

PEER-REVIEWED ARTICLE

Knotting the psyche: White fantasy and racial violence

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ABSTRACT

This article engages core Lacanian concepts to read racial whiteness in relation to the three registers of the psyche. It deploys Lacan's concept of suture to argue that whiteness stitches together the registers of the psyche, joining the Imaginary and Symbolic as a mask over the Real. This masking of the Real privileges the function of fantasy, such that the Real of the white subject's lack is veiled by racial discourses of the Symbolic that articulate Imaginary fantasies of wholeness. Through analysis of the 2014 shooting of Michael Brown, a reading of creativity in African American culture, and an interpretation of Toni Morrison's novel *Paradise*, the article argues that white fantasies of wholeness threaten an unsuturing of the psyches of black subjects. It turns to Lacan's work on the sinthome to suggest how black subjects knot the registers of the psyche in ways that protect against the traumas that assail them in acts of racism and racial violence.

KEYWORDS: whiteness; fantasy; Lacan; suture; sinthome; Toni Morrison; Michael Brown

INTRODUCTION

The concept of racial whiteness has not received sufficient attention in Lacanian theoretical investigations. In the year 2000, Kalpana Seshadri-Crook's groundbreaking study, *Desiring Whiteness: A Lacanian Analysis of Race*, emphatically established whiteness as a master signifier, a signifier without a signified that determines the interpretative semiotic field that structures race. Perhaps due to the success of this theorizing, very little has since been written by Lacanians on whiteness. (Though whiteness has not been a direct focus of the theory, engaging recent work has been produced by George and Hook [2021] on race, Marriott [2021] on blackness, and McGowan [2022] on race and fantasy.) In this article, while paying close attention to historical and literary instantiations of race and racism, I seek to reconceptualize whiteness within the frame of a set of key Lacanian concepts. My conceptualization moves

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past a focus on whiteness as a signifier by bridging Jacques Lacan's early thinking on the tripartite structure of the psyche with his culminating work on the *sinthome* as a fourth element capable of knotting the constitutive registers of the fragmented psyche.

My aim is to facilitate an understanding of whiteness as not only a master signifier that structures what Lacan calls the Symbolic, or the linguistic world of meaning, but more expansively as a concept inflecting all three registers of the psyche: the Symbolic, the Real, and the Imaginary. Racial whiteness is generated in the Symbolic but grounded in fantasy; it thus establishes a relation to the Imaginary that echoes through the Symbolic and aims to silence the Real. I show that the fantasy of whiteness both blinds white subjects to this Real that structures their psychic existence and reshapes the reality of our lived world to fit the fantasies of white subjects. Whiteness, I suggest, first sutures, or stitches together, the fragmented psyche of the white subject and then knits the fantasies of that psyche into the very fabric of our lived realities. My proposal is that this suturing of whiteness roots forms of violence both physical and psychic that threaten an unsuturing of racial blackness. I shall turn to Lacan's concept of the *sinthome* to highlight ways that African American and other black subjects seek to reknit the black psyche that is threatened by whiteness with the catastrophic prospect of its potential unsuturing.

WHITE VIOLENCE AND THE DEMONIC, BLACK IMAGO

The power of whiteness lies in its ability to name and define reality. In order to explore the relation between white fantasy and the reality it insistently dictates, I want to start by referencing a case of police shooting that engrossed the United States of America. This case both displays the violent, destructive power of fantasy and suggests fantasy's enveloping role in the structuring of the psyche as racialized and white. On August 9, 2014, an 18-year-old black teenager named Michael Brown was shot and killed by police officer Darren Wilson in Ferguson, Missouri. Protestors of this shooting came to use the slogan 'Hands up, Don't shoot' because witnesses assert that Brown was shot by Wilson while his hands were up in surrender. After being stopped by Wilson because he seemed, in Wilson's view, to match a suspect police were in search of, Brown is shot six times by Wilson. During a grand jury trial, Wilson gave testimony that displays the unstable relation black bodies hold to reality when reconstructed by the white psyche.

Wilson testified that Brown assaulted him from outside the window of his police vehicle after Wilson tried to stop Brown and a companion as they walked past the vehicle. During the encounter, Wilson fires shots from inside his car, and in his testimony, he describes Brown's appearance during the altercation. According to Wilson, Brown grabbed him from outside the car, and as Brown pointed the gun away from himself, Wilson says: 'he had the most intense aggressive face. The only way I can describe it, it looks like a demon, that's how angry he

looked' (Cave, 2014, p. 225). Wilson's depiction of a demonic Brown slides toward fantasy and soon transforms Wilson's own self-image. Wilson continues, 'I tried to hold his right arm... And when I grabbed him, the only way I can describe it is I felt like a five-year-old holding onto Hulk Hogan... that's just how big he felt and how small I felt just from grasping his arm' (p. 212).

We can begin to speculate here, from a Lacanian perspective, about the fantasy of regression that reduces Wilson to infancy. Wilson imagines himself as a five-year-old, but his fantasies recall the life-long struggle over the inadequacies of the body that are initiated for the subject at the moment of Lacan's (2006c) famous Mirror Stage. The child in the mirror lacks motor control, and his psychic apprehension of this lack fuels the formation of fantasies that, Lacan explains, take shape in images or 'imagos of the fragmented body' (Lacan, 2006a, p. 85). These fantasy imagos include castration, emasculation, mutilation, and dismemberment, and they can be seen as 'matrices' within which an individual instance of violence to the body may be situated; significantly, Lacan argues that 'variations of the matrices' emerge through 'other specific images' (p. 85). I suggest that, over the course of the history of American race relations, the black body has been subjected to repeated scenes of violence that make blackness an elective inflexion of the matrilineal imagos of the body in pieces. Through brutal practices of violence that range from lynchings to the more-recently publicized media images of black Americans graphically killed in police violence, the black body has come to reify the imagos and the psychic apprehension of a fragmented self that plague the human subject. This fragmentation is insistently denied by all subjects and, in a Symbolic that valorizes whiteness, it is cast unto the black body not only through destructive acts like the one committed by Wilson but also through the discursive and visual availability of scenes of black death, scenes that, even when used to resist this brutality, reinforce a coalescing of racial blackness and death with the imagos that drive our violent predilections.

Lacan (2006a) counts demons among the 'aggressive images that torment mankind' (p. 85) across time, and he notes that our aggressive response in our lived worlds to our imagined tormentors has been our 'cruel refinement of the weapons' (p. 86) we aim at the other. Whether Wilson psychically struggles in the moment of the encounter with the demonic images he pins to Brown or whether he later fabricates these images in expectation of their natural believability to the court, Wilson's fantasies justify the excessive violence he brings to the encounter. Wilson explains that, after getting out of the car, 'I shoot a series of shots. I don't know how many I shot, I just know I shot it... but I know I hit him at least once because I saw his body kind of jerk or flinched' (Cave, 2014, p. 228). This jerking body is granted inhuman animacy in Wilson's explaining. Wilson states,

I remember seeing the smoke from the gun and I kind of looked at him and he's still coming at me, he hadn't slowed down... At this point it looked like he was almost bulking up to run through the shots, like it was making him mad that I'm shooting at him. And the face that he had was

looking straight through me, like I wasn't even there, I wasn't even anything in his way. (Cave, 2014, p. 228)

In this testimony, a black teenage boy attains the fantastical ability to transform a trained police officer into a five-year-old little boy, and, simultaneously, Michael Brown, the actual teenager in the incident, not only becomes the wrestler Hulk Hogan but takes on the qualities of Marvel Comics' the Hulk. He becomes stronger and more aggressive as he gets angrier, and he bulks up to run through bullets. Additionally, because his aggression is not only monstrous but demonic, his face, finally, cannot be looked at by Wilson until it is made blank and he lies face down on the ground; Wilson concludes:

I'm backing up pretty rapidly, I'm backpedaling pretty good because I know if he reaches me, he'll kill me. His hand was in a fist at his side... And... I remember looking at my sites and firing, all I see is his head and that's what I shot. I don't know how many, I know at least once because I saw the last one go into him. And then when it went into him, the demeanor on his face went blank, the aggression was gone, it was gone, I mean, I knew he stopped, the threat was stopped. When he fell, he fell on his face. (Cave, 2014, p. 229)

Here Brown's life as well as his identity is violently eviscerated. He is made faceless even before he dies, an empty, blank canvas painted upon with the fearsome fantasies of a white officer who first sees a monster and a demon and then exenterates from his own recognition, and also from the reality around him, the singular life of Michael Brown. Frantz Fanon, the black Martinican psychiatrist, has noted that the 'black man has no ontological resistance in the eyes of the white man' (Fanon, 1967, p. 83). Fanon's statement and his theoretical turn to psychoanalysis highlight the—still undervalued—potential for psychoanalysis to account for the deep-rooted mechanisms of fantasy that shape racial reality. Such an accounting, I suggest, entails engagement with and modification of standard psychoanalytic conceptualizations of subjectivity to account for the racialization of subjectivity in our present society. To explain the imposition of this fatal white fantasy unto the decimated reality of the black subject, I want to turn to Lacan's theorizing of discourse and its relation to psychic structure within the human subject. What I argue is that the constitution of a white racial identity involves a process of what Lacan refers to as suturing, a process that remakes both the racialized psyche and the reality it occupies.

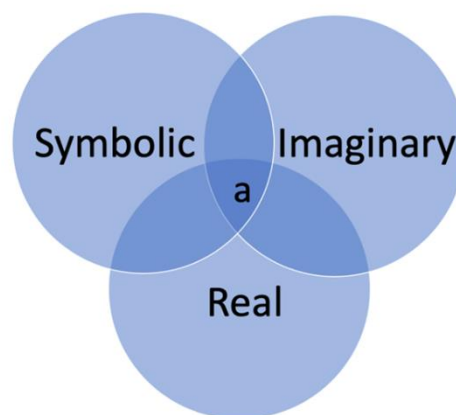
THE SUTURING OF WHITENESS

Lacan's one-time student, Jacques-Alain Miller (1977), describes suture as 'the most elementary articulation of the subject's relation to the signifying chain' (p. 32). Suture, we may say, entails the subject's entry into that chain, into the social world of meaning that Lacan calls the Symbolic. This entry is bound to fantasy. Most precisely, suture involves, to quote Miller again, the subject's 'exclusion from the discourse which internally it intimates' (p. 32).

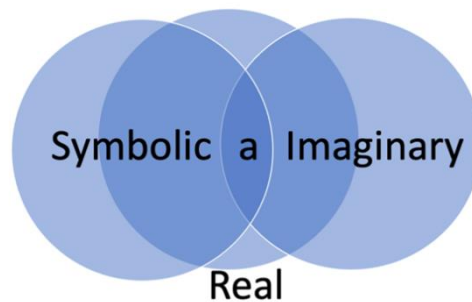
What we have in suture, then, is the subject's entry into discourse through the exclusion of what Lacan may call its own truth, the internal lack that discourse and language simultaneously generate and mask. Lacan (1998) himself elaborates on suture in Seminar 11 as 'a conjunction of the imaginary and the symbolic' (p. 118). This Imaginary is precisely the place of fantasy, the psychic register that plagues the subject with fantasies of an impossible wholeness and nightmares of an intolerable psychic reality of fragmentation.

The Imaginary, which Lacan ties to the mirror stage and its fantasies of the fragmented body, urges a remaking of the subjective self. Lacan (1998) reads the self and its making as 'taken up... in a dialectic, that sort of temporal progress that is called haste, thrust, forward movement' (p. 118). This is the type of temporal haste that Lacan (2006b) describes in his reading of 'logical time', where the subject embraces the 'future anterior', the identity that he will have always been in the past if he hastily grasps at the self that now unfolds in front of him. What I suggest is that whiteness is an identity that brings subjects into their referential position within the chain of signifiers that make up the Symbolic world of meaning; and it does so through the haste of a fantasy that retroactively defines the subject as having always been white, white down to the core of their Imagined being.

Figure 1. *The Three Registers of the Psyche*



Fantasy allows for the subject's hasty response to the very fracturing of the human psyche that grants subjects subjectivity. Lacan describes the human psyche as comprised of three registers (Figure 1): the Symbolic, or the world of language that allows access to meaning and subjectivity; the Imaginary, which supplies the subject with fantasies of its unified wholeness while also assailing the subject with nightmares of the dissolution of such wholeness; and the Real, the psychic zone of lack that is occupied by all that escapes language. If suture marks a conjunction of the Imaginary and the Symbolic, this is because it designates a stitching of the fantasies of the Imaginary into the discourses of the Symbolic.

Figure 2. Suturing of the Symbolic and Imaginary Over the Real

Whiteness, as an identity retroactively constituted by discourse, is a preeminent example of this process of suturing. Whiteness relies upon the object a , or the fantasy object that is the trans-subjective essence of all white people, the fantasy racial core that unifies both the white Symbolic and the white psyche that structures this Symbolic. In the diagram above, it is the a , as the element of fantasy, that makes possible the suturing of subjectivity (Figure 2). What the intransigence of race and racism has meant for whiteness is that white Imaginary fantasies of wholeness can be reinforced by the racist discourses of the Symbolic in such a way as to mask the Real lack of white subjects. The Imaginary and the Symbolic are sutured over the Real to make manifest in the Symbolic whiteness's Imaginary fantasies of wholeness.

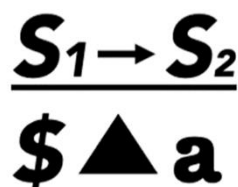
However, driven by the Imaginary, this suturing is also plagued by fantasies of the dissolution of wholeness. The child of the mirror is driven by its motor incapacities, which fragment the ego it constitutes as a gestalt that is discrete, unified, and whole. The fragmented subject perceives a split from the unified reality it projects into the mirror, and the suturing of the racial subject is, as such, plagued by fears of an Imaginary other, a mirror-self who is stronger than me, who infantilizes me with his superior, hulking strength. Though blackness, in white fantasy, has historically marked an inferior, inhuman, animalism, it simultaneously evokes a vitality and exuberance that belies the superiority of whiteness (whether this vitality is tied to fantasies of black brutality, black sexuality, black athleticism, or simply black enjoyment); and the violence that ensues from white fantasies of race has only compounded outraged refutations of the ostensive superiority, or even mere humane sensitivity, of the exalted white race. What I see happening in our historical moment is a dissolution of the fantasies of white wholeness and white supremacy, or at least direct challenges to them; and the result of these challenges is violence at the hands of fearful whites.

The ability Wilson demonstrates to transform blackness into facelessness is a prerogative of whiteness; and it usefully contextualizes our current political moment, a time of increasing white chauvinism in which members of the American Republican party have insisted on the right to mark-out an alternative version of reality through assertion of what former Counselor

to President Donald Trump, Kellyanne Conway, has called ‘Alternative facts’ (Meet The Press, 2017). This imperative of Trump followers to redefine the reality of our social Symbolic began in the wake of the first American presidency by a black man, Barack Obama. That presidency—lasting for a full eight years—threatened to move blackness out of the frame of white fantasy, unsettling the imagos culturally aligned with blackness and potentially forcing America’s reckoning with an embodied blackness, in Obama himself, that defied stereotypes of insufficiency, criminality, and inferiority. Trump’s own Birtherism fueled attacks on Obama’s identity that attempted to void any altered representations of blackness. What was at stake was not simply images of blackness but a fragmenting of the unifying, ascendent concept of whiteness itself; significantly, Obama’s rise coincided with pointed news reports of America’s radical demographic shift, as the country arrived at the inevitable moment when more babies of color were being born than white babies (Cohn, 2016).

Lacan’s theory helps us understand something of the Imaginary fantasies and Symbolic discourses operative in our current historical moment. In Seminar 17, *The Other Side of Psychoanalysis*, Lacan presents his theory of the four discourses. He discusses what he calls the master’s discourse, the university discourse, the hysteric’s discourse, and the analyst’s discourse. The master’s discourse, which is charted below, aligns with the discursive function of whiteness as I see it (Figure 3).

Figure 3. *The Master’s Discourse*



S1 = The Master Signifier
 S2 = Knowledge
 \$ = The Barred Subject
 a = The object a (the fantasy object)

Embodying the function of suture, the master’s discourse roots itself in what Lacan (2007) calls the ‘ultrareduced myth of [the subject] being identical with his signifier’ (p. 90). Here the master is the S1, the master signifier—whiteness itself—which, as Seshadri-Crooks has shown, serves the function of defining the discursive possibilities of the field of the Symbolic. Expanding upon Seshadri-Crooks’ work, we can say that this master signifier of whiteness generates within this field what Lacan calls an S2, or knowledge. However, this knowledge, and the master himself as S1, roots itself upon a masking of the master’s status as barred subject. Established knowledge masks this barring through the function of fantasy, the formula for which we can see obliquely adumbrated here at the bottom of Lacan’s formula

for the master’s discourse: $\$ \diamond a$. Where the formula for fantasy— $\$ \diamond a$ —includes at its center the joining of a letter V with a second inverted letter V to generate a losange that indicates the recursive movement of fantasy (Figure 4), Lacan’s triangle in the bottom of the formula for the master’s discourse lacks the motility of fantasy (Figure 3).

Figure 4. *The Losange of Fantasy*

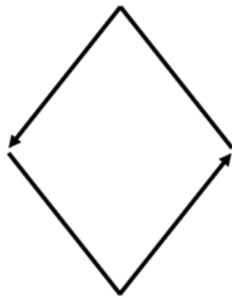
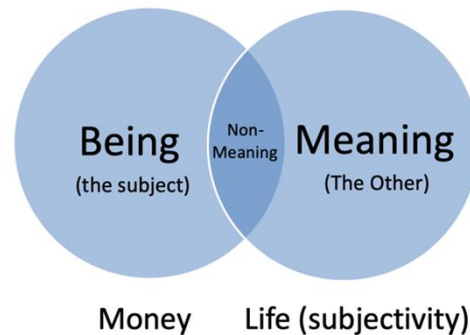


Figure 5. *The Vel of Alienation*



In the formula for fantasy, what we have in the lower half of the losange is a V that is representative of the Vel, or the forced choice each subject must make in selecting life and meaning over being (Figure 4). Lacan (1998) compares this choice to the robber’s ultimatum: ‘Your money or your life?’ (p. 246). Through the splitting of the psyche that grants subjectivity, the subject enters into the Symbolic world of meaning, and thereby chooses life, but does so by giving up access to something quite valuable, to all elements of the self that escape linguistic circumscription (Figure 5). The subject experiences this loss as the surrender of an internal vitality that Lacan terms ‘being’. This being, which can be aligned with the libido, only finds expression through the unconscious, or the overlapping of being and meaning that Lacan calls ‘Non-Meaning’, which is the Freudian unconscious. The subject is thus both alienated from being and forced to live out this alienation within the linguistic realm of the Other, or the Symbolic.

However, Lacan imagines, with the inverted V of the losange, a reversal of the alienating Vel, one that he calls separation. This separation occurs for the subject when, through their ‘skepticism’ toward the Other and the discourses of the Symbolic, the subject begins to chart a path of their own making, a new relation to the desires of the Other and to the drives that the Other agitates in the subject (Lacan, 1998). Lacan’s opaque triangular shape at the center of the lower portion of the formula for the master’s discourse displays only one half of a shaded V, bringing to a halt the cyclical movement of the subject’s path around fantasy. In Seminar 11, Lacan (1998) explains that fantasy is a ‘loop [that] must be run through’ (p. 274)—often multiple times—if it is to be traversed. What the master foregoes in embracing the S1 that defines them is completion of the path from fantasy to skepticism. Additionally, the

suturing of whiteness depends, ultimately, upon this same embrace of the S1 that impedes separation both from the Symbolic and from the fantasies of the Imaginary that the Symbolic buttresses.

THE KNOTTING OF BLACKNESS

This reading I have produced of race indicates how the imperative to recuperate lost being generates whiteness as a fantasy of plenitude. To suggest the impact of racialized reality on the black psyche, however, we must move from Lacan's earlier work on the three registers of the psyche to his focus on the sinthome. In the seminar on the sinthome, Seminar 23, Lacan (2016) imagines the possibility of the registers of the psyche detaching from each other. He presents two contrasting images, arguing that in most subjects the registers of the psyche are interlocked like a Borromean link (Figure 6), but that it is possible for a 'botched' connection to occur, an irregularity that can cause an unlinking of the registers (Figure 7).

Figure 6. *The Borromean Link*

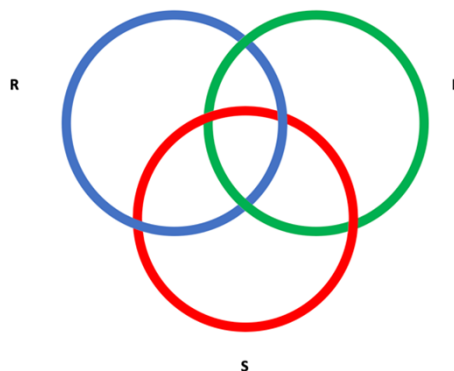
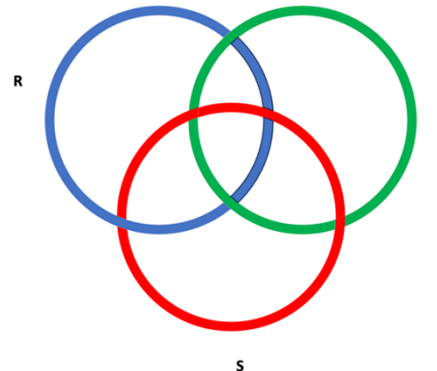


Figure 7. *The Botched Link*

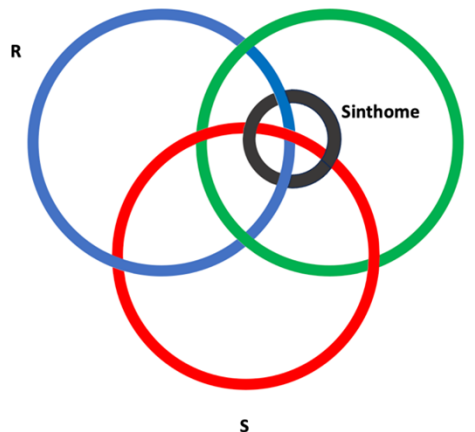


In Lacan's diagram of the botched link, the Symbolic remains tied to the Real, linked to each other in an interlocking chain, but the Imaginary floats freely without connection to the remaining two registers. This condition is quite distinct from the suturing of whiteness, which entails a linking of all three registers of the psyche, such that the Imaginary and Symbolic superimpose upon the Real. However, in our contemporary Symbolic, in which the signifiers of race script within reality itself the imagos of the Imaginary, black subjects are confronted with what I would call the psychic traumas of the Real. Lacan (1998) describes trauma as that which one can approach only through the breaking apart of the psyche into certain agencies, only through the fragmenting of the self. Such fragmenting can allow for emergence of the Real from below the Symbolic and Imaginary.

The history of American slavery and racism has aimed at fragmenting the black self and confronting black subjects with the Real of their lack through attacks upon their Imaginary and its fantasies of being. Racism seeks to constitute black as a metonym for lack by shattering the fantasies of wholeness through which the Imaginary sustains this illusory being. Lacan shows that the Imaginary is the source of subjective consistency, generating the egoic sense of self. The ego, Lacan (2016) says, is 'the idea of the self... as a body' (p. 129), and this body is framed in the Imaginary. The Imaginary is what lends contour to the body as the container that demarcates a self-image that distinguishes the subject—as a subject of fantasized being—from the mirrored other and the Symbolic world into which the subject is jettisoned. The Imaginary container of the body, encased by the skin that signals the borders of our racial and subjective differences, is what is attacked both physically in racial violence and imagistically in cultural stereotypes and oppressive discourses of race.

Lacan's theory allows an understanding that racism attacks the Imaginary of black subjects in order to remake the reality of the Symbolic and unleash the trauma of the Real. He both points to the psychosis-inducing possibilities of this unraveling of the Imaginary and suggests how subjects may evade it through deployment of the *sinthome*. To be clear, there is a distinction between Lacan's unlinked (or botched) psyche, which can be associated with psychosis, and the psyche of the average black subject; blacks are not simply made into psychotics by racism. Instead, the term psychotic defines a psychic structure for Lacan, one that develops through a foreclosure of one's entry into the Symbolic. What the struggles of race entail, contrastingly, is one's maneuvering *within* the Symbolic, one's battles against a racism aimed at dissolving an *existing* link between the Imaginary and the remaining registers. Lacan's Seminar 23, with its reading of James Joyce, allows some understanding of this maneuvering.

Joyce, as an individual emerging out of the postcolonial environment of his Irish homeland, models a process of reinforcing the link between the three registers of the psyche. Joyce, according to Lacan, develops a mode of writing that breaks apart the signifying structure of the dominant racialized Symbolic to create a literary artistry of his own making. Lacan asserts that it is the organizing name of the father that functions as the master signifier, granting the subject its designated place in the Symbolic. Joyce fails to identify with the name of his biological father. His disidentification parallels what may occur with the colonized subject who struggles to identify with the master signifiers of a white world. This disidentification leads to Joyce's inability to find a comfortable place for himself in the Symbolic, and it leaves him without access to the Imaginary fantasies typically granted the subject by the Symbolic to suture an image of their body and ego into the racial Symbolic. However, without the agency of the name of the father, Joyce takes on the challenge of making a name for himself, the endeavor of becoming a self-made artist who, in his novels as creative expressions of his own psychic reality, writes in a sort of remade language all his own.

Figure 8. *The Rectifying Ego*

The image above of the rectifying ego suggests that Joyce's making of a name for himself is the very means through which he rectifies the botched registers of his psyche. The symptom of Joyce's suffering is the lack of a father's name necessary to reinforce the Imaginary self-image and link him to the Real of his lack and the Symbolic of the external world; but Joyce turns this symptom into a *sinthome*, a creative construct as a fourth ring that loops the three registers together to remake his identity and stabilize his psychic structure. I would suggest that Joyce's remaking of language and identity parallels much of the political and cultural activities of African Americans. The counter-discourse that centers so many African American Civil Rights activities upon notions that 'Black is Beautiful' and 'Black Lives Matter' involves, at least, an aesthetic reevaluation of the Imaginary images of blackness, a reevaluation aimed at granting blackness new space in the racist Symbolic. Also, Black culture is defined by a certain expressive distinctiveness; it is characterized by unique modes of speaking, a reassembling of standard English into what is called Ebonics, that signals both a distance from the broader Symbolic and a remaking of its instruments of meaning to better suit an expression of black ways of being in the world.

The inventiveness of black culture is perhaps best displayed by black speech and black art forms like the blues and jazz. These forms articulate a mode of rectifying an ego pinned to lack, with the blues emerging as a musical form whose very aesthetics is rooted in transformation of pain, loss, and lack into art, and with jazz expressing a distinctive virtuosity of improvisation. This black artistic and creative adaptiveness both highlights a limit to existing Lacanian theory and points in the direction of its possible expansion into new areas of inquiry centered upon race. In particular, it suggests the possibility of aligning the expressive forms of black art with ways of knowing that are excluded from the master's discourses in the white dominated Symbolic.

In *The Other Side of Psychoanalysis*, Lacan not only suggests the fantastical nature of the master's knowledge but, drawing from Hegel's master–slave dialectic, also notes that the master's knowledge is derived from the slave's knowledge. He specifies that this knowledge is stolen as a product of what he calls the slave's know-how or the slave's savoir faire. One may think of an art form like the blues as expressing the savoir-faire of black artists (pioneers like Robert Johnson or Jimi Hendrix, for example) who have gone on to inspire iconic musical forms largely associated with whiteness, including Rock and Roll and Heavy Metal. This savoir faire is what Lacan (2007) defines as a knowledge that is not known, a headless knowledge. It is a knowledge that may key into the libidinous *jouissance* of the body that is lost in the Vel of alienation, the *jouissance* and libido that escape linguistic circumscription within the ambit of the master's discourse.

Musical forms like the blues rely upon a know-how rooted in the virtuosity of black bodies. Black artistry, I suggest, facilitates a relation to the Imaginary of a selfhood that is resistantly inserted into the Symbolic. This Imaginary self frames an external image of blackness, emerging as stylized and even rebellious manners of being, patterns of dance and self-comportment that come to define cultural notions not only of what it means to be black, but also what it means to be 'cool', 'hip', and stylish. Black expressiveness frames popular images of an idealized mode of being-in-the-world that is imitated and appropriated; but what this expressiveness grows out of is an assumption of the body as a source of knowledge and *jouissance*, an assumption by the black subject that I would like to describe through attention to the literary work of African American author Toni Morrison.

ASSUMING THE BLACK BODY AND ITS JOUISSANCE

Morrison's novel *Paradise* introduces a relation to the black body that is outside of what we may call the master's discourse. It suggests a unique understanding of this knowledge of the body that I have referenced through its allusion to the Brazilian religious practice of Candomblé. Morrison (1999) wrote *Paradise* after traveling to Brazil and hearing of female practitioners of Candomblé who, she was told, were killed by a group of local men (Smith, 1998). What Morrison is able to address through remaking the story of these black female practitioners is the way that both blackness and femininity are insistently excluded from the expressive meanings readily availed subjects by the Symbolic. Morrison shows in the novel how the female body, in particular, is scorned as a result of patriarchal reliance upon Western religious beliefs. She turns to the practice of Candomblé to imagine an agency that can come to black women through practices refused full integration into a patriarchal, racist Symbolic. Candomblé is an African-derived religious practice that syncretically blends Catholicism and African belief systems. In Morrison's *Paradise*, the main character, Connie, can only come to embrace her body by recalling the practices of Candomblé that she learned in childhood but had abandoned in adulthood.

Connie's character exemplifies an altered relation to the body and language. Connie, as a child, is stolen from Brazil and taken to America by a group of nuns who teach her that the body is bound to sin. She rejects all relation to her body until she falls in love with a man who helps awaken sexual desires that alert her to deeper longings for all she has lost in her diasporic transport from Brazil to America. In the life she now lived, she had embraced the head nun as her mother, supplanting with this matron both the biological mother she lost in Brazil and the mother country she is stolen from. Connie is driven by a sense of lack that she fantasizes can be filled by her lover, but her journey as a character is toward recognition of what she has truly lost at the levels of her own body and psyche.

When Connie realizes that her lover cannot satisfy her deeper losses, she reverts to her mother tongue and starts to explore the gaps in between the meanings made available to her in English and her native Portuguese. Within the interstices of language, she finds unarticulated desires that she had misread alternately as religious then as sexual longing. What Connie had lost was a relation to the *jouissance* of the body that could not be thought in the Christian-inflected English imposed upon her by the nuns. In Lacanian theory, the subject is conceived of as comprising drives that manifest a primal, insuppressible life force or libido that agitates all psychic activity. These drives are polymorphous and able to cathect all regions of the body with their *jouissance* of pleasure and pain. However, the drives are curtailed by language in the *Vel*, which teaches the subject proper, culturally acceptable ways to enjoy, and by the body itself, which channels *jouissance* into regions of pleasure that become bound to the orifices of the body. What Connie explores and seeks to regain is an individualized relation to the body that is less restrained by the racial and patriarchal conventions of her adopted language and religion.

By the end of the novel, Connie not only reevaluates her relation to the body but also comes to embrace for herself the role of Candomblé priestess, initiating other women into her practices by shaving their heads and cleansing them as they dance in the open rain. During this dance, Connie becomes possessed by a spirit that seems to recall the African orishas revered in her recovered religion. Scholars of Candomblé have argued that the act of possession, the 'implantation of the essence or energy of an orixá into the body of the devotee' is a way to mark 'blackness with divinity' (Harding, 2000, p. 156). The black body that had remained open to fantastical scripting by the white patriarchy is rewritten by Connie herself as a divinity she now embodies. Connie's possession opens up the body to a configuration of the drive not normally experienced in the Western Symbolic, a configuration of pleasure, pain, and bodily *jouissance* that Connie may begin to bring into language and into her own Symbolic understanding.

Connie comes ultimately to resist the denial of the *jouissance* of the body that had been forced upon her by the racist patriarchy. However, what her struggles emerges from, finally, is the elemental devaluing of the black body that we have seen from the start of our discussion, beginning with officer Wilson's shooting of Michael Brown. There is a knowledge

of the body, and even a *jouissance* of this body, that is not admitted into Western thought. Lacan himself recognizes the existence of this *jouissance*, but he does not take us far enough into the process of theorizing it. To the extent that it is the black body that is often read as animal, virile, the epitome of an otherness that is unknowable, blackness often speaks this *jouissance*, both within white fantasy and within the headless knowledge that remains unadmitted into the dominant Symbolic world of meaning.

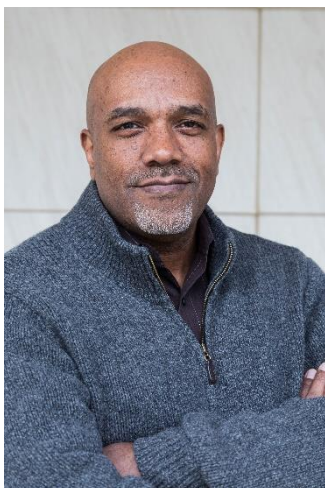
It is significant to this discussion of race, whiteness, and the *jouissance* of the body that, during Seminar 17, in the midst of Lacan's lectures on the four discourses, Lacan's class was interrupted by an ongoing protest. Lacan (2007) addresses a particular interruption that was caused by a former Algerian citizen, whose country had been colonized by the French. Lacan (2007) describes the incident as a 'charming thing' that had 'emerged' from 'the real of decolonization' (p. 34). However, the Real of decolonialization announces a limit to Lacan's theorizing. In the seminar, Lacan (2007) shows that there are 'truths' about the master that are 'split off' from what Lacan calls 'the mythical support of certain societies' (p. 90). He says that such truths are 'ethnographic,' and he insists that they cannot be studied by psychoanalysis. What I suggest, however, is that race delineates an ethnographic and psychic truth about the subject, white and nonwhite, that should not be ignored. It is the task of psychoanalysis not only to allow the emergence of the ethnographic subject into its field, but also to fully confront through this often faceless subject the Real of decolonialization this subject disruptively brings to whiteness's fantasized realities.

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