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David Sigler

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Racism, Or … Worse: On the end of Lacan's *Seminar XIX*

David Sigler
University of Calgary

Jacques Lacan ended *Seminar XIX* (1971–72), *… Or Worse*, with an unexpected warning: "Since, nevertheless, it's not just about painting a rose-tinted future, you should know that what is on the rise, the ultimate consequences of which we have still not seen, and which is rooted in the body, in the fraternity of bodies, is racism. You have not heard the last of this."

The audience had, however, heard the last of this. *Seminar XIX* was suddenly over, and Lacan did not return to the topic in later seminars. He would, though, make a couple of further comments on racism over the following six months, first in the enigmatic essay "L'étourdit" and then as part of his television special of January 1973, the text of which would eventually be published as *Television*.

It is hard to pinpoint the tone of the concluding remark. The two sentences seem to serve all at once as a warning, threat, aside, mic drop, and cliffhanger. It was a bit of a non sequitur, as *Seminar XIX* had not led anyone to expect a warning about racism. Lacan had made no mention of racism up to that point, and it had not often been among his preoccupations, although he had at times over the years spoken out against segregation (Khan 149–50). Lacan began the final session by signaling that he would be taking a new direction that day: "summing myself up, as they

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David Sigler is Professor of English at the University of Calgary. He is the author, most recently, of *Fracture Feminism: The Politics of Impossible Time in British Romanticism* (SUNY, 2021) and co-editor, with Kathryn Ready, of *Romantic Women's Writing and Sexual Transgression* (Edinburgh UP, 2024). His work on Lacan's mirror stage, co-authored with Celiese Lypka, appeared in *English Studies in Canada* 45.4 (2019).

say, is absolutely out of the question" (*Seminar XIX* 197). *… Or Worse* had mainly explored set theory as a logic problem, theorizing, in quite abstract terms, what it means for something to be counted as part of a set, and how counting and numbers cut against and through a unified One, and what happens when a zero gets added to a set of integers. The mathematical reflections developed in *Seminar XIX* take on new significance when considered retroactively in relation to Lacan's parting words that year. In this essay, I argue that the final remark of *Seminar XIX* serves as a quilting point that ties the seminar's mathematical reflections to the social problem of ascendent racism. The warning recontextualizes the discussion of bodies, fraternity, belonging, and social inclusion that Lacan had been exploring in the latter part of the seminar, allowing us to discern the contours of an implicitly anti-racist strategy.

Lacan's parting comment, if read not as a prediction but as a quilting point that retroactively reframes *… Or Worse*, may indicate a new or supplemental direction for Lacanian conversations about racism and anti-racism. In recent years, Lacanian scholars such as Azeen Khan, Derek Hook, Sheldon George, Gautam Basu Thakur, Zahi Zalloua, Slavoj Žižek, and Éric Laurent have studied the ideologies that sustain racism. The conclusion of *Seminar XIX* has been part of those discussions but has not been analyzed in much detail. Laurent analyzes the passage most thoroughly, discussing it for nearly a page before turning to the follow-up remark from *Television* (1–2). George and Hook acknowledge the passage at the beginning of their introduction to *Lacan and Race* but quickly move past it, maintaining that "Lacan held no true interest in race" (1); even in a volume specifically focused on the topic, Lacan's comment does not come up further. Khan quotes the passage but does not much discuss it, introducing the quotation merely with "although I do not expand on this here" (156). I will suggest that *Seminar XIX* should and could become more important to this theoretical conversation.

Generally, a Lacanian theory of racism will understand the phenomenon either as its own form of cruel enjoyment, the envy of another person's enjoyment, or the fear of having one's enjoyment stolen. Hook has done the most to outline the problems inherent in a jouissance-focused approach to racism, which include psychological reductionism, open-endedness, failure to differentiate between modes, and de-contextualization (37–42). Although Hook very insightfully responds to each of those critiques, convincingly defending a jouissance-based approach, it may also be worthwhile to develop alternative ways to think about racism from a Lacanian perspective. That is the strength, to me, of Lacan's comment at

the end of *Seminar XIX*. While his comments in "L'étourdit" and *Television* dwell on the issue of jouissance, the comment from *Seminar XIX* discusses racism in a way not totally removed from the issue of jouissance but not necessarily foregrounding it, either. No longer tasked with pinpointing cruel or envious enjoyments, which as Hook notes are two sides of the same coin (44), the discussion can become a structuralist ideology critique rather than a diagnosis of an individual's hateful feelings and thus possibly offer a more systemic way of challenging racism. That is, the comment from *Seminar XIX* can show us a Lacanian way of considering racism as a cultural and social presence, broadly an effect of cultural discourses, rather than simply as the problem of a subject's private enjoyment.

The fraternity of bodies

Lacan's hypothesis is that racism "is rooted in the body, in the fraternity of bodies." It is an odd statement, though, because "bodies" themselves are not usually known to have "fraternity"—rather, we might normally think of the body as a fleshly thing, something biologically alive and ready to begin signifying, while "fraternity," as the name of a kinship bond and metaphor for political solidarity, might be understood as an imaginary and symbolic structure overlaid onto those bodies, hailing them as socially meaningful. Much of *Seminar XIX* would seem to enforce such a division—even the last session, which includes this remark, is devoted to "bodies captured by discourse."[1] Moreover, because "fraternity" is a keyword in this passage, it is interesting that Lacan initially skips over the term in his concluding remark, introducing it only upon repeating the clause and only once "bodies" has been pluralized. The temporary omission of the key information may dramatize the way that fraternity-based models of political belonging are, in Lacan's view, often so pervasive as to remain unmentioned. Only once Lacan combines the topics of bodies, fraternity, and fantasy into a phrase like "the fraternity of bodies" does he begin to address racism specifically.

To understand Lacan's phrase, one must grasp how it fuses the two issues that he had already been discussing in that final session of *Seminar XIX*: namely, fraternity-based political models and theories of the body. As Laurent explains, Lacan's comment about racism may be meant as a rebuke to those activist students, who, in the years since the social and educational upheavals of May 1968, were prone to champion the ide-

1 That is the title selected by editor Jacques-Alain Miller for the last section of the published version of *... Or Worse*. For Lacan's commentary to this effect, see especially *Seminar XIX*, 200–01.

als of brotherhood and the body (1). By the end of *… Or Worse*, Lacan was emphasizing that clinical psychoanalysis must be understood as "the confrontation of bodies," bodies that cannot be said to be always discrete from each other or separate (*Seminar XIX* 204). He presents fantasy as a mediating frame between these bodies and their networks of fraternity: "[I]t's a matter of relationships," which are "socially binding" and are held together through language systems (*Seminar XIX* 205).

Lacan is saying "fraternity" because it is a keyword in French political culture, not because he is wanting to be gender-specific, although he is also acutely aware of how "woman" gets established as not wholly included within the One of fraternity (*Seminar XIX* 162–65). Lacan introduces fraternity early in *Seminar XIX*, as he complains about people liking to write political slogans on walls: his example is the classic Revolutionary credo, "*liberté, egalité, fraternité*" (60). It would be better, Lacan says, if nothing were written on walls, because the real—the site with the potential for genuine upheaval—is always what is beyond the wall (61). I believe that "nothing" is the key concept in this advice. Lacan is not trying to say that it is pointless to write slogans on walls, given that the real, where politics happens, is always going to be beyond the walls. Rather, his point is that *nothing* should indeed be written on walls, as this would be more efficacious than writing calls for "fraternity" on walls. That is, the unrepresentable—a gap, an elision, and absence—should be brought into view as part of our sociopolitical reality, in the style of the partially elided title *… Or Worse*. The elision as such should be "written on walls" and pursued as a political strategy. Such a strategy, of letting the object *a* as fragment of the real address a cut in the subject, is one that he had called, in the seminar two years prior, the analyst's discourse (Lacan, *Seminar XVII* 35). The comments on racism in *Seminar XIX* arise in a final session in which he contrasts the analyst's discourse to the master's discourse insofar as they each capture "bodies."

Halfway through *… Or Worse*, Lacan speaks of a "comet effect," something particular, he thinks, to psychoanalysis, in which an act of "rethinking" can highlight a radical "disjunction" in what has been said before (*Seminar XIX* 99). The comet effect results in the "distribution" of difference rather than a reconciliation into an expanded One (*Seminar XIX* 87). It can produce what Lacan calls "multiplicity" by boring a hole in the One, "the entrance porthole that is designated by lack" (*Seminar XIX* 127). The seminar's final comment, I will suggest, is just such a porthole in fraternity. For Lacan, bodies are not pre-given fleshly entities awaiting meanings to be conferred by kinship networks but, rather, are the positive presence of

lack, a sort of nothing that can be written on walls. Bodies are an inscribing lack in fraternity, rather than objects waiting to be inscribed upon. We will return to the topic of bodies momentarily, once we have considered what is meant by "fraternity."

In the final session of *… Or Worse*, Lacan turns again to the Revolutionary call for fraternity, to warn that such an ideal is an ideological trap. It is bosses, not workers, he notes, who insist that everyone should be part of the corporate family, as a way of obscuring class division (*Seminar XIX* 210). The entire call for political "fraternity" is ideologically suspect, he thinks. Struggles over equality or inclusion ought not to be metaphorized as a family relation. Fraternity, he argues, is by no means a viable basis for a citizen's rights, as it will invariably produce a "backlash," namely, racism. "When it comes back at the level of a discourse, the notion of a brother … will produce its backlash at the level of the support," Lacan suggests, "however solidly it has been rubber-stamped by virtue of all sorts of jurisprudence through the ages" (*Seminar XIX* 211). At the level of the imaginary, the problem with fraternity is that racial minorities would be less able to claim the protections of the law, because they will have a harder time looking like the majoritarian subject's "brother"; at the level of the symbolic, law (in France) is based upon the Enlightenment principle of fraternity, and so it is always already meant to be weaponized against presumed outsiders. Law, precisely by appearing to be objective and universal, wields exclusionary and violent force intrinsically.[2] There is a jouissance in "the implementation of law" and its enforcement (Hook 45). Moreover, racism is not susceptible to counterarguments, because, as Todd McGowan rightly notes, "the unconscious investment is the central pillar of racism's intransigence" (19). Hence, the ideological intractability of racism. Anti-racist activity would have to unmake the entire juridical apparatus of the state and the Enlightenment theories on which it has been built, not merely create ways for minoritized subjects to be taken seriously as citizen-subjects who belong, count, and matter. Recent work in Black studies, such as Fred Moten's and Achille Mbembe's engagements with Kant's anti-Blackness, has been focused on exactly this task and has done so especially by taking aim at unconscious fantasy structures arising from Enlightenment-era suppositions (Moten 1–32; Mbembe 38–77). Lacan's comment offers intimations of such a strategy.

At the level of the imaginary, the problem with fraternity is that racial minorities would be less able to claim the protections of the law.

One may reasonably wonder: Would it not have been more helpful for Lacan to have spoken directly of racism, given the urgency of the situation?

2 For the best commentary on why, in Lacan's thought, a universalizing discourse depends upon segregation, see Khan, 149–55.

Probably, but directness was not Lacan's way. Lacan preferred to work, as he explained in an earlier seminar, "in the widest sense, [by] metonymy, which consists in getting something across by speaking about something utterly different" (*Seminar IV* 137). He would jarringly move between and across topics, forcing his audience to make the connections for themselves and to consider how any of his utterances might relate to what had been said just before. The comment about racism is hardly oblique at all, when read as an isolated statement. If there is an interpretive riddle arising at the end of *…Or Worse*, it is only the mystery of why Lacan would have decided to stop talking in riddles after a year, or nineteen years, of doing so. The ambiguity of its meaning arises mainly from how the comment might serve as a capstone to the seminar that had preceded it.

Lacan points out that psychoanalysis is itself beholden to the logic of fraternity and urges his audience to find a way out of that way of thinking. A psychoanalyst (implicitly in this account male, it would appear) who imagines himself the brother of the analysand is making a comparable mistake to the Revolutionaries who wrote "fraternité" on walls (Lacan, *Seminar XIX* 210). The problematic logic of fraternity has, he seems to acknowledge, been central to psychoanalytic reason—most fundamentally in the mythical "band of brothers" in Freud's *Totem and Taboo*, who supposedly cannibalized their father and thus inaugurated the incest prohibition and desire as such (13: 144–50). The brothers' violent conspiracy gave way, says Freud, so that "the social fraternal feelings, which were the basis of the whole transformation, continued to exercise a profound influence on the development of society" (13: 146). Lacan, for whom this Freudian myth is always top of mind, urges analysts to avoid a fraternity-based model in clinical practice. Such is the immediate context for his warning about the rise of racism as the "backlash" of fraternity.

Just before speaking of racism, Lacan extols a reconstituted psychoanalysis that could serve the interests of social justice. Lacan here speaks of psychoanalysis as a matter of "justice" explicitly (*Seminar XIX* 211). The analyst's role is to be conjured, to arise as "this split thing, that must be begotten" through the analysand's efforts (211). That is, the analyst should be metaphorically the child of the analysand, a "thing" "begotten" by the analysand's work. Their mutual efforts produce a cut in the analyst, a splitting of the analyst, that ends the work of the session (211). Such a begetting is, Lacan says enigmatically, "the beam by which the scales of what is called *justice* can be set in balance. Our brother transfigured is what is begotten by the analytic conjuration, and this is what binds us to the one who is improperly called our *patient*" (211). It is a scene of conjuration,

of transfiguration: productive rather than analytical, in the sense that it imagines the creation of things instead of the breaking down of things into smaller particles. "Our brother transfigured" is a fascinating image, not least because (as per Lacanian custom) Lacan does not specify *into what*. Moreover, Lacan's image of justice is about balancing, but Lacan does not specify the object of this balancing. Justice is not the weighing of two pre-existing perspectives, which arrive to the court as equals; "balance" is made possible through the creation, or "begetting," of a "split thing" that transforms our "brother" into some unknown thing.

It is unclear—even though Lacan states so directly—whether the body *per se* is really the "root" of racism. "In the body" would seem to situate racism corporally, as if racism were something pertaining to the individual subject at the level of the real; yet "in the fraternity of bodies" suggests, instead, that racism arises between bodies, or from the kinship bonds themselves, and thus at the imaginary and symbolic levels. Basically, the sentence—representing the entire theoretical import of Lacan's claim about racism in *Seminar XIX*—contradicts itself, even in the process of repeating its claim. Yet the contradiction is likely not rhetorical inexactitude on Lacan's part. I say so because the tension between "in the body" and "in the fraternity of bodies" finds an echo in Lacan's wildly inscrutable article "L'étourdit," also from 1972, which represents his most extended commentary on racism. In a section called "The discourses and their racism," he directly criticizes those who would understand race in biological terms, associating physical accounts of racial difference with phrenology, ethnography, and Nazism. "The race of which I speak is not what an anthropology calling itself physical supports," he stresses (Lacan, "L'Étourdit" 64). Rather, race "is constituted according to the mode in which symbolic places are transmitted by the order of a discourse" (Lacan, "L'Étourdit" 64). Racism, he says, is thus a matter of "discourses in action." Of course, no serious scholar today would suppose anything different. But Lacan makes a striking turn of argument here by connecting the two levels with the clinical experience of psychoanalysis; it is here that the connection to the final session of *Seminar XIX* becomes apparent. Racism has long had pseudo-scientific support, Lacan argues, but "the analytic discourse foralls [*sic*] that" ("L'Étourdit" 66). In context, he appears to mean that the delicate interplay of transference between analyst and analysand, and the fact that analysts must themselves undergo analysis, could model a meaningful way out of racism and its presumptions of biological essentialism.

That is, psychoanalysis can teach us how to understand that even effects found "in the body" (for example, the symptom) can be traced to "the fraternity of bodies" (for example, psychoanalysis, not only in its clinical applications but also in its founding Freudian political mythology of a primal "band of brothers"). Which is to say that psychoanalysis might be poised to provide an alternative intellectual framework to the Hegelian one, whereby movement from "lord" and "bondsman" happens as a matter of course, or the Kantian one, in which the field of knowledge harbours Blackness as "a tumultuous derangement" (Moten 32). Moten demonstrates that "Blackness" is Kant's term for non-reason and that it is harboured inside of Enlightenment philosophy as its occluded interior. Lacan, like Moten, wants to seize upon that internal derangement in Enlightenment thought. It is not enough to say that the bodily experience that may have seemed to arise for the subject individually would be better understood as an effect arising from the symbolic and imaginary relationship between bodies, as with a fraternity of bodies. It is better to say that a concept like "the fraternity of bodies" might *also* be something that happens "in the body," because it is the subject's separation from jouissance that is at issue. In such a reading, Lacan's "in the body, in the fraternity of bodies" offers not a sequence or clarification but a deformative tension, showing the division between real and symbolic to be a false choice. The symbolic is not overlaid onto the real; the real is a lack that is present in the symbolic and imaginary and constitutive of them. The real, imaginary, and symbolic are, he is beginning to suggest, thoroughly inextricable, and a cut in one register may let the entire ideological system become dislodged from its commitment to the One.[3]

David S. Marriott has recently argued that Lacan is so deeply immersed in an implicitly racist set of concept-metaphors (lord and bondsman dialectic, master signifiers, black and white disks), that his work is implicitly hostile to Black people. Lacan's warning about the "backlash" produced by fraternity-based models of belonging, socially, politically, and clinically, may be a meaningful counterexample. Lacan clearly sees the racist foundations of Enlightenment thought, understands their continuing implications, and tries to find an alternative episteme that can be more than merely inclusive. Lacan is here modeling a kind of anti-racist thought at a quite deep level, and using the keyword "abolition" to do so, as he calls for the "abolition" of the phallic function (*Seminar XIX* 89). Lacan's strategy is not to universalize a minoritized position—that would be the … or worse-case

3 To illustrate their inextricability, Lacan introduces his concept of the Borromean Knot in *Seminar XIX*, 76–78.

scenario—but to reorganize discourse around the noticeable presence of an objectified cut, that is, a nothing (*Seminar XIX* 89).

Doing … worse

The grammatically "disjointed" title *…Or Worse* marks the presence of an absence, of something known to be unknown and unknowable. In a talk given at Sainte-Anne in parallel with his seminar, Lacan explains that the ellipsis, by acknowledging the place of the Other, signals the active presence of a certain authoritative "emptiness" in discourse (*Seminar XIX* 80). The ellipsis functions like the grammatical equivalent of an algebraic variable. It calls attention to "the empty place" that (according to Lacan) invisibly holds the social order together (*Seminar XIX* 3–4).

Lacan is not exactly a grammarian (and certainly neither am I), but part of the charm of the title is his idiosyncratic understanding of the word "worse." He asserts that "worse" [*pire*] is specifically an adverb, and hence to present it without a verb to modify would be bewildering. The irony is that, as translator A.R. Price points out, the French "*pire*" is in actuality strictly an adjective, despite the sometimes "erroneous" use of it as an adverb, as in "I am doing worse" (Lacan, *Seminar XIX* 233 n1). Lacan is probably aware of this; he later notes that "it wasn't just for the sake of it that I said to say it adverbially" (*Seminar XIX* 146). Lacan cultivates the disquieting effect of a quasi-adverb stripped of a verb to modify. He even holds that verbs should not be considered a distinct grammatical category, when they, in his estimation, are so multifarious in function (79). To make matters worse (so to speak), we also don't know to what "…" is being compared. In the absence of a comparator or an action to modify, the unspecified adverbial "worse" becomes, in effect, an alternative directly to itself.

Lacan's parting comment may be the culmination of this idea. Racism is not something to come; it is already here, and it is "worse." Yet the alternative to a racist social order must remain unspecified. Racism is both an aberration and a norm, even an implicit social expectation. And so, with no discernable outside to racism, we can only ask: Worse than what, if racism is coextensive with "all"? And worse in what way? What is worse? Whatever could be "worse" than ascendant racism? Lacan courts but deactivates these questions through layers of deliberate ambiguity. The unspecified comparator and the suggestion that the situation is neither merely "bad" nor "the worst" seems to highlight the impossibility of measuring relative levels of discrimination faced by variously minoritized peoples. Lacan's model makes it impossible but necessary to measure racism against other forms of hate or discrimination, or levels of racism

against an imaginary unbiased norm. Rather, he places a racist norm in relation to the "empty place" that defines the social order as its excluded interior, designating it implicitly as vaguely "worse." That is why it is a question of ideology specifically—it's not a matter of racist views held by this or that person but a racism baked into the symbolic field itself. Speaking beings understand only the world in which they have been immersed (Lacan, *Seminar XIX* 122).

Racism, as Lacan suggests in *Television*, occurs when a norm is established that, upon encountering difference, finds difference to be a sign of inadequacy. It is thus the result of normalizing an array of biased comparisons, in which the basis for the comparison itself is already "worse." Lacan implies that, if we are to really deactivate racist ideological structures, we would first have to grasp the impossibility of making meaningful comparisons, of making measurements between categories. One would have to become comfortable with the presence of an "emptiness" that, in warping the symbolic field around it, would render comparison absurd (Lacan, *Seminar XIX* 80). That way, the discursive field as such could no longer take satisfaction in comparing itself to those others it assumes to be deficient. To say "… or worse" focuses attention on how we do what we are doing rather than what exactly we are doing: it becomes an adverb connected to the totality of a culture's activities.

Yet, as the name implies, "… or worse" is no panacea. The ambiguity of the ellipsis cannot save us from what is already *the worst*, nor can it necessarily make things better. It could, though, entice us to imagine the social link apart from the constraints of the master's discourse and the capital that supports it. It is not a utopian plan for improvement but an attempt to harness "the significance of failure," which was often a key feature of Lacan's thought (Landrum x). Lacan's aim is not to fix a broken social order but to activate a non-all implicit within the social order, so as to enable different fantasies to emerge through the reorganization of subjects' overdetermined, multi-corporeal jouissance. Lacan's theory of marking "the empty place," once it reaches its culminating confrontation with the "worse" of rising racism, may activate that nested structure of overdetermined jouissance. It is a way to create an uncertainty that may trouble a social order based on equivalences (and thus comparison, measurement), and in which only "all lives," rather than all "Black lives," seem to matter. It suggests that Aristotelian-style set theory could be an anti-racist form of thought, however unlikely such a thing may seem.

Not-all lives matter

Rights discourses in the European tradition usually depend on an imagined political universal—an "all" to which every subject is said to belong. This quickly leads to a paradoxical double bind, as the philosopher Jacques Rancière, building upon the work of Hannah Arendt, observes. Following Arendt, Rancière considers the phrase, "the Rights of Man and of the Citizen," a phrase coined by France's National Constituent Assembly in 1789, and which remains the basis of rights in France today. Rancière is interested in that duality: either one is talking about the rights of the "citizen," meaning, tautologically, the rights of those who already have rights; or the rights of "man" as such, meaning, the rights of even the un-included person, the refugee or exile, meaning the rights of those who have no rights, which, being contradictory, would void the definition of rights (302). Given this double bind, rights can only acquire meaning, argues Rancière, when they are claimed by those who have no rights. This requires a process that Rancière calls the "double negation": "[T]he rights of man are the rights of those who have not the rights that they have and have the rights that they have not," he wickedly explains (302). He champions a process, which he calls the "test," according to which a subject who does not seem to qualify for rights nevertheless claims them, because the rights have been written down for the benefit of someone else (304). Thus, Rancière claims, the border of who and what is included under the auspices of rights can shift to include those formerly left out: "Politics is about that border" (303).

Seminar XIX is, to a surprising extent, concerned with exactly this problem, and I think that Lacan's proposed solution to the impasse is even more radical than Rancière's. Rancière seeks, through "the test," to note the contested ways that marginalized people become included in the set of rights-bearing subject-citizens. The matter for him is about remaining vigilant in contesting the border so as to ever expand the compass of the political. Lacan conceives of the same problem quite differently—he seeks to undermine the "all" from within rather than to expand its scope. That is, politics is not about fostering inclusion for Lacan but, rather, understanding how certain subjects are and can be ideologically included out, to form an internal outside to the political order. Lacan's term for this phenomenon is "ex-sistence": the enduring internal presence of something not included, an "*out there* that is not" (*Seminar XIX* 117).[4] Rather, wherever a universal is posited—we could call it "all," as in the dismissive

4 Lacan's main example of something ex-sisting in *Seminar XIX* is unconscious knowledge—knowledge that is inside the subject, belonging to the subject, but also, by definition, not part of the subject's knowledge. In later seminars,

BLM makes the more Lacanian-style point that the universal set (the "all" of our society) is founded upon a hole in the One.

phrase "all lives matter"—Lacan would teach us to recognize that universalizing category as internally riven, incomplete, a "mirage" sustained only by fantasy (*Seminar XIX* 85). Psychoanalytic discourse can reveal the limit of the "all," Lacan suggests, because it proves that subjects are generally fixed in the phallic function—that is, they have accepted the severance of their enjoyment. Because the "all" is secretly created by the unanimous acceptance of a limit or cut—the trait that all members of this set have in common—we must logically concede the possible presence of a not-all, a part of the set that is not wholly included in the universal. The extimate force of the included outside is internal to the political order and partially, ambiguously belongs to it.

In 2018, when *Seminar XIX* was first published in English, this exact logic problem had been elevated, in the broader culture of North American society, to the level of a full-on Trumpian culture war. On the one hand, all decent people (meaning, "all" within mainstream political discourse) supposedly agree that there should not exist a citizen-subject who does not matter. We are all human beings, after all, and so forth, with inalienable rights. On the other hand, each day's news cycle would document further deadly incidents by police, which, taken in sum total, plainly demonstrated that there exist whole classes of people who have not seemed to matter, at least in terms of their access to the protections of the rule of law—innocent before proven guilty and so forth. It is as if, as Christopher Chamberlin has argued, "democracy's actualization can only result in a program of racial violence." Hence the powerful intervention of the Black Lives Matter movement. The claim of BLM is not: whatever "mattering" may consist of, "We have that attribute, too!" Rather, BLM makes the more Lacanian-style point that the universal set (the "all" of our society) is founded upon a hole in the One.

Lacanians have lamented the racial exclusions implicit in the universalizing "all," which tends to posit whiteness as an unmarked norm (Seshadri 301; George, *Trauma* 3). The ideology of "all" has had the effect of "shattering the physical and psychic lives of African Americans" (George, "The Lacanian Subject" 258). My point is that it is not latter-day Lacanians who first began to theorize racial injustice in this way. Rather, Lacan himself directly worried about the ideological damage a universalizing One had wrought. Lacan urges for the exploration of "the discord" between a universal premised, paradoxically, on delimitation, and a "contingent

ex-sistence begins to characterize the position of woman in relation to the "all" defined by phallic jouissance.

relation" that is "not in the same position" (*Seminar XIX* 89). The hope that Lacan offers is that "the universal is enclosed by negative possibility" (*Seminar XIX* 180). This is deliberately a paradox: the universal, if it is to be constituted as such, must have a boundary. Or, rather, a bounded set can announce itself as "all" (for instance, as in the tendentious retort "all lives matter"), only by excluding something non-synthesizable from its parameters. While Lacan mocks the notion of "the exception that proves the rule," he also says that this is exactly what happens with sets: a zero, something that does not count, is needed in a set if a collectivity is to arise out of it with its capacity for difference intact (*Seminar XIX* 180). Fraternity will not get us anywhere.

Instead of claiming membership in an "all" that aspires to be totalizing, it would be better—as Gautam Basu Thakur maintains in his Lacanian reading of Frantz Fanon—to proceed directly as lack, as "drive incarnate," as an internal excess to the symbolic order and as "signifier of a non-significative vacuity" (295). Khan echoes this point in arguing that, "the possibility of non-segregation thus enters through the not-all" (160). I am trying to suggest that in *Seminar XIX* Lacan makes this same type of argument, but in mathematical rather than sociological terms, as he valorizes "the entrance porthole that is designated by lack" (*Seminar XIX* 127). The aim, he advises, is to learn how to posit a negative in the particular (for example, "there is not …") with an affirmative in the universal ("all" x exists) and let them sit together in tension. Such a strategy would highlight the contradiction between the "all," a set which supposedly encompasses everything, and the not-all that therefore could not exist (Lacan, *Seminar XIX* 183). Lacan presents this abstractly, as a logic problem, but makes it clear that the logic could and will identify a gap between the sexes. Yet the advice also perfectly captures the tragic contradiction latent in the seemingly uncontentious statement "Black lives matter." To urge as a matter of social justice that "Black lives matter" is, in the context of a protest movement, to point out that *there is at least one Black life that has not mattered*, whereas justice would demand that *all Black lives matter*. To "matter" captures a range of ways of being socially legible, ranging from not being killed by police, to actively enjoying the privileges of police and state protection, to economic opportunity, to civic investment in Black communities, to educational opportunities and non-discriminatory hiring practices. The constant extrajudicial killings by police and lethal actions of racist vigilantes make clear that *at least one Black life does not matter*. And so the phrase "Black lives matter" makes visible the gap between the universal category—that is, those who matter (that is, what should be

everyone, "all" human beings) and the demand of the universal upon the contingent (that is, Black lives matter as such—meaning, they matter on account of belonging to the category "Black lives"). The un-synthesizable gap that opens between these two sets—the aporia separating "all lives" from "all Black lives," showing that one set is not contained fully within the other—is a site of political desire. The ellipses of *…Or Worse* hold open that place and make the lack present and visible; the comparator "worse" puts the racist "all" in relation to that gap. It is, in a way, a call for justice in the form of a logical proposition. As we have seen, Lacan specifically frames the issue as a matter of "justice" at the end of *Seminar XIX*, as he discusses the work of psychoanalysis (212).

Lacan's main preoccupation in *Seminar XIX* is to develop the logic of a sequence of integers—a topic that sounds resolutely, even suspiciously, apolitical. He considers what happens when one founds a sequence of integers in zero. Implicitly it can be seen as a commentary on difference and social exclusion. Lacan maintains that the One deals with difference by trying to count differences (*Seminar XIX* 145). This involves making all differences equivalent to each other and developing a way to count them as units. Lacan rejects such a system. He is trying instead to show his audience how to engage with a more radical kind of difference: difference that cannot be easily enumerated (*Seminar XIX* 145). Mbembe would call this "difference in its raw manifestation" (46). Lacan's main insight into this problem is that a class of items (that is, a set) must share a trait of some kind. The shared trait links the members of the class and places them together in a set. His main interest is in how a set can accommodate an absence, the zero which adds precisely nothing to the set, yet remains, should the foundation to which the other members of the set get "added" (*Seminar XIX* 166). The aim for Lacan is not social cohesion: "Our not-all is discordance" (*Seminar XIX* 14). Khan makes a similar point while extrapolating upon Miller's work: "What is at stake in racism is precisely this demand to uniformization," and it is this that must be strenuously resisted (158).

Lacan shares two important insights about this logical structure: First, that a shared attribute (such as "mattering") cannot be universal, as the set cannot really be totalizing. Even if the set names the set of "all," as in "all lives matter," we still need to learn how to think about those who are partially excluded from that all and affirm that they meaningfully exist; secondly, that it is important to separate the attribute from the included subject, so that the subject's inclusion can be *grounded* on the attribute. For instance: "All Black lives are the ones that matter"; "There is at least

one Black life that did not apparently matter." "Mattering is a property of all Black lives." Lacan explores the endless play of all and not-all, existence and ex-sistence, in relation to a space sometimes presumed to be inclusive and universal. He stresses that, in sets formed around "the One attribute," all members of the class must share the attribute in order to be included in the set, yet they must also be different from each other. One—a unified zone of inclusion—is a "delusion," because we still have to distinguish "the One of difference" from "the One attribute" signaling belonging to a class (Lacan, *Seminar XIX* 91, 168–69). For instance, if we were talking about defining a set of "juicy" things, the various items must not only each be juicy, but they must be juicy differently from one another—or else the things would be mere duplicates rather than a class. And so set theorists assiduously separate the defining attribute from the status conferred by the category: they seek to locate ever endless and proliferating difference within the set. Black Lives Matter is, in this way, a powerful example of such a logic in action, because the attribute (that is, "mattering") is the same as the class itself (that is, "mattering"). The class is "subjects who matter," or ought to matter, and they are included in the set because of their mattering. The tautology satirizes the fantasy of an open and accessible society and suggests the impossibility of, and yet the necessity for, justice. Justice as an experience of the impossible effectively punctures the set called "all" and casts its criteria into doubt.

The clarification in *Television*

The publication of *Seminar XIX* in French and English has coincided with a resurgence of racism in the world and an urgent need for new theoretical approaches to anti-racism. When the seminar became available for English-language readers in North America, the U.S. Trump administration was in the middle of stoking a racist culture war, and around the world other far-right governments had been elected. The previous year had seen several deadly, tragic, and high-profile hate incidents, including the Unite the Right rally in Charlottesville, Virginia, and a mass shooting in Québec City. Notorious white supremacists in Canada and the U.S. had become public figures with their own media followings; "What to do when encountering a Nazi in day-to-day life" had become a popular topic for public discussion. Media coverage was focusing public attention on the extrajudicial killings of African Americans, including Philando Castile, by police, and Colin Kaepernick and other athletes were helping to bring systemic racism into public consciousness in a mainstream way. Canadians had recently observed the one-hundred-and-fiftieth anniversary of

Confederation, an ambivalent occasion given the findings, in 2015, of its Truth and Reconciliation Commission; the subsequent death by shooting of Colten Boushie made the stakes of reconciliation yet more clear. It was quite possible, in this North American context circa 2018, to read the closing words of *Seminar* XIX as prophetic, or at least prescient. To be clear, I do not share this view, although I do find that Lacan's parting comment is striking.

My own feeling is that it would not have taken a Nostradamus to predict the rise of racism on 21 June 1972, when Lacan made his remark. It is even a bit asinine for a white Parisian thinker to have predicted the rise of racism at that time, as if racism hadn't already then reached crisis levels. Lacan's remark came a decade after Algerian independence, which had stimulated extraordinary levels of Algerian immigration to France (Comtat). The Algerian immigrants had been met with a number of racist incidents in the late 1960s, including those caused or deliberately ignored by the police; in terms of legal protections, Algerian immigrants could rely only on "the French insistence on color-blindness in the face of persistent and even mounting discrimination" (Lieberman 190). The decade had also seen the rise of hate groups like the Occident movement in France, the National Front in the UK, and the resurgence of the KKK in the U.S.; it saw the installation of confederate flags and monuments throughout the U.S. as a reaction to the Civil Rights movement; it saw the assassinations of Martin Luther King Jr and Malcolm X. And so on.

Yet to some, the remark at the end of *Seminar XIX* sounded like a bold, even outrageous, prediction. Jacques-Alain Miller, Lacan's future editor and intellectual heir, was seemingly baffled by it. Miller publicly asked Lacan to account for the statement during the *Television* interview: "From another direction, what gives you the confidence to prophesy the rise of racism? And why the devil do you have to speak of it?" (32). Miller chides Lacan twice, first for the hubris of predicting that racism would continue, and again for raising the topic of racism to begin with, as if to speak of racism in an academic setting were impolite. The tone of Miller's question is quite unfortunate. In Miller's defense, he was basically serving as Lacan's comedic foil in the *Television* interview and so may have been asking with feigned incredulity; moreover, Miller has gone on to develop Lacanian approaches to combating racism himself (125–26); and we should note that it was he, not Lacan, who raised the topic in the *Television* interview. Still, the bafflement implied in Miller's question certainly suggests that, at least for some, the conclusion of *Seminar XIX* was an uncomfortable and

impolitic moment, a breach of philosophical decorum, and a troubling thing for Lacan to have said.

I believe I understand Lacan's comment differently than Miller did. Certainly, I would agree that Lacan is trying to cultivate a general air of prophecy. Yet, I also see Lacan carefully avoiding a predictive discourse in that remark. He uses the present tense to declare that racism "is" on the rise; if one allows enough emphasis on the verb and noun in his statement about "painting a rose-coloured future," rather than emphasizing the "rose-coloured" adjective, one might say that Lacan is specifically *not* talking about "painting a … future." Rather, he acknowledges that racism is already here and has been happening already; he merely predicts that we will hear more about what has been happening and later come to see its "ultimate consequences." Such a statement suggests that, if this is a prediction, it is one that operates retroactively, in the style of a psychoanalytic *après coup*. Lacan is predicting what the present and past will have meant.

The statement itself moves, in relation to the rest of *Seminar XIX*, in a similar way, retroactively transfiguring what had been largely mathematical and abstruse reflections as a capstone to the work of the year's seminar overall. In such a reading, Lacan's concern about racism no longer seems like a prediction nor like a non sequitur. If Lacan is making a meaningful prediction, it is not that racism will endure, which is tragically obvious, but that our attempts to find a non-worse alternative risk getting trapped in the discourse of fraternity. More importantly, the statement itself becomes a cut in the symbolic field of the seminar, suddenly delimiting its reflections and transforming them in an admittedly gently anti-racist direction. Lacan's words become prophetic only by functioning as such a cut, not because they were teaching us something we didn't already know about the world to come. It is akin to an analyst exploiting the element of surprise by cutting short a psychoanalytic session, activating the content of what has been said before and restructuring it. Read in this way, the statement renders the overall content of *Seminar XIX* ambiguous and socially relevant at the same time. It puts the substance of the entire seminar into implied ellipses and allows racism, as an ideological condition, to be revealed as the "… or worse" of *… Or Worse*.

Here is Lacan's answer to Miller as it appears in the text of *Television*:

> [JAM]—From another direction, what gives you the confidence to prophesy the rise of racism? And why the devil do you have to speak of it?

> [JL]— Because it doesn't strike me as funny and yet, it's true. With our *puissance* going off the track, only the Other is able to mark its position, but only insofar as we are separated from this Other. Whence certain fantasies—unheard of before the melting pot. Leaving this Other to his own mode of *jouissance*, that would only be possible by not imposing our own on him, by not thinking of him as underdeveloped. (32)

These comments have loomed large in the discussions of Lacan and race—as Hook notes, "it is hard not to read these comments as somewhat prescient" (Hook 35).[5] The statement, as is typical for Lacan, does not exactly make sense, but one can detect its basic drift: that racism inheres in misapprehending difference as deficiency and in constructing a set of subjects collected on the basis of their shared experience of being separated from the big Other. Lacan seems to be advancing a theory of cultural relativism, according to which each racial group should be left to its own preferred form of jouissance. Solving racism would thus seem to require tolerance and the appreciation of difference. One is left with the impression of a basically liberal and multiculturalist Lacan. My sense is that Lacan's comments from *Seminar XIX* go much further than this, because of their alignment with set theory.

Some of Lacan's remarks from the 1973 television special were edited out from the text of *Television*. The excised remarks are both ambiguous and interesting, as they go beyond what was introduced in *Television* and represent a fuller elaboration on the comment from *Seminar XIX*:

> I finished a seminar on this, one year. It's better to know what you can expect. It was like this in a kind of goodbye at the end of the seminar. People have to be warned. The only thing that's interesting, at that time I didn't have to comment, that's what it looks like to me, it's not only foreseeable, because there are all kinds of symptoms, but … but necessary. ("Psychanalyse," sec. 40:28–41:14)

The bleakness of the comment comes through, here: for structural reasons, racism is not only ascendant but "necessary." That certainly does not mean desirable, but it does present racism as inevitable. It also arguably reduces brutal acts of racial hatred in Paris and worldwide to mere "symptoms"

5 Hook does not specify, but I take him to mean that Lacan's remark seems prescient of the "certain [racist] fantasies," including xenophobia, white supremacy, and nativism, that characterized much of politics in the 2010s and since.

of a racism to come, as if the assassination of Dr King or the refusal to support Algerian immigrants had not been in themselves fully racist acts.

Another reading is possible, though. I believe that Lacan means "symptom" here in the sense of "preliminary to what is necessary," a space activated within fantasy. That is specifically the definition of symptom used in *Seminar XIX* (39–40). Fantasy lays the basis for social reality and delimits what kinds of difference can be accommodated and sustained (121).

The next part of Lacan's response to Miller, which was likewise cut from *Television*, strangely switches topics:

> [I]t means that the Other, the other side of the sex, we are divided. So from the time we are mixed up like that, there are fantasies—fantasies unheard of—that wouldn't be … that wouldn't be otherwise. It's a way of the dramatization, if one can say, this Other that's here anyway. If there is no sexual relation, it's because the Other is of another kind. ("Psychanalyse," sec. 42:06–42:44)

A real distribution of difference would demand much more from us.

Here too, the comment is not fully coherent—a situation made worse by the fact that I am relying on YouTube's computer-generated translation of the television special. But one can sense in these remarks the gesture toward an intersectional analysis of race and sex. As Kalpana A. Seshadri argues, a Lacanian analysis of race along these lines does not require us to make an analogy to sex: "The value of Lacanian theory in serving to unpack our unconscious attachment to race identity as a will to wholeness derives from its unique analysis of sexual difference. Importantly, psychoanalysis enables us to escape the trap of analogizing race and sex" (301). In the remarks given to Miller, Lacan ties his brief analysis of racism to his study of the sexual nonrelation but does not suggest that racial difference is analogous to sexual difference. Rather, he may be saying that race is not a separate category of analysis from sex, because racism is, at root, a type of sexual fantasy. Multiculturalism and difference would only give rise, if reduced into the "all" of the universal or of fraternity, to fantasies of sameness. A real distribution of difference would demand much more from us—the opening of a hole in the social order. Indeed, to establish a phallic logic of sexual difference is to work from a place of occluded difference, because for the two-sex system to work, ideologically speaking, one must find one's place within a system that cannot make accommodations for difference, that cannot engage meaningfully with lack. Hence a "… worse" strategy—of understanding lack as inherent in bodies and the

engine of proliferating difference—might be exactly what's needed if we are to open a porthole into the One.

Set theory is the study of who or what is included. The study of logical sets is, at root, a training in how to distribute differences against but within the field of the similar. If the "all," for Lacan, designates the parameters of the possible, then "there exist" some subjects who are posited against and through the all (*Seminar XIX* 33). These subjects should be understood to be excluded in, in a matter of speaking, rather than simply accommodated or marginalized; what they achieve is "not impossible" (36). It is to find a position neither included nor excluded but "between centre and absence" (104). Which is to say that we should eschew a rhetoric of binary opposition, of social inclusion or exclusion, but embrace a double negation that can reveal the collapse of the universal. The strategy would be to locate difference within the field of similarity and assert its presence while it renders the category itself incoherent. Rather than expanding the parameters of what can be included or asserting a different and separate realm that is also valid, one should exploit the disruptive force of the foundational zero that gets added to the other items in the set.

Conclusion

Racism need not be understood primarily as biased people jealously guarding their own jouissance or envying someone else's; it is, rather, the name of a world-making system that establishes racially coded norms and measures things by it. The problem is that speaking beings are thoroughly enmeshed in discourse, "solidly installed in all this," as Lacan puts it, which is why "your fantasies derive jouissance from you" rather than the other way around (*Seminar XIX* 97–98). Because the social link is discursive, and because the social link emerges through fantasy as the subject tries to imagine themselves capable of a direct, non-discursive enjoyment, this means that eroticism is interfused into social structures.

Lacan says it explicitly in *Seminar XIX*: what I have been proposing, he says, is what is conventionally known as the study of "ideology," because ideology simply means that discourse serves as the social link (131). The entire political field is contained within discursive ideological "walls," which is why, Lacan jests, "nothing is impossible for man—what he can't do, he leaves" (100). That is, there is no outside to ideology, and it prescribes and delimits what is thinkable. When Lacan seems, at times, to be speaking about math—and particularly about the pivotal invention of the zero—he also seems to imply that social/political equality is not easily achieved or willingly granted: "inclusion" is no simple matter when those

who already count require a negativized outside-to-existence in order to become legible as humans themselves (*Seminar XIX* 145). To achieve equality in such a context would mean becoming equal to nothing.

Hence, Lacan does not merely assert that racialized subjects should be included and accepted. A Lacanian approach to anti-racism would analyze the way that social belonging comes to be and what it means to be included in the field of those who are said to "matter." It would seek not merely an expansion of rights but also the recognition that lack and negation can themselves constitute a social link, if they can be made legible and present, written on walls, visible and apparent like the ellipsis of "… Or Worse." Difference could build along several axes without finding accord and may overload hegemonic discourses through ambiguity and overdetermination (Lacan, *Seminar XIX* 200). Instead of brotherhood or sisterhood as models for political belonging, Lacan would have us bet on the overdetermination of bodies, each bringing a blank capacity to generate jouissance, and so possibly to yield new fantasies built with the ellipsis in mind. Certainly this is an abstract goal. It is not easy to find an example of it happening today, which is Lacan's point, I think: because racism is discursive and ideological, anti-racism requires a wound to the "all" that marks the boundary of the thinkable and possible. I recognize that it is not particularly inspiring to pin one's hopes on lack and negation, nor to reason through mathematical formulas in the face of human suffering. Abstraction and indirectness are certainly drawbacks of Lacan's approach when it comes to a political topic of such urgency as this one. Yet any meaningful challenge to the ideological frame that constitutes reality will necessarily seem abstract and abstruse, even useless. Even so, such a model helps us move beyond the limitations of rights-based models, which can depend upon the impossible (because contradictory) aim of inclusiveness, and beyond the neo-Lacanian notion that racism is an individual's wielding of malicious jouissance. It is because of Lacan's abstractness and abstruseness, his indirectness and obliqueness, that he can slowly develop a meaningful critique of such models, pointing to their limitations and hinting at an impossible event, justice.

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