*Lacan Noir: Lacan and Afro-pessimism*
David S. Marriott
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In the afterword to the recent collection *Lacan and Race*, Kalpana R. Seshadri revisits a passage from her ground-breaking book *Desiring Whiteness: A Lacanian Analysis of Race*, where she argued that white subjects cathect their identity so vociferously "because the unconscious signifier Whiteness, which founds the logic of racial difference, promises wholeness" (cited in George and Hook, 301). For critics Derek Hook and Todd McGowan, that this fantasy of the whole subject, the subject without lack, should underwrite anti-Black racism explains why racists fantasize about Blacks' "theft of [white] enjoyment" (George and Hook, *passim*.) and, Sheldon George adds, why African Americans will distance themselves from, but also repeat, the trauma of slavery (George, 76). However, while these very important texts demonstrate compellingly how well Lacanian theory can account for racism, they neglect to inquire into how racism can account for Lacanian theory. The latter is the remit that David S. Marriott sets for himself in this fascinating new book, *Lacan Noir: Lacan and Afro-pessimism*, in which a tropological reading of key texts by Lacan joins (and informs) chapters on Frantz Fanon and Frank Wilderson.

The book is divided into three sections, each dealing, as Marriott tells us in a preface, with Lacan's theory of the signifier. The first part, "Slave and Signifier," offers a close, rhetorical, or figural reading of two key moments in Lacan's *oeuvre*, one well-known (the discussion of public washroom doors in *Écrits*) and one less so (*Robinson Crusoe* and the footprint in Seminar III, *The Psychoses*). The second part, "The X of X," reads Fanon via Lacan's 1930s essay *Les Complexes Familiaux* but also inquires into the nullity of the X as akin to Fanon's "zone of nonbeing." In the third part, Frank Wilderson's *Red, White and Black* is under the microscope, in particular his critique of Lacan around empty and full speech.

In a well-known passage from "The Instance of the Letter in the Unconscious," the 1957 essay in which Lacan lays out a structuralist argument for the unconscious via Saussure's theory of the sign, Lacan offers as an illustration of the signifier and the signified the doors of public washrooms, remarking on the laws of urinary segregation that Western man shares with "primitive communities" (cited in Marriott 8). The work of the signifier and signified, in Marriott's reading, depends for its logic upon the *figure* (that is, both rhetorical figure, and

drawing) of public washrooms that features in Lacan's *Écrits*. So we have an ambiguity in the drawing (two identical doors, one saying *Hommes*, the other *Dames*), but also an ambiguity in "segregation" (by gender or by race), which, Marriott tells us, "symbolized a natural link between the racial imperative of signification as such and its spacing across whiteness and blackness" (13).

This first insight is early in *Lacan Noir*, and by the end of the chapter on Lacan ("The Slave and the Signifier"), Marriott has shown that slavery is at the heart of Lacanian identification and that the theory is a veritable apostrophe to slavery, not only insofar as Hegelian tropes of master and slave are foundational but also because they are formal. Semiotic formulas of signification rely on a bar between the signifier and signified, a bar that is weaponized for the Black subject as a matter of being the excluded term in the workings of Lacan's mathemes, algorithms, and graphs. For Marriott, that is, as for Wilderson, slavery denotes specifically the Black subject (Wilderson has made the "iconoclastic" claim that "Blackness is coterminous with Slaveness:" Wilderson 2020, 225-6). Marriott's argument is not, I hasten to add, a matter of "canceling" or dispensing with Lacanian theory, with which he is tremendously competent in reading; not for nothing does he turn to such late period ideas as *ab-sens*, or the nexus of non-sense and sense approaching the Real, and extremely obscure texts like *L'Étourdit* and *Radiophonie*. In terms of the other thinkers that Marriott encounters in *Lacan Noir*, he is closer to Fanon in his proximity to (and sympathy for?) Lacan than to Wilderson.

Marriot's reading of Fanon joins the substantial engagement that the Lacanian left continues to make with that key figure of the clinic, the revolution, and theory. On the one hand, he examines in a close, patient way Fanon's account of children's violence, of what he (Marriott) calls the "black imaginary" and the "colonial thing," as well as Fanon's well-known invocation of the mirror stage. On the other hand, Marriott will continually turn back to Lacan, not only with respect to the mirror stage essay (or what we might call *the black mirror stage*), but also Lacan's early (1938) essay on family complexes and a passing reference, in *Seminar VII*, to the imaginary "colonizing" the Thing. The subtlety of Marriott's engagement can be seen in two places in particular. The Fanon chapter is called "The X of the X" and takes that phrase from the famous footnote, in *Black Skin, White Masks* (1952), on the mirror stage where Fanon remarks, "there is nothing surprising in hearing a mother announce: 'X… is the blackest of my children'" (cited in Marriott 86). For Marriott, this X marks a lack, the *ab-sens* (a sense that is an absence), "the appearance of a mythical event" (87), and, most complexly in Marriott's reading. "Thus Fanon opposes what is non-identifiable, non-assimilable, that is to say, the

decathexis of the non-me to the more obscure anti-cathexis that attaches to the *(b)lackest x*" (88).

The crux, here, for Marriott lies in the difficulties of solidarity, the social, that are confounded for the colonial subject when she or he has swallowed the white supremacy of the settler hegemony. In that regard, to read colonial paranoïa alongside Lacan's *Complexes familiaux* on psychoses is to see that for the Algerian to hear voices denotes an impossibility of disentangling the psychic from the social. Not only, to cite the grunge band Nirvana, just because you're paranoid doesn't mean they're not after you; nor, to cite Žižek on Lacan, just because your wife is unfaithful doesn't mean you're not pathologically jealous —but *both conditions*. The colonized is paranoid, *and* the settler is after him. "Mama, see the Negro! I'm frightened"—that moment for Fanon, akin to James Baldwin in a tiny village in Switzerland or Teju Cole in Rome—then helps Fanon understand why the Algerian boy will kill his playmate. Lacan tells the story, from Melanie Klein, of a woman who, faced with an empty wall, and a void, paints over it "the life-sized figure of a naked negress" (cited in Marriott 107). This is all Marriott needs to demonstrate very well not only the enduring role of Black representations for the European subject, *but also psychoanalysis' incompetence* in doing more than documenting such a fetish, not realizing, perhaps, the role of "blackness giving white femininity, white narcissism, the assurance of being in its salvation" (Marriott 107).

Wilderson's Lacan, Marriott tells us, is the Lacan of "cultural studies." Marriott confines himself to a reading of Wilderson's *Red, White & Black*, a book on cinema, but it is not the Lacan of the gaze or the imaginary signifier that interests Wilderson; rather, it is how Lacan's notion of empty and full speech stacks the deck in favor of the white subject, who is the only subject who can utter meaningful sentences. Wilderson's reading of Lacan on full speech (much of which was developed in the "Rome discourse") is not without its problems. For Wilderson, alienation in the imaginary or the symbolic is constitutive of full speech, and he argues that, similarly, "Fanon's psychoanalytic description of Black neurosis, 'hallucinatory whitening,' and his prescriptions for a cure, 'decolonization,' and 'the end of the world,' resonate with Lacan's categories of empty speech and full speech" (Wilderson 2010, 74). But Wilderson mis-reads Lacan, seeing the void of subjectivity as "this self-cancellation … possible only when the subject and 'his contemporaries' are White or Human" (75), for "civil society, the terrain in which the analysand performs full speech, is always already a formally stagnated monument" (76). Marriott seizes on this weakness in Wilderson's text, proposing to read the 1950s Lacan (of the "Rome discourse") via later concepts of the Real and the matheme. This is not so much a "gotcha"

moment so beloved by Lacanians (*yes, but what if we contrast Freud's Entwurf with the abbreviated* Name of the father seminar? etc.), not an attempt to rescue Lacan, but instead a way of engaging with the spirit of Wilderson's critique of meaning as the hangman's—or slave-owner's—noose that lynches the Black subject. Insofar as Marriott's critique is a *tropo*logical one—an examination of the unconscious of Lacan's rhetoric and of his figures—it is also a *topo*logical one, as when he compares Lacan's knots to nooses. Marriott finds Wilderson's dour conclusions as much in Lacan's figures as in his ideation, and, indeed, it may be *de trop*, or too much for some readers, over the top.

We can also think about the vulnerability of Afro-pessimism to more global conceptions of race. Marriott nods in that direction; for example, separating Wilderson and Fanon from each other. Zahi Zalloua has critiqued the parochialism of Afro-pessimism vis-à-vis the Palestinian struggle. And Loïc Wacquant, in a recent *New Left Review* article, pointed out the neo-imperial irony whereby America's fetishes of phenotype and race/class entanglements are exported via thin solidarity, thereby allowing for a disavowal of local struggles, be they the Eta and Hnin in Japan or Romani people in Europe.

But what is so remarkable about this book is how the text is so frustratingly elliptical, opaque, and baroque, *for a political text*. In this way, it remains a work of theory—therein lies the strength of *Lacan Noir*. The archive of recent writing on Lacan and race/racism is rich and includes the aforementioned collection edited by Sheldon George and Derek Hook; Zahi Zalloua on Žižek; Todd McGowan on the racist fantasy; Marriott's prior book on Fanon; and Ilan Kapoor & Zalloua, Gautam Basu Thakur, and McGowan on universalism and lack. As Christopher Chamberlin argues in a recent review, much of this work proposes that anti-Black racism functions as a sanctioned misdirection of *jouissance* in two senses: a disavowal of the Lacanian subject qua castration and a reciprocal disavowal (or, let us use stronger words, *foreclosure*) on the part of psychoanalysis of its own fraught relation with white supremacy. Marriott's *Lacan Noir* proposes that to read Lacan is to find what is already there, in black and white, hitherto unread. This is the most exciting book I have read on Lacan in years.

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