggle to comprehend the Other is central to Kafka’s vision. However, my purpose here is to examine the anthropological ramifications of the intercultural encounter depicted in «In der Strafkolonie.» In this text Kafka subjects his Western protagonist to the radical decentering described by Derrida, as he finds himself uprooted from his customary sphere and besieged by disturbing, alien cultural practices.

Despite the text’s complexity, critics tend to subsume it under a single category, offering allegorical readings based on such fields as religion, law, or aesthetics. In so doing they focus exclusively on a single, salient theme in a dense, contradictory, discursive network. It is perhaps more productive to consider how these categories interact within the interpretive frameworks suggested by the text itself. In this regard, the field of anthropology, so conspicuously neglected by its alleged practitioner, the Traveler, might offer a new perspective. Let us consider the Old Commandant’s regime as the judicial equivalent of the cargo cult. Just as the illiterate, indigenous populations of remote areas performed the rituals of writing in the hope that cargo might magically appear, so the followers of the Old Commandant on Kafka’s fictional island inscribe the sentence on the body of the convict in the belief that justice will be done in a supernatural fashion.

Although Papua New Guinea, the island on which many of the cargo cults appeared, was under German jurisdiction from 1885 to 1914, I do not intend to argue that these cults represent an extra-diegetic referent for Kafka’s text. Rather I mean to use the anthropological concept as an analogy to illustrate what happens when a practical process rooted in social reality, such as the passing of a sentence on a convicted criminal, becomes the object of cultic veneration. Kafka’s story thus depicts a Western society that has gone «native,» in that it has reverted to ritualistic practices and a belief in magic. By showing that this regression has occurred within one generation, Kafka’s text suggests the tenuousness of Western civilization.

This emphasis on the regressive and ritualistic tendencies of the colonial regime represents one way of undermining the traditional opposition between the «civilized» colonizer and the «primitive» native. Another is to contemplate the historical function of actual penal colonies. Walter Müller-Seidel’s Die Deportation des Menschen (1986) paved the way for subsequent postcolonial readings by asserting the relevance of the historical institution of the penal colony for Kafka’s story. However, many of the later postcolonial interpretations lose the focus of Müller-Seidel’s study and instead subsume the text under the general rubric of colonialism. Such an approach ignores the fact
that the penal colony arose far more out of a concern with the punishment of European convicts than with the colonization of overseas populations. Indeed, the debate over the penal colonies in Germany and Austria centered on the health and welfare of the Volk, which, it was claimed, could only be preserved through the permanent removal overseas of degenerate elements. Consider, for example, how Hans Groß, an ardent advocate of penal colonies and one of Kafka’s law professors, presents the threat posed by degeneracy in an article entitled «Deportation und Degeneration»:

Unserer Zeit droht viel weniger die Gefahr von gewissen schweren Verbrechern, die vielleicht kerngesund sind, - die möge man entsprechend einsperren; viel mehr haben wir zu befürchten von den echten Degenerierten, die Verbrechen oder auch nur fortgesetzte Übertretungen begehen, die unsere Kultur herangezüchtet hat und die man dem ausliefern soll, dessen Entziehung an ihrer Existenz schuld ist, der Natur. Das können wir tun, wenn wir endlich die Courage zum Versuche haben: Deportation für die straffälligen Degenerierten. (286)

As Müller-Seidel points out, Groß emphasizes degeneracy as the primary criterion for transportation, rather than criminality (58). Under Groß’s scheme a serious felon can be safely incarcerated at home, while a mere habitual offender should be dispatched to a penal colony forthwith if degenerate tendencies are detected. Here Groß’s deployment of the opposition between culture and nature reveals the basic assumptions behind the establishment of penal colonies. The removal of «nature,» i.e., the principle of natural selection, has allowed European culture to breed degenerate specimens. Therefore, the transportation of said degenerates to a state of unalloyed «nature,» i.e., an overseas penal colony, will rectify this situation. By leaving the term «nature» so nebulous, Groß can simultaneously denounce the degeneration of the Volk and tacitly reinforce the notion that culture, however debased, is the sole preserve of the West. Thus, as this excerpt indicates, the penal colony represented a peculiarly insular colonial institution that combined a paranoid obsession with eugenics at home with a racist disregard for indigenous populations abroad.

It is the insularity of both the historical penal colony and Kafka’s fictitious depiction that eludes those postcolonial critics who cast various figures and institutions as the colonized «Other.» The most idiosyncratic example of this tendency comes from David Pan. Despite beginning from the premise that the conflict is intra-European, «between a European primitive and European civilized perspective on law and culture» (3), Pan goes on to describe the text «as the tragedy of primitive culture,» as represented by the Old Commandant’s régime, which succumbs to the «predations of a universalist rationalization,» embodied by the Traveler (40). By placing the Old Commandant’s colonial regime in the position of a threatened indigenous culture, Pan only succeeds
in reinscribing precisely that binary opposition between barbarism and civiliza-
tion that the text interrogates. The same can be said of those critics who
cast the Prisoner as simply and solely the colonized native (see, for example,
Lee 36, Peters 409, Piper 47, and Zilcosky 107). However, while Rolf Goebel
proceeds from the same assumption (199), he then admits that «It is not even
clear, after all, if the Prisoner really is a native in the literal sense of the word –
an indigenous inhabitant of the island whose subject position was formed be-
fore the arrival of the […] colonists» (201). This confusion stems from the
mixed signals that the text sends with regard to both the convict’s ethnicity
and his position on the island. As Elizabeth Boa points out, the reference to
his «wulstig» («thick») lips (Drucke zu Lebzeiten 211)\(^4\) can be construed as
a «racist marker suggesting African features» (139), but this hint hardly ac-
cords with the ostensible setting of the tropical Far East, as suggested by the
teahouse (D 246). Indeed, taken in conjunction with the initial description of
the Prisoner as «ein stumpfsinniger, breitmäuliger Mensch mit verwahrlostem
Haar und Gesicht» (D 203), those bulbous lips might indicate a physiognomy
associated with degeneracy, a condition for which, according to Groß and
his fellow scientists, deportation was the only cure. However, we see that the
convict is initially described as a soldier in the colonial army (D203) and that
he is even able to strike up a rapport with his fellow enlisted man, the guard.
Thus the text places the figure of the convict in all the subject positions avail-
able in the context of the penal colony: the colonized native, the degener-
ate deportee, and the lowly soldier. Equally, his actions and reactions run the
gamut of those associated with the position of subaltern, whether as a de-
gegenerate deportee or «primitive» native. His responses range from his violent
rebellion against his superior to his abject submission as a prisoner described
as «hündisch ergeben» (D 230), from his child-like clownish capering on be-
ing released (D 239) to his vengeful glee on realizing it is now the Officer who
will submit to the machine (D 241). Yet despite the multiple roles played by
the prisoner, the fact remains that the only convict we encounter in this penal
colony is a soldier of the colonizing power facing summary execution on an
unproven charge. From the very beginning Kafka’s text suggests that the in-
sularity of this system will lead to its self-annihilation long before the officer’s
suicide or the destruction of his machine.

In order to interrogate not only the island’s judicial system, but also the
attitudes of the Western Traveler who comes to inspect it, this text repeatedly
turns the anthropological gaze inward. By focusing on the presumptions of
sovereignty, rationality, and even humanity displayed by the Traveler in his
ethnological encounter with the island, we can see how this story challenges
some of the foundational assumptions behind the West’s self-conception.
Kafka’s Traveler must confront his own version of Corngold’s «anthropological moment.»

«In der Strafkolonie» undermines the protagonist’s pretensions to objectivity by placing him in a situation in which his very presence impinges upon the phenomenon under observation. Indeed, both the Traveler and the Officer suspect an ulterior motive in the New Commandant’s invitation to witness the execution (D 223 and 225, respectively), i.e., that the Commandant will exploit the Traveler’s probable outrage in order to push for the abolition of the practice. The predetermined function of this act of observation thus militates against impartial analysis. Conversely, the Officer makes strenuous efforts to enlist the Traveler’s support for the Old Commandant’s juridical system. Here the visitor’s physical situation reflects his lack of independence. For a start, the Officer directs the Traveler’s movements with regard to the machine, obliging him to come closer to observe particular aspects of the apparatus, forcibly ushering him to his seat (D 213) and even holding him back when the Prisoner ventures too far forward (D 216).

Moreover, the Officer’s solicitation of the Traveler’s support comes to resemble a sexual overture: he takes the visitor by the hand and makes him feel the cotton «bed» (D 208), walks arm in arm with him (D 212), and finally embraces him with his head on the Traveler’s shoulder (D 226). The Officer’s homoerotic attraction toward his interlocutor not only suggests the unpredictable effects of the latter’s presence on the objects of his study, but also underlines the impossibility of detached and impartial observation. Indeed, while the Traveler subscribes to the notion of unobtrusive observation, i.e., that «er reise nur mit der Absicht zu sehen und keineswegs etwa, um fremde Gerichtsverfassungen zu ändern» (D 222), the conclusion of the text demonstrates that such surveillance inevitably obtrudes upon its object. For the Traveler’s ultimate rejection of the Officer’s overtures and his method of execution leads to the latter’s suicide and to the collapse of his machine. Thus the Traveler, whose stated aim is to witness the execution, does not merely disrupt, but rather destroys, the entire judicial system under observation.

Of course the annihilation of an abhorrent practice, however anthropologically intriguing it may be, is to be welcomed. Why then should we not consider the Traveler’s intervention a timely reassertion of truly enlightened Western values in the face of barbarism and wanton cruelty? Here I would like to depart from the tendency amongst some critics to duplicate the adversarial tenor of the text and side wholly with either the Traveler or the Officer in their readings. David Pan, for example, declares unequivocally that «The officer is the hero» (40). It is not surprising that critics such as Pan throw their support behind one antagonist in the conflict between the Officer and the
Traveler. For as Axel Hacker trenchantly observes, the critics themselves can be divided into «officers and «travelers.» The former offer narrow and specific interpretations of the text that attempt to read the text in allegorical terms (115). The latter seek a more balanced view, weighing the evidence in a more judicious fashion, but, according to Hacker, fail to provide a comprehensive and definitive statement of the text’s meaning (117). At the risk of showing my hand and siding with my fellow travelers, I take the view that the adversarial structure of the text invites a critical evaluation of both the Officer and the Traveler. For if the text unflinchingly depicts the horrors perpetrated by the Old Commandant’s colonial regime, it also portrays the Western visitor’s response to these atrocities as wholly inadequate. Indeed, a closer inspection of the work reveals that the Traveler fails to uphold the Enlightenment principles of impartiality, humanitarianism, logic, and egalitarianism, and instead succumbs to equivocation, indifference, superstition, and excessive deference to authority.

While the text presents the Traveler’s goal of impartiality as unattainable, it also casts doubt on the morality of his objective. Although dissatisfied with the judicial process (or lack of it), he tells himself «daß es sich hier um eine Strafkolonie handelte, daß hier besondere Maßregeln notwendig waren und daß man bis zum letzten militärisch vorgehen mußte» (D 214). Here the categories that the Traveler invokes to justify his inaction are irrelevant. Certainly, one can imagine that the context of a penal colony and a military outpost might result in a somewhat abbreviated judicial process. However, these circumstances cannot begin to justify the fact that the Officer refuses even to inform the accused of the charges against him before passing the automatic verdict of guilt. Nor is there anything «necessary» about a prolonged period of torture in which the law allegedly transgressed by the convict is inscribed upon his body until he eventually succumbs to his wounds. Thus the Traveler represents a peculiarly bloodless brand of cultural relativism6 that seems willing to accept any atrocity in the name of difference and to invoke spurious grounds for its own inaction.

A subsequent passage in the text confirms the equivocation behind the Traveler’s supposedly principled neutrality:

Der Reisende überlegte: Es ist immer bedenklich, in fremde Verhältnisse einzugreifen. Er war weder Bürger der Strafkolonie, noch Bürger des Staates, dem sie angehörte. Wenn er diese Exekution verurteilen oder gar hintertreiben wollte, konnte man ihm sagen: Du bist ein Fremder, sei still. Darauf hätte er nichts erwidern, sondern nur hinzufügen können, daß er sich in diesem Falle selbst nicht begreife, denn er reise nur mit der Absicht zu sehen und keineswegs etwa, um fremde Gerichtsverfassungen zu ändern. Nun lagen aber hier die Dinge allerdings sehr verführerisch.
Here the Traveler suggests his consternation by repeatedly invoking the term «fremd» («foreign» or «strange») in order to separate himself from the execution, the trial and the Prisoner, respectively. While his initial misgivings about intervening in foreign affairs appear justified, his reference to his citizenship in the second sentence seems utterly misplaced. After all, the Officer’s description of the juridical procedure has already revealed that the notion of citizenship, with all its attendant rights, has absolutely no bearing on the island. Moreover, later in the same paragraph he contradicts his own claim that a foreigner has no right to object to the process by observing that the courtesy with which he has been received and his invitation to the execution «schien sogar darauf hinzudeuten, daß man sein Urteil über dieses Gericht verlangte» (D 222). Far from silencing foreign criticism, the New Commandant’s regime has expressly invited an outsider to comment on the judicial process in order to further its reforms. Through the Traveler’s subsequent deliberations the text reveals that his preoccupation with his foreign status does not represent a professional precept, but rather a personal pretext for his own inaction.

For a researcher apparently engaged in comparative ethnology, the Traveler harbors an extremely rigid notion of alterity, or «otherness.» He even experiences the desire to relinquish his neutrality and intervene in the island’s affairs as a moment of self-alienation («Darauf hätte er […] nur hinzufügen können, daß er sich in diesem Falle selbst nicht begreife») that suggests a highly circumscribed self-conception. Moreover, this passage indicates the paradox arising from the Traveler’s insistence on neutrality: he can only contemplate intervention when the conditions confirm his fundamental impartiality, i.e., when the injustice of the procedure and the inhumanity of the execution are beyond doubt, and when the convict is revealed to be neither a personal acquaintance, nor a compatriot, nor a remotely sympathetic individual (D 222). Here the participial construction «ein gar nicht zum Mitleid auffordernder Mensch» emphasizes the word «Mensch» and thus undermines the Traveler’s caveats by suggesting the torture of a fellow human being might in itself warrant immediate intervention. Yet while he readily concedes the injustice of the process and the inhumanity of the execution, the Traveller considers the need to intercede «verführerisch,» a temptation that must be resisted in pursuit of the higher ideal of neutrality. Ironically, it is only when the Officer impinges on his impartiality and solicits his support directly, that the Traveler reveals his opposition to the process. Until that moment he seems grimly determined to
sacrifice the hapless prisoner on the altar of «scientific» objectivity. Through the character’s equivocations and rationalizations Kafka indicates the degeneration of the fundamental precepts of the Enlightenment. The categorical imperative to protect one’s fellow man from barbarism is now perceived as a siren temptation to abandon the ideal of an utterly dispassionate impartiality that is untempered by humanitarian concerns.

The Traveler’s desire to distance himself from the proceedings contrasts starkly with his interest in the execution machine itself. Indeed, during the Officer’s detailed description of the apparatus, the Traveler starts to reveal attitudes that resemble those of his interlocutor. Having referred to the cotton wadding («Watte») on which the victim is placed, the Officer then considers the felt stump used as a gag: «Er [der Filzstump] hat den Zweck, am Schreien und Zerbeißen der Zunge zu hindern. Natürlich muß der Mann den Filz aufnehmen, da ihm sonst duch den Halsriemen das Genick gebrochen wird.» To which the Traveler blandly responds, «Das ist Watte?» (D 208). Such moments reveal the intensely dark and perverse humor within the text. Fascinated by the technical specifications of the apparatus, the Traveler glibly ignores the horrifying torment inflicted by the machine. Indeed, a few lines later we are informed that «Der Reisende war schon ein wenig für den Apparat gewonnen.» Thus the man on an anthropological mission to observe cultural differences privileges the allure of technology over the welfare of his fellow human beings.

However, the description of the sunlit torture device that follows literally casts an ironic light on the Traveler’s incipient admiration for the contraption. As Mark Anderson explains, in the harsh glare of the «schattenlosen Tal» in which the story takes place «[l]ight is an obstacle to perception» (173). The Traveler has to shade his eyes from the sun in order to survey the machine, which consists of a Bed and Designer, joined by brass rods «die in der Sonne fast Strahlen warfen» (D 208). Although the auratic appearance of the device presages the Officer’s subsequent claim that it enlightens its victims as to their sins (D 219), the caveat «fast» questions the possibility of such illumination. Nevertheless, by presenting the scene through the eyes of the Traveler, the text hints symbolically at his susceptibility to the quasi-religious vision of the machine offered by the Officer.

Indeed, in the course of the narrative, the Traveler unconsciously adopts many of the Officer’s attitudes towards the machine, his rationalist interest in technology giving way to an occult fetishization. For example, when the machine malfunctions during the Officer’s suicide, impaling him instantly rather than gradually inscribing his skin, the Traveler observes, «das war ja keine Folter mehr, wie sie der Offizier erreichen wollte, das war unmittel-
barer Mord» (D 245). His response indicates the impact of the Officer’s views on his value system. Rather than perceiving the instantaneous execution as the more humane option, the visitor now subscribes to the Officer’s notion that prolonged torture is preferable. More importantly, when he removes the Officer’s corpse from the needles he searches the face in vain for a sign of the promised salvation (D 245). This final action suggests that the Officer has made a belated convert of the Traveler after all.

Although the Traveler shares much of the Officer’s ethos, it is not surprising that he should reject the Officer’s overtures and ultimately side with the authority of the New Commandant. Throughout the text the Traveler seems preoccupied with maintaining the status quo of hierarchical power relations. Thus it is the Traveler, not the Officer, who initially notices «mit Schrecken» that the Prisoner has ventured too far forward and motions to drive him back, «denn, was er tat, war wahrscheinlich strafbar» (D 216). Such punctiliousness seems grotesquely misplaced, given the punishment that the Prisoner is about to endure. More importantly, when the Officer finally demands the Traveler’s verdict, the latter, described with some irony as «ehrlich» and «ohne Furcht,» nevertheless hesitates to voice his opinion in front of the Soldier and Prisoner, lest he set the lower orders a bad example (D 235). Indeed, despite his rejection of the Old Commandant’s penal system, the Traveler’s deference to authority extends even to the ancien régime. He is therefore disconcerted when the lowly harbor workers in the teahouse treat the Old Commandant’s prophetic and admonitory gravestone with derision and encourage the Traveler to share their scorn (D 248). He pretends to ignore their subversive, conspiratorial smiles and dispenses coins among them, not so much as an act of charity, but rather as an attempt to reimpose some semblance of social order. This concern with maintaining hierarchy comes to the fore in his final action, when he brandishes a knotted rope to deter the Prisoner and Soldier from jumping on board his boat to escape the island (D 248). This blatant intervention indicates that despite his profound misgivings about the colony’s system of justice, he still wishes to uphold its basic functions as a military barrack and prison. Moreover, the Traveler’s somewhat histrionic response to the Soldier and Prisoner suggests that he regards their particular presence as a threat. This reaction can best be understood in light of the rapprochement that takes place between the convict and the guard. Even before the Prisoner is released, they peaceably share a meal of rice porridge (D 230 and 235). After his liberation, the convict amuses the Soldier by capering in a shirt and pants split down the back (D 239). The levity of the underlings’ understanding finds its analogue in the mirthless solidarity of the two «Herren,» the Traveler and the Officer. Their adherence to the same code of honor becomes apparent when we learn
that the researcher considers the Officer’s plan to commit suicide «vollständig richtig» and would have acted in the same way in that situation (D 241). For the Traveler, the laxity that leads a guard to befriend a convict represents a contagion that must be quarantined on the remote island. Moreover, the instrument for restoring order, the knotted rope, recalls the hangman’s noose. Through this symbol the text suggests an analogy between the supposedly civilized Western judicial code and the atrocities perpetrated on the island, with both systems eschewing any notion of justice in favor of the arbitrary assertion of hierarchical power.

The fact that the final scene indicates an equivalence between the Western penal system and that of the penal colony should come as no surprise. After all, the horrific abuses carried out on the island arise not from an alien, indigenous culture, but from the European colonial power that has subjugated the territory. Indeed, aside from the Traveler, all the figures and customs connected with the main plot of the abortive execution and the Officer’s suicide represent this colonizing force. As we have seen, even the Prisoner is a former colonial soldier who has been sentenced to death for dereliction of duty and insubordination (D 203).

However, Kafka takes care to avoid specifying the identity of this imperium. For while the Traveler and the Officer converse in French, it is clear from the bemused responses of the Soldier and the Prisoner that the colony does not identify itself with France. To confuse matters further, the ceremonial dagger, which the Officer unceremoniously breaks and discards before submitting himself to the machine (D 240), suggests the military uniform of Austria-Hungary, an empire devoid of overseas colonies. By obscuring the identity of the colonizing power, Kafka suggests that the peculiar horrors found in this penal colony are representative of Western imperialism in general. Thus when the Officer describes how the New Commandant will introduce the Traveler as «ein großer Forscher des Abendlandes» (D 229), an ambiguity arises as to whether he is a scholar from, or of, the West. Through the figure of the Traveler, a European anthropologist studying a European colony, the text turns the Western anthropological gaze upon itself to excoriate the barbarism of the supposedly enlightened Occident.

With the demise of the Old Commandant and the rise of his successor, one might expect the end of the barbaric ancien régime. However, for the Officer, the self-contained nature of the Old Commandant’s system will ensure its survival long after the death of its founder: «Wir, seine Freunde, wußten schon bei seinem Tod, daß die Einrichtung der Kolonie so in sich geschlossen ist, daß sein Nachfolger, und habe er tausend neue Pläne im Kopf, wenigstens während vieler Jahre nichts von dem Alten wird ändern können» (D 206). As
a fanatical devotee of the former leader, the Officer is unable to see how his continued allegiance to the old system and his schemes to thwart the New Commandant’s reforms constitute an act of insubordination far more serious than that committed by the convict. But he is not alone in his admiration for the Old Commandant’s gifts: the Traveler cannot conceal his wonder at the man’s versatility, exclaiming «Hat er denn alles in sich vereinigt? War er Soldat, Richter, Konstrukteur, Chemiker, Zeichner?» (D 210). Contrary to John Donne’s dictum, one man does indeed appear to have been an island in this case. Nevertheless, the Traveler’s enthusiasm for an autocratic founder of a totalitarian judicial and ideological system again calls into question his credentials as a critical and objective thinker. After all, while the various roles described above are not necessarily mutually exclusive, in the field of justice no one person can fulfill the roles of judge, jury, and executioner, as the Officer claims to do. The task of the critic is therefore to engage in the critical analysis omitted by the Traveler and to point out the inherent contradictions within the Old Commandant’s system.

The former régime embraces a number of positions in its penal code that are either inconsistent or absolutely antithetical. Among the inconsistencies are the summary executions practiced on the island, which negate one of the primary purposes of the historical penal colony: to provide an alternative to capital punishment (see Müller-Seidel 26). Further, the prolonged torture enacted by the complex, electrically powered apparatus flies in the face of the historic desire to perform executions more swiftly and therefore more humanely through mechanization, whether through the guillotine or the electric chair. Finally, the Officer’s rapturous description of the enlightenment supposedly experienced by the victim during the execution seeks to bridge the irreconcilable divide between capital punishment and rehabilitation:

Verstand geht dem Blödesten auf. Um die Augen beginnt es. Von hier aus verbrichtete es sich. Ein Anblick, der einen verführen könnte, sich unter die Egge zu legen […] der Mann fängt bloß an, die Schrift zu entziffern. Sie haben gesehen, es ist nicht leicht, die Schrift mit den Augen zu entziffern; unser Mann entziffert sie aber mit seinen Wunden. Es ist allerdings viel Arbeit; er braucht sechs Stunden zu ihrer Vollendung. Dann aber spießt ihn die Egge vollständig auf und wirft ihn in die Grube, […] Dann ist das Gericht zu Ende, und wir […] scharren ihn ein. (D 219–20)

Here the need to attain «Verstand,» i.e., to understand one’s crime rationally, and the arduousness of this task evoke the eighteenth- and nineteenth-century discourses of rehabilitation, which focused on both the moral education of the prisoner’s soul and the physical edification of his body through hard labor. However, the penal colony’s system of reform results in a mangled corpse, rather than a rehabilitated criminal. Thus Kafka’s text collapses the historical
schema suggested by Michel Foucault in *Discipline and Punish*, whereby the locus of punishment shifts from the body to the soul, into a single, paradoxical act that combines an execution with an education. Moreover, the Officer’s prophetic claim that one is tempted by the sight of the convict’s enlightenment to join him under the harrow attests to the power of the Old Commandant’s epistemo-juridical system to transcend its own logical incoherence and engender absolute conviction in its followers.

Indeed, since the condemned man is in no position to benefit from his hard-won knowledge, the edifying effects of the execution must be sought among the witnesses. Thus the Officer’s nostalgic account of past executions switches focus from the victims of the executions to the crowds that used to attend these public spectacles:

Es war unmöglich, allen die Bitte aus der Nähe zuschaun zu dürfen zu gewähren. Der Kommandant in seiner Einsicht ordnete an, daß vor allem die Kinder berücksichtigt werden sollten; ich allerdings durfte kraft meines Berufes immer dabei stehen; oft hockte ich dort, zwei kleine Kinder rechts und links in meinen Armen. Wie nahmen wir alle den Ausdruck der Verklärung von dem gemarterten Gesicht, wie hielt wir unsere Wangen in den Schein dieser endlich erreichten und schon vergehenden Gerechtigkeit! (D 226)

Here the condemned man is transformed from the reader of his wounds to a text for others to decipher (see Gray 229). However, the Officer’s emphasis on the visual reception of the prisoner’s «transfiguration» («Verklärung») casts doubt upon the truth claims in his account. On a practical level, the Commandant’s order to show special attention to the children and give these most impressionable members of the community the closest vantage points suggests that this spectacle was intended as a means of indoctrination. Moreover, as Richard Gray explains, the Officer undercuts his own narrative by describing the Prisoner’s expression as a «Schein,» a term that not only denotes a «glow», but also a mere «semblance» (231). This term thus undermines the Officer’s claim to discern an essential transformation within the prisoner based on purely visual information. Finally, by suggesting that justice must be seen to be done in order to be done at all, the Officer inadvertently calls into question the «trial» at hand, for which the Traveler is the sole spectator. For in the absence of the ideological community that claimed to perceive the fleeting manifestation of «justice» in the execution, the ritual ceases to have any meaning.

In invoking the edification of both the audience and the victim of the execution, the Officer imbues the process with such religious significance that the convicted criminal emerges as something of a martyred saint. The ecclesiastical rhetoric is most apparent in the term «Verklärung» («transfiguration»),
but is also to be found in the participial adjective «gemartert.» (The noun, from which the verb derives, «Marter,» or «torment,» is etymologically related to the noun «Martyrium» or «martyrdom»). In addition, the «Schein» allegedly emanating from the prisoner bathes its audience in a beatific radiance. However, in his use of religious terminology, the Officer, the true believer, inadvertently reveals the modus operandi of the ideology to which he subscribes. For in an attempt to reconcile the ennoblement and murder of the convicted man, the system of belief appropriates, or more aptly, colonizes, the realm of religion. Of course, the implicit theological claim in the Officer’s speech is nonsensical: no faith would advise torturing individuals to death in order to bask in the reflected glory of their martyrdom. But as we have seen in our examination of the former régime’s contradictory positions, logical coherence is not a priority in this totalitarian system. Its objective is rather the occupation of ideological territory, and it is willing to indulge in internal contradictions, mystification, and outright obscurantism in order to assimilate and subordinate every aspect of thought and action on the island.

The tendency towards obfuscation that I perceive in the Old Commandant’s system contrasts starkly with Richard Gray’s view that the regime embodies a «totalizing ideology of transparency» (226). For Gray, the direct inscription of the prisoner’s crimes into his flesh results in the «perfect, for all intents and purposes immediate semiotic transmission of the signified» (225, Gray’s italics). In support of this argument, he then cites the glass harrow, which allows the spectators to view the inscription directly and «thus concretizes the drive for transparency associated with the machine as a semiotic apparatus» (226). However, the glass harrow also concretizes the legal notion of transparency: the Old Commandant travesties this principle by rendering the apparatus transparent while constructing a judicial system that remains opaque to the accused. Moreover, the understanding that the victim allegedly derives from the execution does not represent an «immediate semiotic transmission» but rather the protracted, arduous labor of decipherment that the Officer considers essential to the process. The condemned man’s hermeneutic difficulties arise from the Old Commandant’s arcane designs for the inscriptions, which leave even the well-educated Traveler completely baffled:

Der Reisende hätte gern etwas Anerkennendes gesagt, aber er sah nur labyrinthartige, vielfach kreuzende Linien, die so dicht das Papier bedeckten, daß man nur mit Mühe die weißen Zwischenräume erkannte. «Lesen Sie,» sagte der Offizier. «Ich kann nicht,» sagte der Reisende. «Es ist sehr kunstvoll,» sagte er ausweichend, «aber ich kann es nicht entziffern.» (D 217)

It is difficult to discern an ideology of transparency in the obscurantism of the Officer’s designs, to which, as Gray states, the Traveler responds with «alien-
ation and total comprehension» (223). The Traveler’s evasive reply that the manuscript is very «kunstvoll» («artistic») inadvertently reveals the degree to which the regime has co-opted the field of aesthetics, as evinced by the «theatrical» spectacle of the execution, with its adherence to the Aristotelian unities. However, it is in their indecipherability, rather than their artistry, that these manuscripts serve as symbolic blueprints for the Commandant’s ideology as a whole. For just as the elaborate designs efface the white page and with it the basic semiotic distinction between ink and paper, so the ideological system annihilates any trace of alterity, including the crucial internal distinctions between, for example, the judiciary, the arts, and organized religion, in its pursuit of a monolithic hegemony.

This inability to tolerate alterity ultimately leads to the demise of the system. Although the New Commandant’s incremental reforms have marginalized its practices and driven away its followers, the deathblow comes from the foreign Traveler. Confronted with his rejection, the Officer applies the precepts of the system to himself, submitting to the harrow and the apt inscription «Sei gerecht!» (D 238).7 The Officer thus adds the role of executed convict to those of judge, jury, and executioner. However, feedback tends to produce distortion: the «justice» invoked by the inscription denies the Officer his longed-for redemption (D 245) and dictates that the machine, as the embodiment of the Old Commandant’s regime, should self-destruct (243–44). Thus the system, faced with the external perspective that resists assimilation, turns upon and consumes itself.

In this regard the reforms advanced by the New Commandant would seem to herald a welcome return to civilization. The invitation extended to the Traveler brings about the demise of the repellant system of executions; the insular cargo cult of justice practiced by his predecessor is replaced by genuine cargo as the island joins the global shipping network; the once mighty Old Commandant now lies in a neglected grave under a table in a teahouse, a fate that plays on the expression «unter den Tisch fallen» («to go by the board.») However, the modus operandi of the new regime is disconcertingly familiar: instead of public executions, the colonists are now obliged to witness meetings of the higher administrative officials (D 232). Further, the burden of this process of modernization seems to fall disproportionately on the harbor workers whom the Traveler encounters in the teahouse: «Alle waren ohne Rock, ihre Hemden waren zerrissen, es war armes, gedemütigtes Volk» (D 247). In this regard Kafka’s relegation of this group to the epilogue of the text represents an ironic performative of the marginalization that these people have already suffered at the hands of their European oppressors. By showing the material suffering of these workers, the text indicates that the atavistic brutality of the
Old Commandant has been superseded by a modern, bureaucratic indifference toward those who suffer in the name of progress. In a final irony, the regimes of the Old and New Commandant thus occupy the positions traditionally associated with the process of colonization. The Old Commandant’s system represents the savagery of a «native» population, while the emerging culture of the New Commandant represents the bureaucratic technology and global ambition of the invading colonizers.

While the new regime still harbors a totalizing ambition to integrate all the population into its modernization, there are some signs on the island of a genuine and resistant alterity. The camaraderie that develops between the Soldier and the Prisoner, for example, undermines the hierarchical order and can serve no rational economic purpose for the new regime. When the downtrodden harbor workers exchange sly smiles on seeing the Old Commandant’s gravestone, their lack of deference toward the former ruler suggests that they might also resist his successor. Finally, while the women on the island seem to form a harem around the New Commandant, their indulgence of the Prisoner with sweets suggests that they represent a realm of sensuality, of compassion, even of silliness, that cannot be subsumed by a ruling ideology (D 223). Ironically, it is the Traveler, the one figure who does escape the island, who shows a marked susceptibility to its ethos. When he wards off the Soldier and Prisoner with the knotted rope, he demonstrates that he is still in thrall to the notions of hierarchy and hegemony that inform the island’s ideology.

To conclude, we should perhaps consider the alternative conclusions to «In der Strafkolonie» that Kafka drafted in his diary in August 1917 only to reject them. For it seems that the problem with some of these fragmentary texts is their overemphatic declaration of the themes found in this story. In one passage the Traveler declares, «Ich will ein Hundsfott sein, wenn ich das zulasse,» only to take the words literally and begin running around on all fours (T 822). This ending ascribes to language the magical power found in written incantation enacted by the execution in the penal colony. Thus the rationalist Traveler comes not only to believe in, but also to enact the incantatory power of language associated with «primitive» modes of thought.

In another abortive ending the Traveler seems to ponder what could have gone wrong with the Officer’s execution: «Wie?» sagte der Reisende plötzlich. War etwas vergessen? Ein entscheidendes Wort? Ein Griff? Eine Handreichung? Wer kann in das Wirrsal eindringen? Verdammte böse tropische Luft, was machst du aus mir? Ich weiß nicht was geschieht. Meine Urteilskraft ist zuhause im Norden geblieben» (T 823). The Kantian term «Urteilskraft» evokes the Western Enlightenment tradition at a point when the protagonist’s sovereign rationality is most imperiled by the confusion of events. When he
blames the deleterious effects of the «tropical air» for his befuddlement and sites the home of reason in his native north, the Traveler indicates the irrational hubris that ironically attaches itself to the Western Enlightenment tradition and inevitably misinforms encounters with the exotic Other. However, the irony that pervades Kafka’s text is still deeper. As we have seen, in his encounter with the penal colony the Traveler does not confront genuine alterity, but rather the exotic emanations of Occidental fantasy, since the Officer and the Old Commandant’s regime exemplifies a dream of absolute colonial control. Instead of having the supposedly enlightened protagonist impose his logic on these irrational projections, Kafka unmasks the very notion of European rationality as merely another figment of the Western imagination.

Notes

1 Given that the island is evidently «terra cognita» and under European jurisdiction, I have chosen to render the character’s title of «Forschungsreisende» as simply «the Traveler,» rather than «the Explorer» favored by some translators (see Edwin and Willa Muir’s translation, 140.) Moreover, since the term «Forschungsreisende» occurs only once in the opening sentence and is thereafter replaced by «der Reisende,» «the Traveler» reflects Kafka’s terminology and usage more accurately.
2 For details of the scholarly interaction between Groß and Kafka, see Müller-Seidel 50.
3 Quoted in Müller-Seidel 58.
4 Henceforth referred to as D.
5 Most recently, Ritchie Robertson argued for such a positive reading of the Traveler’s intervention in a talk entitled «Kafka and Institutions» at the conference Kafka at 125, held at Duke University and the University of North Carolina, April 2–4, 2009.
6 Cf. Russell Berman’s denunciation of the Traveler as «the prototype of the effete liberal,» 232.
7 This decision represents a departure for the Officer, who previously showed no such self-awareness in his conduct of the «trial.» For example, he ignores the fact that the Soldier’s dozing off (216) and his scheme to thwart the New Commandant (D 227–29) parallel the convict’s «crimes» of falling asleep and rebelling against a superior.
8 For a full discussion of the significance of this term, see Gray 239.

Works Cited


