
Original Article

Introduction: Lacanian praxis and social intervention

Sheldon George^{a,*}  and Derek Hook^b

^aSimmons College, 300 The Fenway, Boston, MA 01880, USA.
E-mail: Sheldon.George@simmons.edu

^bDuquesne University, 600 Forbes Avenue, Pittsburgh, PA 15282, USA.
E-mail: hookd@duq.edu

*Corresponding author.

Abstract Jacques Lacan's pronouncement that psychoanalysis is a praxis extends the relevance of psychoanalytic thinking and practice far beyond the confines of the clinic into the realm of the political. This introduction to the special issue on "Lacanian Psychoanalysis: Interventions into Culture and Politics" highlights a series of crucial Lacanian concepts and interventions within the political. Key concepts for a Lacanian social and political theory touched upon here include the notions of the act; the gaze; the lamella; *jouissance*; *object petit a*; and the sinthome. Crucial domains of political struggle and intervention addressed include the areas of race and racism (inclusive of questions of African American history and identity); the Trans movement; the ongoing political relevance of Frantz Fanon; and the re-conceptualization of post-traumatic forms of political subjectivity.

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In the final issue of *Psychoanalysis, Culture and Society* to appear under their editorship, Lynne Layton and Peter Redman (2017) stress the ongoing struggle that “some psychoanalytic traditions have [with] acknowledging the impact of the social world on unconscious life” (p. 352). They urge contributors and readers of the journal to address in the years ahead the “sheer difficulty involved in trying to specify those properties of the social world that might be unconscious and how these can be said to operate at a



scale and over time” (p. 359). It is just such an effort to identify the unconscious in the social that we embrace in this special issue of *Psychoanalysis, Culture and Society*.

Titled “Lacanian Psychoanalysis: Interventions into Culture and Politics,” this special issue emerges in the wake of drastic social and political changes that have accompanied the rise of new governmental administrations and radical economic restructuring in America and Europe. The essays in this issue contextualize these changes through investigations of resilient modes of desire and *jouissance* structured around various forms of alterity, including racial and gender identity. They explicitly engage the social through the lens of Lacanian theory, a form of psychoanalysis often seen by critics as disconnected from the sociopolitical in precisely the manner discussed by Layton and Redman.

Providing an apt example of the frequent sociopolitical critique made of Lacanian theory, psychoanalytic scholar Hortense Spillers (2003) has stressed the urgent need to theorize the psychic with the social through a proclamation that Lacanian psychoanalysis “has no eyes for the grammar and politics of power” (p. 386). What the editors of this issue find at the heart of Lacan’s work, however, is a distinctive recognition of psychoanalysis as a praxis. In its broadest terms, Lacan (1979) explains, a praxis “designate[s] a concerted human action” that “places man in a position to treat the real by the symbolic” (p. 6). We suggest that this emphasis on psychoanalysis as not so much a body of theory but a practice, an exercise, or indeed, a *mode of action*, steers one beyond narrow conceptualizations that regard psychoanalysis primarily (or even exclusively) as a clinical or psychotherapeutic modality.

Significantly, Lacan’s designation of psychoanalysis as a praxis comes in January 1964, at the very beginning of his Seminar XI (*The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis*) where, fresh from his “excommunication” from the International Psychoanalytical Association, he begins to consider what is most essential to psychoanalysis, contemplating also psychoanalysis’ status as a science. What pre-empts Lacan’s (1979) calculations is precisely the fact that “praxis delimits a field” (p. 8). Rather than beginning with a presumed object or circumscribed domain—both of which are typically regarded as necessary pre-conditions for the founding of a given science—Lacan insists on a practice that recognizes the agency of the Symbolic upon the Real. In such an insistence, suffice to say, the clinical realm is not necessarily primary; the imperative of “treat[ing] the real by the symbolic” speaks as much to the social and political fields as to that of the psychotherapeutic (p. 6).

Where the Symbolic, in Lacanian terms, is the universe of language and law that intersects so noticeably with the social, the Real is that exclusion from the Symbolic, overlapping with the unconscious, around which the Symbolic protectively structures itself. It is this Real that establishes the contours of our desires, bringing structure to our fears, conflicts, and unconscious pursuits. As such, the subjective relation to what occupies the space of the Real can become



a determinant factor in our political and social activity. Circumscribing this Real, therefore, which also inflects the unconscious, moves one significantly along the route set out by Layton and Redman. Such circumscription facilitates our fundamental efforts in this issue to specify both the unconscious in the social and the social in the unconscious.

As editors, we aim not just to trace, but also, ultimately, to *intervene* in the interdependent psychic and sociopolitical frames that motivate our scripted or unconscious responses toward forms of alterity. In his discussion of whether psychoanalysis is a science—or should even endeavor to become one—Lacan asserts that the work of analysis does not involve the mere repetition of established methodologies that lead to the same discoveries. It is not, he argues, a matter of “discovering in a particular case” the predictable “differential features of the theory” and “in doing so believ[ing] that one is explaining why your daughter is silent” (p. 11). What makes psychoanalysis more a praxis than a science is precisely its function as an “intervention,” its concentrated endeavor to, as Lacan puts it, get your daughter “*to speak*” (p. 11). The papers in this issue recognize that the Lacanian understanding of subjectivity as shaped by language also means the Symbolic ever intrudes upon the unconscious and the Real. They embrace, therefore, an interventional praxis aimed at the impediment of the Real itself. What our special issue suggests is that it is by “overcoming the barrier of silence” (p. 11), through adumbrating this Real within the ambit of a Lacanian psychoanalysis fully cognizant of the Real’s potency, that we, as scholars and practitioners, may impact the sociopolitical realities of our times.

The essays we have gathered here seek to treat the Real by the Symbolic through a variety of engagements with the political and the social. Derek Hook’s “Racism and *jouissance*” provides a suitable opening. Written in a style equally accessible to general readers of the journal and specialized Lacanians, it foregrounds one of the issue’s central concepts: *jouissance*, that is, libidinal enjoyment, the terrain of morbid bodily excitation, which is one privileged form of the Lacanian Real. By both introducing and critically exploring the conceptual/analytical strengths (and limitations) of this notion for instances of social critique, Hook is able to show how racism—like other forms of ideology and power that animate the passions and fantasies of subjects and communities alike—is inextricably interwoven with the libidinal “substance” of enjoyment. Hook’s article offers a series of insightful conceptual and methodological clarifications that prove invaluable for any sociopolitical application of the notion. *Jouissance*, he argues, exists in (at least) three interconnected modes (as bodily excitation, libidinal treasure—or *objet petit a*—and surplus vitality of the other). It is, additionally, more of a “sociological” than a “psychological” concept, one which for Hook cannot be utilized in any rigorous way without reference to a series of accompanying psychoanalytic notions (drive, fantasy, *objet petit a*, and superego). Perhaps most crucially of all, Hook argues that to



omit analytical attention to *jouissance* in the conceptualization of racism means to not have adequately grasped racism's psychical and historical tenacity.

Sheldon George's "Jouissance and discontent" focuses precisely on this tenacity of racial structures bound to *jouissance*. In a cross-disciplinary investigation that anchors Lacanian theory within deep historical and literary analysis, George argues that American slavery actively produced an upsurge of *jouissance*. Recontextualizing Freud within the historical frame of slavery, he declares that this *jouissance* structured Antebellum American southern society around the very instinctual passions that Freud (1930/1961) suggests should lead to civilization's disintegration. George's reading gives newly urgent meaning and value to traditional Lacanian concepts like the *Vel* of alienation, suture, and the *object a* by tying slavery to a subjective condition of psychic alienation unveiled for the slave but masked for the master. He argues that slavery situated the slave as *object a*, transforming this slave into the instrument that sutures the constitutive gap of the white master's psyche. Through engagement with Lacan's reading of capitalism as productive of a surplus *jouissance* that compensates for loss through fantasy, George points to an emergent economics in the 17th century that included the Atlantic Slave Trade and made surplus *jouissance* accessible through possession of the *object a*'s social representatives. To demonstrate African Americans' resistance to this psychic alienation confronting them in slavery, George turns to the anthropological work of Zora Neale Hurston, tying this resistance to African Americans' fabrication of a notion of the soul that positions this soul as their own internally possessed *object a*. He traces the gradual replacement of this soul with race as the fantasy *object a* within African Americans that comes to ground their group identity. Ultimately displaying the essential function of the *object a* in constituting the very concept of race, George's essay incisively presents race as an apparatus of *jouissance*; it declares race a tool, created in slavery but still fully operative today, for mediating the contemporary subject's relation to the Real of his or her psychic lack.

Stephanie Swales' "Transphobia in the bathroom" brings us solidly within the frame of today's struggles with *jouissance* and the other's alterity. Patricia Gherovici (2017) has recently argued that the trans movement represents the new frontier of Civil Rights, insisting that it also holds the potential to reform—indeed, to queer—psychoanalysis of its often heterosexist and explicitly pathologizing attitudes to "non-normative" sexualities. Swales' essay is a crucial intervention into current debates and struggles surrounding this movement. Proceeding adeptly across different periods in Lacan's work—from his early conceptualizations of the mirror stage, logical time, and the agentic nature of the signifier, to the later theories of sexuation, the social bond, and the sinthome—Swales gathers various elements of Lacanian, and indeed Freudian theory, to enable a non-essentialist understanding of sexuation. As Swales makes clear, Lacanian sexuation stands importantly apart from commonplace notions of



gender identity or biological sex, referring instead to an *unconscious choice* in which a person adopts a sexual positioning determined neither by anatomical sexual characteristics nor by gender as social construction. Swales makes the point—of considerable importance for political applications of Lacanian theory more generally—that Lacanian psychoanalysis, with its emphasis on the uniqueness of the subject engaged in such unconscious choice, is both explicitly anti-normative and opposed to forms of homogeneity and totalization. In this respect, Lacanian theorization shares common ground with queer theory and trans studies. Paralleling the discussions in the foregoing papers by both Hook and George, Swales engages questions of alterity and *jouissance* within a specified sociopolitical and ideological sphere, asking: Why does the figure of the trans person elicit such anxiety, hatred, and aggression? Contextualized within the current debates over transsexuals' use of public restrooms—spaces in which, she argues, fantasies of bodily coherence and integrity are inherently threatened—Swales provides a multifaceted analysis of the passionate defense of given gender identifications and the active generation of fantasies regarding the other's *jouissance* that today frequently confront transgender subjects.

Taking up this focus on alterity in another vein, Michelle Stephens' "Skin, stain and lamella" rereads Lacan's concept of the lamella, the mythical organ that manifests the pure libido of the drive, through Frantz Fanon's conceptualization of the racial epidermalization of the black subject. Returning to the famous scene of Fanon's (1967) encounter with the gaze of the white child who hails him upon his disembarking a train in Paris—"Look, a Negro" (p. 109)—Stephens reads this act of interpellation into blackness as manifesting psychic effects for both the black subject and his white viewer, shifting theoretical focus away from more common discussions of race as a signifier of lack toward a fuller recognition of the intersubjective dynamics at play in the racial encounter at the levels of what Lacan calls the gaze and the eye. Where the racial epidermal skin is scripted by the Symbolic as a lure for the eye that desires to see difference, Stephens reads this skin as having an underside that manifests Lacan's lamella. This fleshy, invaginated under-layer as Real, suggests Stephens, is what flies away to escape the Symbolic constructs of epidermalization and the phallic fantasies of race. Emphasizing Lacan's reading of the drive as bound to rim-like structures on the body that constitute junctures between the libido of the Real and the external Symbolic world, Stephens imagines a notion of skin and lamella that underscores the intersubjective desires of racialized subjects seeing and being seen by each other. Her work actively theorizes a phenomenological, bodily experience of the self. Through Fanon, it pushes Lacanian theory toward fuller recognition of a self that touches and is touched by the other: a self that is the site of an inter-corporal drive, at the nexus of the skin, that links Symbolic and Real, social and psychic.

In "The act reconsidered," Louis Matheou engages this Real and Symbolic to reconceptualize both political agency and the relation of psychoanalysis to



traumatized subjectivity. The notion of the act has become something of a focal point in Lacanian social and political theory, particularly in respect to questions of how a given political status quo might be challenged, subverted, or even wholly uprooted (Pluth, 2007; Žižek, 2005, 2014). In a reading that is at once provocative and original, Matheou reconsiders the notion of the Lacanian act and proposes the existence of a novel version of this act: the “actcident.” Not only does Matheou’s paper provide an impressive overview of the Lacanian literature dealing with the notion of the act, he also takes up the challenge of responding to Catherine Malabou’s (2012) assertion that there is a new form of post-traumatic and political subjectivity (that of the “new wounded”) that lies beyond the remit of Lacanian psychoanalysis. Antigone is the key protagonist in Matheou’s exposition of the *actcident*, and for a crucial reason: she can be said to lie outside the fundamental law of the exclusion of the traumatic Real and still be expositied through the Lacanian conception of the subject. The theoretical stakes here are high, and not only inasmuch as Matheou contributes to our understanding of what political agency might be. Matheou’s wager is that the conceptualization of the subject of the *actcident* will ensure—contrary to Malabou’s expectations—the continuing relevance of the psychoanalytic reading of post-traumatic political subjectivity.

In our final piece for the issue, “The deontology of a political psychoanalysis,” we interview clinician and Lacanian scholar Patricia Gherovici to discuss the ethical concerns confronting psychoanalysis in the wake of shifting social changes in our historical moment. We turn to Dr. Gherovici because of her pioneering work bridging the psychological and sociopolitical in her engagement with patients who are often poor and/or queer identified. Dr. Gherovici describes her early work’s recognition of new questions being asked by patients: not the expected hysterical question of “Am I a man or a woman?” but its contemporary rearticulation as “Am I straight or bisexual?” She argues that we are in a new politically contentious “transgender moment,” the impact of which she recognizes in the anxieties of her patients. Dr. Gherovici calls for a deontology within psychoanalysis that questions the limits of the analyst’s political neutrality in the wake of the Symbolic’s impact upon what manifests psychically in the clinician’s office. This deontology urges a psychoanalysis that is more than purely clinical in its orientation, and rooted in appreciation for the manner in which the social structures desire and subjective relations to *jouissance* for analysands. What Dr. Gherovici promotes, finally, is exploration of the analysands’ own *sinthome*, the symptom, expressive of their relation to the Real, that analysands may seek to transform into a creative strategy for psychic and bodily survival within the social-Symbolic. Indeed, she argues that what is political is to recognize the *singularity* of the subject’s *sinthome*, suggesting that, as is the case in Dr. Gherovici’s own practice, such a recognition is often the necessary ethical response to a request that reaches the analyst from the borders of the subject’s life and death.



Dr. Gherovici's insistence on the *sinthome*—along with Stephens' privileging of the lamella, Matheou's delineation of the *actcident*, and George's unveiling of the *object a* that structures an internal African American soul—point to the manner in which subjects compensate for traumatic confrontations with the Real that are orchestrated by the Symbolic. But these varied conceptualizations also point to the Symbolic's master discourses of otherness—homophobia, racism, sexism, trans-phobia, islamophobia, xenophobia—as themselves agitated by anxious efforts to evade the subjective, psychic reality of lack. A crucial reference point for George, Hook, and Swales is Lacan's (1990), and subsequently Jacques-Alain Miller's (1994) psychoanalytic theorizations of racism, both of which necessarily highlight the roles of *jouissance* and the *object a* in the maintenance of virulent and antagonistic social structures. This convergence in these authors' focus points to an imperative underlined by virtually all of the papers in this special issue: the political importance of understanding the role of the *object petit a*—and particularly an apparently *threatened object a*—in contemporary and historical formations of power and dispossession.

While not a psychoanalytic theorist, the Black Lives Matter activist and historian Christopher Lebron (2017) highlights a decisive factor in both the maintenance of given structures of privilege and the aggressive reactions to any challenge to the sociopolitical and cultural norms associated with such structures.

[M]any of our white counterparts [...] are afraid, so very afraid [...] their fear is not a motivation to totally eliminate our presence. Rather, they are afraid to be without us in the exact position we are today. Were black Americans to occupy true and genuine equal standing with white Americans, the cachet of being a white American would evaporate before our very eyes. (p. 160)

Here Lebron deftly pinpoints the particular *object petit a*, that is, “the cachet of being a white” heterosexual, cis gendered subject that is being both so perilously disrupted and aggressively reasserted in these political times. Slavoj Žižek (1997) succinctly defines *jouissance* as a lost bliss associated with the absent Real, an “objectless ecstasy” that is imagined to be lost by the subject and “subsequently” is “attached to some historically determined representation,” some manifested *object a* that promises compensation for losses both psychic and social (p. 50). It is this binding of the Real to the Symbolic, we argue, that makes essential a Lacanian psychoanalysis aimed at treating the Real through incisive analytic intervention into its Symbolic manifestations.



About the Authors

Sheldon George is an Associate Professor of English at Simmons College in Boston, Massachusetts. He directs the English Graduate Program and teaches courses on American and African American literature, along with courses on cultural and literary theory. His scholarship focuses primarily upon African American literature and culture, and on Lacanian psychoanalytic theory. His most recent publications include a Lacanian reading of Toni Morrison's *Beloved* that appeared in *African American Review* and a coedited special issue of *Psychoanalysis, Culture and Society* on "African Americans and Inequality." His book *Trauma and Race: A Lacanian Study of African American Racial Identity* was published in 2016 by Baylor University Press.

Derek Hook is an Associate Professor of Psychology at Duquesne University in Pittsburgh, and an Extraordinary Professor of Psychology at the University of Pretoria in South Africa. He is the author of *A Critical Psychology of the Postcolonial* (2011), *(Post)apartheid Conditions* (2013) and *Six Moments in Lacan* (2018). Along with Calum Neill, he edits *The Lacan Series* for Palgrave Macmillan.

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