Original Article

From alienation to cynicism: Race and the Lacanian unconscious

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Abstract Positing race as the Lacanian *object a* that binds the subject to a fantasy-self alienated from its subjective drives, this article presents the traversal of race as an ethical responsibility, made increasingly achievable by the recent public focus on repeated incidents of deadly violence against African American men.
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Introduction

Perhaps best captured in the familiar phrase "race is a social construct," contemporary scholarly thinking about race has been more influenced by poststructuralist theories of language and social reality than by psychoanalytic conceptions of the subjective psyche that interacts with this social world through the semiotics of language. Directed by a sense that psychoanalytic theory does not sufficiently privilege the social for it to be readily applied to the study of race, even theorists amiable to psychoanalysis have asserted that Lacanian theory in particular "has no eyes for the grammar and politics of power" (Spillers, 1997, p. 140). What I would like to examine, however, are the ways in which a Lacanian reading of the unconscious can bridge the social and the psychic to define race as an apparatus of being, as a tool for masking the central lack of subjectivity. By reading the unconscious as the gap or passageway through which lack finds expression in the social sphere, or, as Jacques Lacan called it, the Symbolic, I will argue that race functions to occlude the space of this gap and thereby compounds the alienation in the Symbolic that is experienced by the subject. Through a reading of the drive, which manifests the loss that eruptively presents itself in the gaps of the unconscious, I will

describe the process of cynically questioning and mapping one's relation to race, as a necessary step in what Lacan called a traversal of the fundamental fantasy of subjective wholeness.

We begin to circumscribe the function of race with regard to this fantasy by inquiring into the source of the cross-temporal resilience of notions of race in America. The relation, in particular, of African Americans to race reveals a noticeable paradox. Though direct or indirect reference to race is the central means through which discrimination of African Americans has been justified in America, African Americans most often embrace the concept of their own racial identity. Emerging from the successes of the Civil Rights Movement, an identity politics based on unification along racial lines continues to hold sway for African Americans. Whatever credence they give to the existential value of race, African Americans frequently argue for race's value in a sort of poststructuralist approach to agency, whereby the subject must seek to appropriate and redefine the signifiers that define the subject. This is the approach extolled by renowned African American scholar Houston Baker, who declares that African Americans should embrace a politics of "liberating manipulation" and "revolutionary renaming" (1989, p. 25) that employs language as a "black defense against and revision of ancient terrors, mistaken identities, dread losses" (2001, p. 5). What I suggest, however, is that race holds such appeal even for African Americans because the losses against which it defends are not merely social, but also psychic.[1] Adherence to race is directed by an effort to recover what I would call an illusion of being.

Being is what the subject loses of herself through entrance into the world of language that Lacan called the Symbolic. Forced to exist within this Symbolic, the subject is alienated from her being, from all aspects of the self that escape submission to the hermeneutics of the signifier in its ability to define and name the subjective self that always extends beyond language. This self is what is mourned through a search for the Lacanian *object a*, the fantasy object within the Symbolic, often pinned to the other as mate, that promises the subject completion. But it is also, I suggest, what is pinned to the racial other, as a living medium through which fantasies of race articulate for the subject an illusory relation to being. In such fantasies, the racial other can be constituted as comprised of a being totally different from the subjective self. Lacan made the striking assertion that "a solid hatred is addressed to being" (1998a, p. 99). In the American Symbolic, structured by a history of racism, what urges subjects toward a process of racial othering through use of ready-made fantasies of race is precisely the attempt to establish the self's and the other's divergent relations to being.

The subject most effectively establishes the other's relation to being by pinning fantastical meaning to the other's perceived jouissance, or mode of enjoyment – the pleasures and actions which may signal to subjects that this other has the *a*, the fantasy object that grants completion. Inherent in the racism of today, I argue, is the recycling of signifiers of the past that incorporate notions of African Americans' relation to a distinctly different jouissance of being. We see this, for

example, in the recent shooting of Jordan Davis, an African American teenage boy who was shot at ten times and killed by a white man named Michael Dunn because Davis and his friends were parked in a gas station playing their rap music too loud for Dunn's liking. Aiming his hatred at their particular form of jouissance and arguing that "this gangster-rap, ghetto talking thug 'culture' that certain segments of society flock to is intolerable" (February 20th), Dunn shot at the boys because, he says, "the way they behaved" in response to his request that they turn down the music was "obnoxious," causing him to conclude that "everybody in the car was a thug or a gangster" (Trial, Day 5). Admitting to possibly "imagining" that the boys had a gun, Dunn grounds his fears of the boys in fantasies that define their jouissance as other, dangerous: he explains, "You know, you hear enough news stories and you read about these things, they go through your mind" (Trial, Day 5).

The circulation of "these things" in the minds of Americans is rooted in a Symbolic that remains bound to signifiers of the past that secured a sense of being for white Americans. The specific experience of slavery, I argue, produced an eruptive surplus of illicit jouissance for white Americans, a surplus of pleasure that flooded this past and still threatens to saturate the present. Where Lacan defined jouissance as fundamentally "evil" for its unbending drive toward the bliss of being, jouissance designates a pleasure beyond the Symbolic, one for which the subject will destroy both the self and the other who occupy this Symbolic (1997, p. 184). It is by making jouissance accessible through the suffering body of the black racial other that slavery produced a particular mode of enjoyment, a way of accessing pleasure that resounds in the present. At the heart of this mode of jouissance is the oppression of black others whose supposed inferiority secures for white Americans a notion of superiority and greater being.

Where the *a* that signals a relation to being is only imagined, jouissance as a visible mode of enjoyment that distinguishes self from other, and racial group from racial group, functions as an index of being. But the fantasy *a*, this "object that puts itself in the place of what cannot be glimpsed of the other," is the true source of this other's alterity (1998a, p. 63). Through the *object a*, race functions as what I would call, after Lacan, the "para-being," the "being beside," which is "substitute[d]…for the being that would take flight" (p. 44). This para-being is what Lacan linked to a notion of the soul. Where in the Western tradition the association of supreme being with God is expressed in the biblical statement, "'I am the one who is,' by which God asserts his identity with Being," the subject only achieves a sense of being through the fantasy *object a*, the function of which is precisely to present itself as a "semblance of being," as that which "give[s] us the basis of being" (p. 95). The *object a* presents itself as a "remainder" (p. 6), a remnant of the lost being, grounding itself as the source of the "soul" that links us to God (p. 84). In this manner, we may read race as a form of what Lacan called "soul loving," whereby individuals of the same race "love each other as the same in the Other," love each other as a mirrored self that contains the very same

object the subject is in pursuit of, the object belonging to the self but absent from the self (p. 85).

This object, as a missing remnant of the self found in the other of the same race, constitutes, I suggest, a fundamental essentialism inherent in race. At root, it is the notion of an essential fantasy sameness, an illusory core-self identifiable in the other of the same race, that binds the subject to his or her racial partner as complement. Such sameness, sought in the other, is rooted in what Lacan called the extimacy of the self, the self's constitution by the "extremity of [an] intimacy that is at the same time excluded internally" (2013, p. 16).[2] This internal exclusion of the subject is what is most fully embodied by the unconscious as an intimate but external agency structured by the signifiers of the Symbolic. It is thus the extimate unconscious that we must first isolate in our understanding of the psychic functions of race.

Race and Psychic Alienation

The extimacy of the unconscious is most properly an effect of the signifier that grants subjectivity by alienating the subject in its limited meanings. This alienation, I will argue, is compounded by the signifiers of race, which contribute to the very structuring of the unconscious. Lacan defined this structure by tying the psychic to the social in a reading of the unconscious as "constituted by the effects of speech on the subject," effects that cause the unconscious to be itself "structured like a language" (1998b, p. 149). Asserting that "fifty years before the linguists" (p. 46), Freud reduced "everything," as far as "the unconscious is concerned," to "the function of pure signifiers" (p. 40), Lacan described the unconscious as comprised of signifiers that form a "signifying chain": these signifiers structure the unconscious like language because they interlink with one another, because they form "links by which a necklace firmly hooks onto a link of another necklace made of links" (p. 418). But it is important to note that these links are not merely arbitrary or random. Expanding upon the work of linguist Ferdinand de Saussure, Lacan maintained that, "rather than qualifying it as arbitrary, Saussure" would have done "better to qualify the signifier with the category of contingency" (1998a, p. 40). For Lacan, it is contingency that grants the unconscious its structure.

Providing the unconscious a structural organization determined by temporality, contingency is what binds the unconscious to the past in ways that facilitate the continuation of the jouissance of race in the present. Lacan explained this contingency by distinguishing between what he called "cause" – which is linked to "impediment, failure, split" (1998b, p. 25) – and the "law of the signifier" (p. 23). It can be argued that what linguists like Saussure identify is this law of the signifier, whereby signifiers operate through "themes of opposition" (p. 20) and

"functions of contrast and similitude," to form what Lacan termed a "synchrony" that structures the signifiers into their chain-like links (p. 46). As Lacan explained, however, it is "not only a network formed by random and contiguous associations" that is "involved in this synchrony," for "the signifiers were able to constitute themselves simultaneously only by virtue of a very defined structure of constituent diachrony" (p. 46). It is this diachronic linking of signifiers, punctuated across time, that reveals the unconscious to be structured contingently around a cause, around "something anti-conceptual, something indefinite" (p. 22). What organizes the signifiers is, most broadly, jouissance, the moments of bliss, defined by a surplus of pleasure and pain, around which the signifiers rally themselves. I tie this cause in the racist American Symbolic to the trauma of slavery, defining slavery as a social event of the past that temporally structures a diachronic relation to jouissance.[3] Organizing the Symbolic around signifiers of race that mediate psychic pleasure, this past produces race as a cross-temporal mode of access to the jouissance of being.

What slavery entailed at both a social and psychic level in the past, and what racism continues in the present, is a traumatic attack upon subjective fantasies of being for African Americans, fantasies that African Americans attempt to reaffirm through a revaluing of their racial identity. However, race itself, I argue, exacerbates for African Americans "the function of barring, the striking out of another thing" that Lacanian theory establishes to be inherent in the subject's relation to the Other's signifier, where the Other is the Symbolic order itself, the universe of meaning that deprives the subject of a psychic sense of being (1998b, p. 26). Initially serving to define the slave as chattel, as a mere signifier in a monetary system of exchange, race contributes to the "*aphanisis*" (p. 207) or "*fading* of the subject," who is forced to attain subjectivity via the signifier of the Other through a "lethal" (p. 208) choice Lacan called "the vel of alienation" (p. 218). This alienating vel involves a compulsory and fatal choice that each subject must make between meaning and being. Where meaning emerges through the signifier and produces subjectivity, being is an illusory autonomy and state of pleasure that can never fully exist within subjectivity because it requires freedom from the signifier, and thus from subjectivity. Lacan aligned the subject's choice with the no-win situation the slave confronts when standing face to face with his master, "*your freedom or your life*": what the master truly presents the slave with is a "neither one, nor the other" option (p. 211), whereby if the slave chooses life, he loses "both," or is granted only "a life deprived of something" essentially valuable (p. 212). Because of the subjugation justified by his racial identity, the slave thus personifies and makes manifest the condition of alienation inherent to all subjectivity.

This condition, as is exemplified by the slave and schematized in Figure 1 below, is one in which subjectivity, emerging through this vel, "condemns the subject" so that while the subject "appears on one side as meaning, produced by the signifier of the Other," he or she "appears on the other as *aphanisis*" (p. 210).

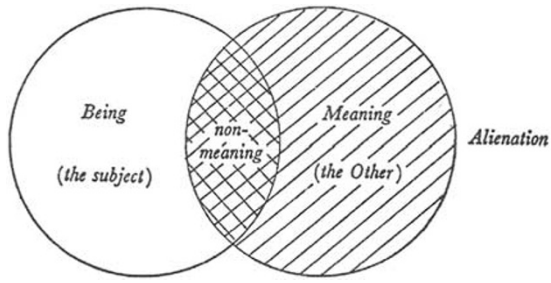

Figure 1: Alienation.
Source: Lacan, 1998b, p. 211.

Because choosing being means "the subject disappears completely," or more precisely, is incapable of accessing that zone of meaning that enables subjectivity, the subject necessarily chooses meaning (p. 211); but this "meaning survives" as subjectivity only while remaining "deprived of that part of non-meaning" that "constitutes" the "unconscious" (p. 211). The unconscious therefore arises through an overlapping of being and meaning, as that zone of "non-meaning" in which being is written over or stricken out by the signifier (p. 211).

However, the unconscious is also the place where the signifier, and indeed the racial signifier, overlaps with being to produce through fantasy the non-meaning of jouissance. In the space of this gap, the signifier, recalling the structures of pleasure emanating from the past, produces a mode of enjoyment that is grounded in illogic, irrationality and fantasy. Such recall grants especial importance to the historical binding of the slave not just to social but also psychic alienation. Where the slave is so fundamentally representative of the subject's relation to being, both he and his descendants remain open to fantasy-constructs through which the Symbolic defines the position in relation to being of its varied occupants. And at the intersection that is the unconscious, the meanings of the signifier coalesce with the lost being of the Real to produce unconscious, Imaginary fantasies of the overcoming of subjective lack, fantasies that are, in this case, grounded in the illusion of race. These illusions presume a fantasy internal object shared cross-temporally among the varied members of the races, an exclusionary object that if socially valorized can guarantee for each race an illusory relation to being and the Real. Thus unconsciously bound to both the Real and the Symbolic, race as this illusory, impossible possession – this Imaginary *object a* that is both within and absent from the subject – ultimately directs subjective desire toward the lost being of the Real.

Lacan presented two versions of this Real.[4] The first is constructed retroactively as a fantasy state of being, autonomy and wholeness. This is the fantasy that fuels the Imaginary of the mirror stage, wherein the child conflates him or herself with the mOther seen in the mirror, forming the gestalt of a single self who is misapprehended as one "whole" being. Where it is the onset of language that

enables the child to distinguish between I and you, mother and child, the time before this split retroactively arises in the child's psyche as the fantasy of a Real past of absolute contentment and psychic completion. It is a return to this state that race promises. But Lacan stresses that this notion of a prior "totality" (1998b, p. 25), this "false unity" thought to exist "anterior" to the split initiated by language, is nothing but "a mirage" (p. 26). It is not the case that this prior totality is now absent, but rather that "rupture," the splitting of the psyche into the conscious and the unconscious, "the stroke of the opening," makes "absence emerge" (p. 26). As the figure above conveys, the vel grants meaning and subjectivity while simultaneously producing a Real that defies language; this second Real is represented by the entire circle titled "being" in the above figure, a portion of which encircles the unconscious. As Lacan states, "the unconscious…is Real" (p. vii). Racial desire thus aims for a return to an illusory state of completion in which this Real comprising being and the unconscious is no longer elided; and this desire expresses itself most clearly in calls for racial unification, which, encroaching upon other more political motivations, position the other of the same race as the missing partner, the embodied absence as para-being, that can make the subject whole.

Here we understand the psychic urgencies that drive a perpetual, cross-temporal adherence to the concept of race. This promise to reproduce the illusory Real of a lost wholeness emerges because the splitting of the subject is inherently traumatic. Through pursuit of this illusory Real, the final, traumatic truth avoided by the racial subject is that subjecthood demands both an enduring condition of lack and a reduction of the subject to the status of a signifier. By gaining subjectivity through the institution of lack, Lacan asserted, "this subject – which, was previously nothing if not a subject coming into being – solidifies into a signifier" (1998b, p. 199). Famously arguing that the "signifier is that which represents a subject for another signifier," Lacan stressed that it is possible for each subject to gain meaning only by inserting him or herself into a preexisting signifying chain (p. 207). The fact that language "exists prior to each subject's entry into it" (2006a, p. 413), makes the subject the "slave of a discourse" in which "his place is already inscribed at his birth" (p. 414). Indeed, Lacan's assertion that "the unconscious is the Other's discourse" highlights that the subject is granted meaning only through a conflation of the self with the Other that leads to what Lacan termed the alienation of the subject (p. 436).

The fundamental relation of alienation to the signifier grants deeper insight into the racial subject's own alienation within the racist Symbolic. The alienated subject of the unconscious emerges through language as what Lacan called the S2, or the "binary signifier" (1998b, p. 218). This S2 is a composite of "the unary signifier" pinned to the subject "in the field of the Other" and the signifying chain within the Symbolic that is linked to this unary signifier (p. 218). Lacan called the unary signifier the S1, or "the first signifier," the master signifier that has no signified (p. 218). This master signifier can be aligned with the abstract identity

created for the child before its birth, which reduces the child to a S1. An example of this S1 may be the simple term "boy," which as an abstract master signifier determines numerous levels of the child's identity even before birth. However, this S1, boy, can only produce meaning for the child through its relation to other signifiers, such as girl, which then constitute the subject as a binary S2; what Lacan meant when he said "the subject is a signifier for another signifier" is precisely that there can be meaning only when two signifiers are involved, when we have an S2. The signifier "boy," and the subject who is pinned to this signifier, only attain meaning through those "themes of opposition" (p. 20) and "functions of contrast and similitude" that we have already seen are essential to the operations of the signifier (p. 46).

This fundamental dependence of the subject upon the signifier for meaning is what grants the signifying chain of the Other the capacity to alienate and indeed "petrify the subject" into a binary signifier (1998b, p. 207). The process of petrification, by which the subject's identity is solidified in the signifier of the Other, is in turn fortified and exacerbated by racial identity. If we shift the S1 that determines our new subject from "boy" to "black boy," we encounter an identity that threatens to solidify the subject into an S2 that produces subjective meaning in a chain of signifiers that articulate the stereotypes of race. This racial identity becomes the ossified surface under which is subsumed the absence that is the subject's lost being. Lacan asserted that the binary signifier "constitutes the central point…of what, from having passed into the unconscious, will be, as Freud indicates in his theory, the point of…attraction, through which all other repressions will be possible" (p. 218). What I suggest is that a central unconscious function of race is to stand as the signifier facilitating the repression of all aspects of the subjective-self that are aligned to being. If we turn to Frantz Fanon, one of the first theorists to apply psychoanalysis to race, we can better understand how this signifier works to produce racial identity as a central locus of fading and repression for the subject.

In chapter three of *Black Skin, White Masks*, Fanon (1967) focused on Jean Veneuse, a "Negro, 'who has raised himself through his own intelligence and his assiduous labors to the level of the thought and culture of Europe,' [but] is incapable of escaping race" (p. 67). Veneuse is in love with a white European woman who reciprocates his love, but he avoids pursuing the relationship by fearfully balancing his love against stereotypes that say "Negroes have only one thought from the moment they land in Europe: to gratify their appetite for a white woman" (p. 69). What Fanon revealed, however, is that Veneuse's fears are not tied directly to race, but to the fact that, at heart, Jean Veneuse is an "abandonment-neurotic," the essence of whose "attitude is 'not to love in order to avoid being abandoned'" (p. 76); Fanon stressed: "Jean Veneuse is a neurotic, and his color is only an attempt to explain his psychic structure. If this objective difference had not existed, he would have manufactured it out of nothing" (p. 78–79). What Fanon's reading allows us to see is the way that race emerges as the master signifier toward which all of

Veneuse's neurotic repressions are attracted. Because he embraces the signifiers and racial identity granted him by the Symbolic Other, Veneuse, the neurotic, is thus petrified under the racial signifier, incapable of confronting or recognizing his true psychic structure as neurotic. In Jean Veneuse is proof for Lacan's claim that "a whole series of cases" of psychic disturbances can be linked to the subject's return to or stagnation at a state in which "there is no interval between S1 and S2" (1998b, p. 237). Where race perpetuates identification with the Other's signifiers, what both Veneuse and the subject of race are in need of is a separation of the S2 binary chain that defines them from the S1 master signifier of race.

Separation, Impaired by Race

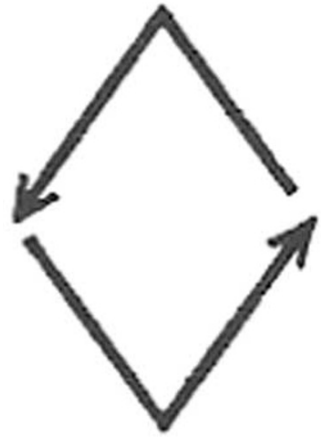

Figure 2: The Losange.
Source: Lacan, 1998b, p. 209.

Lacan described separation as the significant step through which the subject of desire truly emerges. As is shown in Figure 2 above, he schematized the alienating vel through the image of a letter V, above which is placed an inverted V to represent the reverse process of "separation" that completes the subject's loop of development into full subjectivity and binds the subject to a desire that emerges in the losange of the unconscious. In this separation, what the subject has to "free himself of is the aphanisic effect of the binary signifier" (1998b, p. 219). Rooting subjectivity in "scepticism" as what Lacan called "a mode of sustaining man in life" (p. 224), Lacanian theory ties the reversal of alienation to a "cynic[ism]" by which the subject questions the desire of the Other who grants the signifier (p. 238). This cynicism, which Lacan tied to the establishment of a more personal relation to one's own desire, constitutes what I would call an ethical stance for the subject of race, one in which this subject comes to interrogate and reject the racial signifiers that mandate the subject's relation to being and the Other.

For Lacan, the significant living Other within the Symbolic is both the mOther, who personifies the site of jouissance that is the illusory Real of wholeness, and the paternal authority, who represents the Symbolic and its law of desire but also facilitates alienation by granting access to the signifiers that define identity for the subject. Not accounting particularly for race as a complicating factor in this process of separation, Lacanian theory nonetheless shows that in separation the subject must first move toward recognition of the desire/lack both of the subject and of the mOther, who functions as a fantasy source of bliss. The goal here is to shift from a stultifying obsession with being and bliss toward an embrace of the signifier and fantasy. Lacan explained, "[I]t is in so far as his desire is beyond or falls short of what she says, of what she hints at, of what she brings out in meaning, it is in so far as his desire is unknown, it is in this point of lack [recognizable in the desiring mOther's meanings], that the desire of the subject is constituted" (p. 218–219). By filling the gaps left in the mOther's discourse with his own meanings and fantasies, the subject thus constitutes in the losange of his unconscious a desire that institutes separation from the mOther.

What emerges in this separation produced by desire and fantasy is the desiring subject whose completion of the loop from alienation to separation Lacan presented in his formula for fantasy, $\$\lozenge a$, read as the barred subject in relation to the fantasy object. But it is precisely a relation to this fantasy object that complicates matters for the subject of race. Because in the racist American Symbolic the goal of the signifier is to aggrandize the lost bliss of the Real, the Symbolic functions actively to impair the raced subject's separation from this Real while also fortifying this subject's alienation by the signifier. Lacanian scholar Kalpana Seshadri-Crooks has shown that the Symbolic is structured around the racial signifier whiteness, which functions as a "master signifier" by establishing a "structure of relations, a signifying chain that through a process of inclusions and exclusions constitutes a pattern for organizing human difference" (2008, p. 4). Though securing for only whites the hierarchal fantasy of their "sovereign humanness," whiteness presents itself as the ideal to which all subjects aspire (p. 55). Despite the subject's alienation from not only the part of the self constituted as the non-meaning of the unconscious but also the impossible Real, what this master signifier "promises the subject is precisely access to being" (p. 45), thus directing the racial subject toward the very Real from which this subject must separate.

It is this obsessive pursuit of the Real, thus encouraged by race, that can lead to the violence and frustration of racism. This frustration arises because whiteness can never reconstitute being. In truth, whiteness functions only as the *object a* that merely *promises* wholeness by simultaneously masquerading as the phallus, the castrated object that manifests the illusory site of bliss in the Imaginary form of the subjective-self. Distinguishing the phallus from "the organ" (2006b, p. 579), Lacan associated the phallus with Imaginary fantasies of lack, fantasies about "exclusion[s] from the specular image" (p. 697). It is such fantasies of

bodily parts "falling off" from the Imaginary self that define the aggressivity, or sense of psychic fragmentation, that may lead to the aggression that invades race relations. Whiteness produces such aggressivity because it aims at an impossible ideal of completion that no living subject – not even a white subject – can ever embody. Providing ideals both for the physical human form and for its fragmented psychic structure that simply are unattainable, the very term "white" marks its own discursive and fantasy function by defying the phenotypic reality of all subjects. With the subject of race remaining incapable of maintaining in actuality the two central positions in relation to being articulated by Lacanian theory, those of either "being" or "having" the phallus, the best this subject can do is position himself as having the fantasy *object a* that functions as referent to the phallus, the illusory remainder that when positioned within the self leaves even the white subject always one step removed from the ideal he seeks to embody (p. 582). There is thus a fundamental frustration, insufficiency and aggressivity awakened by this ideal called forth by the illusion of whiteness.

The problem with contemporary theoretical and political approaches to the aggression and racism that still plague race relations today is that their frequent reliance upon the concept of race precludes engagement with this fundamental aggressivity produced by the concept itself. While recognizing the destructive power and persistence of the illusion of race, the attempt made by numbers of African American scholars is not to destroy this illusion; instead, it is to give the illusion new mythical meaning by adopting a process of resignification that is made intelligible by Derridean poststructuralist theory. Tying agency to resignification of existing signifiers, Jacques Derrida, the father of poststructuralism, described the need to ground what we may call a critical stance toward the Other in a process modeled by the "bricoleur" (Derrida, 1978, p. 285). As skeptical critic, the bricoleur recognizes "the necessity of borrowing one's concepts from the text of a heritage which is more or less coherent or ruined" (p. 285). His task is to embrace the "received historical discourse" while altering its meaning by putting it to a use for which it "had not been especially conceived" (p. 285). It is this approach of the bricoleur that African Americans have often embraced in accepting the terms of race posited by the racist Symbolic.

This approach is driven by the need to reinforce a sense of being that was visibly challenged by slavery and continues to be challenged by racism. In Lacanian terms, the goal here is to alter the fantasy relation to being. This alteration is addressed most directly at the *object a* that structures fantasies of race. Where it is the *a* that stands as the internal object common to members of the race – the fantasy essence within each African American – rearticulation of African American identity is aimed at revaluing this internal, fantasy self. This self is what is devalued in the racist Symbolic as the *object a* of whiteness gains the discursive dominance that facilitates its masquerade as phallus, as signifier of being and jouissance. It is thus only through this glorification of the fantasy object thought to link African Americans intersubjectively that the subject rooted

in this identity establishes a relation to being, thereby alienating himself in the signifiers that also liberate him.

This paradoxical path toward freedom through alienation creates what I would identify as an ambivalent relation to race for African Americans, whereby they challenge its racist implications by embracing the distinctions of self and other it promotes. But because the very function of race is to make the self and other knowable only through fantasy – by which the racial other is not only already defined, but is also often already defined as enemy – what I propose is a traversal of the fantasy of race. This traversal involves separation not only from the Real represented by the mother, but also from the Symbolic that redirects the raced subject to this Real through buttressing the fantasy *a* of race. While racial identity can petrify the subject into the signifier of his or her race, thus contributing to the aphanisis of the raced subject's being, I argue that through a cynical questioning of the mandates and signifiers of the racial Symbolic the raced subject may attain an "obstacle to his fading," one that involves this subject coming to "recognize" his racial desire "as desire of the Other," as a desire shaped by a Symbolic structure that precedes and delimits the raced subject's existence (1998b, p. 235).

The Drive and Traversal of the Racial Fantasy

Most important in this traversal of race is an essential recognition of the lack in the signifiers of the Other, a recognition that the signifier does not capture the subject's entire being. Especially apparent in signifiers of race – like "black boy" –, there is always a left over, a part of the self that cannot emerge fully through the racial signifiers' subjective meanings. It is this very failure of the signifier that is highlighted in Figure 1, wherein the circle of being designates an entire portion of the split subject that exists in the Real and is only partially accessible through the unconscious. The first implication of the fact that being is elided by the signifier's meaning is that, as we have seen, the subject is thus petrified into a signifier and simultaneously alienated from that part of the self that can be, but is not, signified by language, that part situated in the unconscious, where being and signification overlap to create non-meaning. But more radical than this is the implication that there is a part of the subject that is not available to the operations of the signifier but yet may express itself through desire, the part that comprises the rest of the circle of being. As Lacan argued, desire is "the metonymy of our being," and the "channel in which desire is located is not simply that of the modulation of the signifying chain" (1997, p. 321). This desire, I suggest, is what can facilitate an ethical separation of the S1 and S2, creating critical distance from the signifier and opening up a space for the subject to access better that of the self which escapes the signifier.

If we return to Fanon's Jean Veneuse, what we see is exactly a desire for abandonment that escapes signification and indeed grants structure to the signifiers that define subjectivity, organizing them by their effort to repress this desire. The escape of desire from the signifier is possible because the Lacanian subject is not merely the subject of the signifier, who "appears in the field of the Other," but also "the subject in the field of the drive," (1998b, p. 199), where desire functions as that which is "agitated in the drive" (p. 243). Characterized by a "constant force," a tension that is at odds with the homeostasis and delayed gratification promised by the signifier (p. 164), the drive is "different from any stimulation coming from the outside world" because it is an "internal" force (p. 164). It emerges from the libido as "pure life instinct," "irrepressible" and "indestructible life" (p. 198). This libido, manifesting itself most appropriately as that which "the sexed being loses in sexuality" (p. 197), is connected to Freud's notion of the subject as initially "polymorphous, aberrant," able to attain pleasure from all sources, but as subsequently forced to localize pleasure in the erogenous zones (p. 176). The signifier and the mores of the Symbolic institute a homeostasis that restricts "sexuality," as a manifestation of the force of the libido, into coming "into play only in the form of partial drives" (p. 176), so that we "deal only with that part of sexuality that passes" into "the networks of the signifier" (p. 177); but the force of this immortal libido insistently marks its presence at the site of the "gaps that the distribution of the signifying investments sets up in the subject" (p. 180). We see this insistence, for example, in parapraxis, as something slips through the network of the signifier, something emerging from the "losage ◊," from the unconscious as a gap that Lacan places "at the centre of any relation" between "reality and the subject" (p. 181). It is because the force of what emerges from the unconscious in this movement outward directs the subject to the Other that the drive holds particular importance to an understanding of race.

What race encourages through the Other is substitution of desire for the drive, as it petrifies the subject in a stagnant relation to the fantasy object. The movement of the drive involves a "circular" path out from the gaps of subjectivity toward the Other and back to the subject (1998b, p. 178). In the place of the Other, the drive encounters and closes in on "the *petit a*," which is "in fact simply the presence of a hollow, a void" that "can be occupied by any object" but that functions as representative of the "lost object" (p. 180). In the American Symbolic, I contend, the *object a* of race, acquired from the Other, binds the racial subject to this circular path around a hollow that serves as the source of identity. Unlike the path of desire, which involves a continual metonymic movement from object to object in search of a source of satisfaction, the drive endlessly circles its illusive object, "attaining its satisfaction without attaining its aim" (p. 179). While failing to attain the racial identity represented by the *object a* of race, the subject of race yet still remains bound to the *a* because the *a* of race becomes integral to the drive's function not just of "*making oneself seen*," but more fundamentally of "*making oneself*" (p. 195). In encountering the *object a*

defined by the Other, the subject acquires in this object, in race, a "little mirror," an "illusion" of self, to which the subject may "accommodate his own image" (p. 159). We can say that in race the subject "assumes the role of the object," embracing the reversal whereby it is the jouissance and demands of the Other that are privileged (p. 185).

But this static objectification stifles the metonymy of desire. The fantasy object petrifying the self becomes the master signifier through which a "primal" repression of being is achieved, and what is "built on" the signifier, as we saw with Vaneuse, is "the symptom" of the subject, "constituted" as a "scaffolding of signifiers" (1998b, p. 176). It is because of the satisfaction gained from the symptom, the jouissance and sense of being granted by race as the soul or remnant of a lost being, that the drive need not reach its aim of hitting the mark set by race as *object a*. This satisfaction is sustained as the source of a subjective self with "nothing else" ensuring its "consistency except the object, as something that must be circumvented," something both aimed at and missed (p. 181). Lacan tied the pleasure of the symptom upheld by the drive to a kind of autoeroticism that he described in the image of "a mouth sewn up" in "certain silences," closed "upon its own satisfaction" (p. 179). It is this closing up upon a jouissance of pain and pleasure, this insertion into the self of the Other's signifier, that I associate with race.

However, Lacanian theory also shows that "by snatching at its object, the drive learns in a sense that this is precisely not the way it will be satisfied" (1998b, p. 167). I suggest that the existing ambivalence about race of both African Americans and white Americans makes possible increased recognition that race does not produce the sovereign humanness or supreme satisfaction that binds subjects to race as a fantasy source of being. Though the extent to which recent events in America mark a permanent shift in relations to the signifiers of race is yet to be seen, whiteness itself and the very value of race have been cynically questioned in the wake of publicized incidents of "white"-on-"black" murders – like the shootings of Trayvon Martin by George Zimmerman, and Jordan Davis by Michael Dunn – and police-on- "black" killings, like the death of Eric Garner in an illegal chokehold by New York police who alleged he was unlawfully selling cigarettes.[5] In light of active protests in Missouri after 18-year-old Michael Brown was shot by police in the streets of Ferguson, some have even argued optimistically that we are bearing witness to a "new civil rights movement which has sprung up" (Ifill, 2014). Whether or not this movement comes to full fruition, it is precisely a process of bearing witness that is key to its development thus far. What I suggest has occurred in the immediate aftermath of the killing of these black men is a shift in many Americans' scopic relation to the Other.

At issue in this shift is the gaze of the Other, which Lacan stated "has the effect of arresting movement" and halting transgression (1998b, p. 118). What objectifies the subject, as the movement of his or her drive binds the subject to the jouissance of the *a*, is subjection to an "entirely hidden gaze" of the Other,

which the subject positions as a policing authority for whom the subject performs his or her identity (p. 182). This disembodied observer and judge constitutes an extimacy that polices unconscious desires, ensuring that "it is in the space of the Other that [the subject] sees himself and the point from which he looks at himself is also in that space" (p. 144). This space of the "capital Other," Lacan said, is the "locus of speech," the Symbolic (p. 129). Where Lacan associated this locus with the law, the law of the father and the law of desire, it can be said that this hidden gaze is often given presence by the police. Embodying the arresting gaze that "surprises" the subject in his moment of transgression, the police should allow to arise "the conflagration of shame" that realigns the subject's desire away from the pathological object of his or her fixation (p. 182). But while the police of Ferguson have facilitated an ostensive realignment of America's subjective relation to the object of race, they have done so by also largely dispossessing themselves of the agency of the shaming gaze.

Indeed, after the killing of the unarmed Michael Brown by police on August 18th, 2014, the agency of the shaming gaze was notably transferred to the community and the larger American and international public in turn. The community was the first to watch as the body of Michael Brown lay in the streets for hours. Marking this indignity in his eulogy at Brown's funeral, the Reverend Al Sharpton recalls that for "four and a half hours" the "family couldn't come to the ropes" but were left to watch "Dogs sniffin' through" (2014). Explaining that it signaled to him "how many of us are considered nothing," how "we were just so marginalized and ignored," Sharpton displays his own struggles against a Symbolic that destroys African Americans' fantasies of being (2014): he emphasizes, it was like Brown's "life value didn't matter" (2014). But Sharpton's rhetoric throughout the eulogy also marks the shift of the public gaze toward the Ferguson police and America itself. He asks, "How do you think we look when the world can see you can't come up with a police report?" – which was only produced with sparse details almost two weeks after the shooting – and "how do you think we look when young people march nonviolently asking for the land of the free and the home of the brave to hear their cry, and you put snipers on the roof and point guns on them?" (2014). Highlighting what many in the media and the public see as excessive force in the police's response to protestors, Sharpton exhorts, "America, it's time to deal with policing" (2014).

Sharpton's rhetoric echoes a larger national shift whereby the authority of the police as enforcer of the law and holder of the gaze is cynically challenged. As a reverend himself, Sharpton transfers the gaze from the earthly agency of the law to the divine agency of God, asking the mourners, "What does the Lord require of you" as response to the killing? (2014). But Sharpton finally pins both agency and responsibility to the self, arguing that "nobody gonna help us if we don't help ourselves," so "we've got to [start] a movement" (2014). Throughout, Sharpton's rhetoric directs the shaming gaze to the police by positioning this gaze as the possession alternately of the community, Americans in general,

the international community that sees an America bound to practices of the past, and the heavenly authority who is positioned in judgment of all these participants. The eulogy contributes to and charts the optical shift that, now making the Ferguson police the object of the shaming gaze, has led not only to public calls for body cameras to document police activity but also to federal investigation of the Ferguson police department by the United States Department of Justice. This shifting of the gaze goes some way toward freeing the subject from the power of the policing Other, whose abuse and even transgressions of the law unveil the inherent racism of the Symbolic itself. With the Symbolic Other's capacity to define the raced African American subject cynically challenged, the individual African American is positioned to define more freely his or her own identity.

The possibility opened up here is dual, offering the subject access to an identity grounded in a reconfigured relation either to the fantasy *a* or to an individual desire actuated by the drive. Already emulating the metonymy of desire, the shifting of the gaze away from the line of sight traced in the vision of the policing Other and toward perception of the violent excesses this Other embraces because of race, opens up the *object a* of race to reevaluation by diverse onlookers. Through this displacement of the gaze, the violence that emerges from racial identity can be put to uses for which it was not intended, helping to fortify the poststructuralist approach of evolving African American identity through the bricolage of self-redefinition. But it can also, at the more individual level of the subject who is racialized as African American, issue a challenge to the very concept of race itself.

Conclusion

Though the ethical responsibility of issuing this challenge to the concept of race is ceded through the glorification of the *a*, this responsibility is established even in the model of poststructuralism that holds such sway over contemporary thinking about social change, wherein the ultimate aim of the theory is not an essentialist but a strategic deployment of identity. In the poststructuralist vision, because the given identity is "never fully owned," it remains open to "urgent and expanding political purposes" that demand shifting allegiances across such lines as race, class and gender (Butler, 1993, p. 228). But while poststructuralism produces this politics driven by a metonymic shift in subjective positionality by assuming a center-less self untethered from all identity, I envision through psychoanalysis the subject's encounter with an excluded center masked by the illusions of this subject's embraced identities. Where belief in race threatens to bind the subject to the fantasies of wholeness secured by the *object a*, and where true poststructuralist resignification of race

forecloses recognition of the deeper drives that guide the identity politics of the individual subject, such a potentially seminal moment in the reconfiguration of race offers the racialized subject a unique opportunity to attempt a Lacanian traversal of race that can ground individual political activity in deeper recognition of the subject's desire.

Lacan specified that the *object a* "plays the role of obturator," inhibiting such recognition by facilitating the "closing of the unconscious" (1998b, p. 144). Aimed at an impossible wholeness, what the *object a* of race attempts is to fill the constitutive gaps in the subject, the spaces left unoccupied by the subject's absent being. But Lacanian theory stipulates that the "subject who has traversed the radical fantasy [can] experience the drive" that exudes from the space of these gaps (p. 273). Where this drive is an expression of the undirected libido whose "effective presence" is registered only in "desire," it is through the process of reorienting one's desire away from such fantasies as race that the subject may begin the process of experiencing and directing this internal tension of the drive (p. 153). Through the process of "mapping" one's own desire in one's cynical questioning of the *object a* presented by the Other (p. 273), the subject is placed upon the "track of something that is specifically [her] business," situating herself in relation to a desire and drive that is particularly her own belonging (1997, p. 319). It is perhaps most likely that the recent attention to repeated incidents of deadly violence to black men will not produce sustained social skepticism about the value of race, for "the loop" of the fundamental fantasy, Lacan stressed, "must be run through several times" if the subject is to free himself truly from the illusions of the Other. However, the unconscious gap opened up by this cynical response to race at the national level allows essential space for the initial movements of the individual subject of race along the path of this loop.

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Notes

1 For a fuller discussion of this and other parts of my argument, see my forthcoming book, *Trauma and Race*.

2 See especially Miller (1994) for more on the concept of extimacy.

3 I present a more extensive reading of the trauma of slavery in a 2001 issue of this journal (George, 2001).

4 For more on these versions of the Real, see especially Fink (1997) and Shepherdson (1996).
5 Popular identification of Zimmerman as "white" has called attention to the violence that such categories encourage; simultaneously, Zimmerman's self-identification as Hispanic and his descent from a "white" father and Peruvian mother have urged many to complicate the category of whiteness (Gamboa, 2012).

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