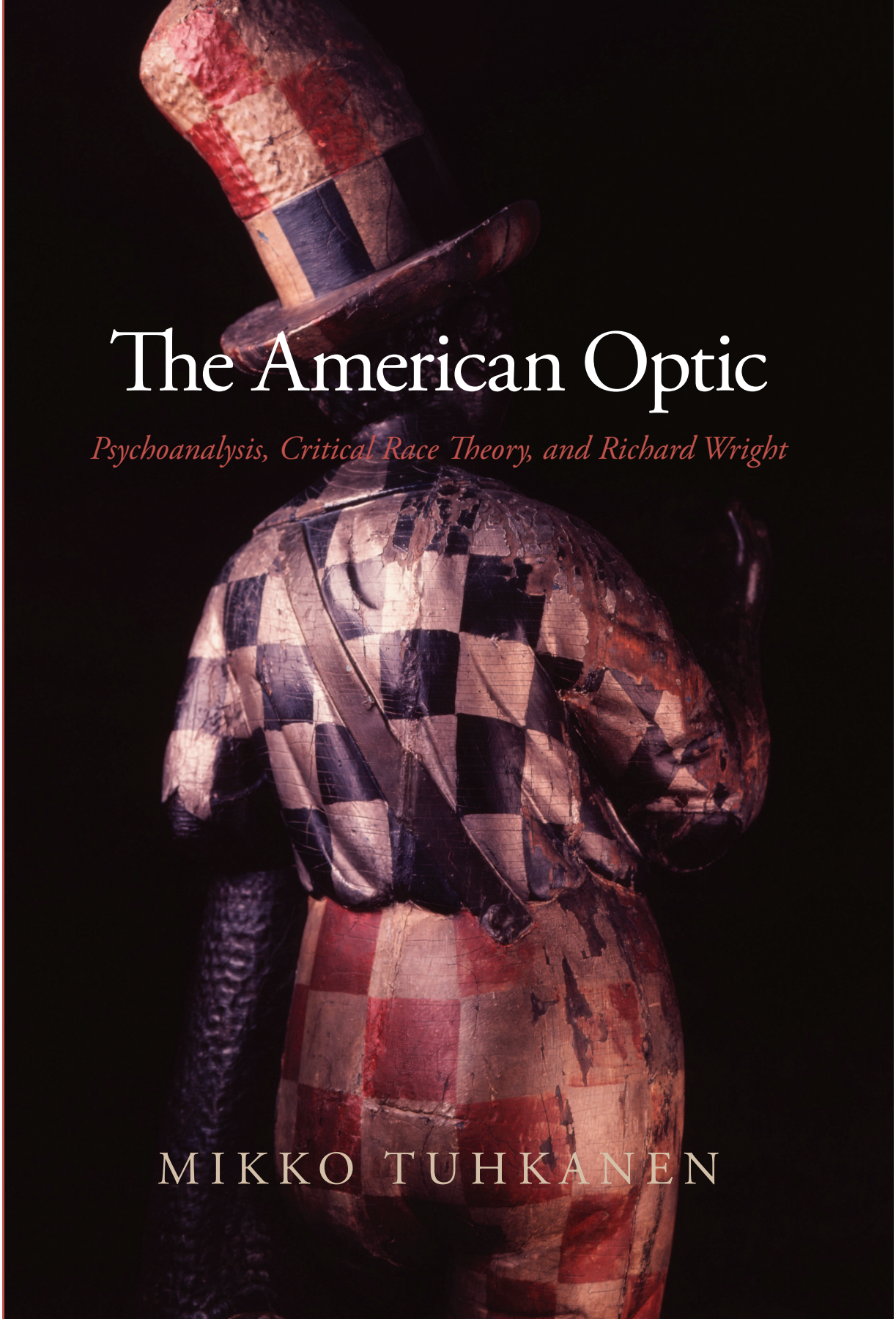
The American Optic
Psychoanalysis, Critical Race Theory, and Richard Wright
MIKKO TUHKANEN

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The American Optic

SUNY series in Psychoanalysis and Culture

Henry Sussman, *editor*

The American Optic

Psychoanalysis, Critical Race Theory, and Richard Wright

MIKKO TUHKANEN

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The whole American optic in terms of reality is based on the necessity of keeping black people out of it. We are nonexistent. Except according to their terms, and their terms are unacceptable.

—James Baldwin in 1987

Thus early I learned that the point from which a thing is viewed is of some importance.

—Frederick Douglass in 1855

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Introduction

"Richard, Jacques; Jacques, Richard"

We don't know anything about race. Whenever we speak of race, or use the term racial type, we speak, in fact, of a void which cannot be filled.

—Richard Wright, interviewed in 1953

CLARA. They'll never stop looking—the white folks never stop.

—Paul Green and Richard Wright, *Native Son: The Biography of a Young American*

Critical race theorists have long understood that, ever since its emergence in the eighteenth century in Voltaire's and Kant's work, the modern concept of "race" has depended on visual epistemologies.[1] In this, racial definition arguably evinces the ocularcentric legacy of Enlightenment thought, its privileging of sight as the ultimate arbiter of difference. The subhuman place that the African, for example, came to occupy in Western economies and imagination relied on "the epistemologies attending vision and their logics of corporeal inscription" (Wiegman 4). When one considers race's hybrid ascendancy—combining and cross-breeding Enlightenment ideals, aesthetic judgment, economic exigencies, and (pseudo-)scientific discourses—"[t]he importance of the emphasis upon the visual for racial thought cannot be overestimated" (Mosse 24–25). In its contemporary dynamics, race continues to "secure[] itself through visibility": it remains "an aesthetic practice," based on "a regime of looking" (Seshadri-Crooks, *Desiring* 8, 19).

This study argues for the benefit of psychoanalysis in rethinking race as a visible category. Engaging African American literary and theoretical texts with Jacques Lacan's work, it asks what happens when we interrogate "the American

optic" (Baldwin, "Last" 210) through what Lacanian theory teaches us about the role of the visible and the scopic drive in the constitution of the human subject. Subsequently, it proposes a shift in race theory, arguing that the visibility of race does not merely assign the subject a social category or discipline one's mobility in society but may have *an ontological status*: in certain symbolic configurations, the subject's emergence, taking place through the visible, may involve "racialization."

The benefit of such a shift is twofold. First, with the psychoanalytic understanding of the visible, one can better delineate not only the ways in which racialization functions, and is contested, in historically specific symbolic orders but also why race remains an indelible category of identification and politics even after critical race theory has demonstrated the groundlessness of most racial categorizations.[2] Second, by engaging psychoanalysis in a dialogue with African American literature and culture, we can open what Houston Baker, Jr., identifies as the "scholarly double bind"—our being constrained by questions and paradigms that, with teleological predictability, guide our work to certain conclusions (*Modernism* 12–13)—and locate "a signifying device sufficiently unusual in its connotations to shatter familiar conceptual determinations" (*Blues* 144). That is, through the dialogue between psychoanalytic and African American texts, we are able to revisit, to cast an awry look on, moments in African American literary history that may have been evacuated of their potential for newness. I suggest that Richard Wright's work is one such site.[3]

What we know of Wright's biography supports a psychoanalytic approach to his work. His association with the psychoanalysts Frederic Wertham and Benjamin Karpman, as well as the texts found in his library—among them books by Karl Abraham, Helene Deutsch, Otto Fenichel, Sandor Ferenczi, Anna Freud, Sigmund Freud, Ernest Jones, Melanie Klein, Theodor Reik, and Géza Roheim—attest to his familiarity with psychoanalysis.[4] According to one biographer, he remained "intensely Freudian"—indeed, "obsessed with psychoanalysis" (M. Walker 286, 245)—throughout his literary and philosophical career.[5]

Yet, proposing a dialogue between Wright and psychoanalysis invokes inevitable methodological problems. Given that psychoanalysis often comes to us as yet another one of the master's tools, is it possible to approach questions of race from a psychoanalytic perspective? More specifically, considering psychoanalysis's historical ties to the discourses of the unprecedented colonial expansion of late-nineteenth-century Europe, as well as the seeming irrelevance of late-twentieth-century Lacanianism to the concerns of African American culture, how are we to open a dialogue between Lacan and Wright, to introduce Jacques to Richard, as I propose to do here?

In terms of psychoanalysis's relation to Wright's work, nothing may be more decisive than the fact that his writings have been seen as a precursor to the militant black movements of the 1960s and was adopted by numerous Black Panthers and Black Muslims as the emblem of black male rage.[6] That

psychoanalysis was among the "white" solutions to be rejected in favor of more authentic African American approaches is mediated by Eldridge Cleaver, who recalls his encounters with a prison psychiatrist in *Soul on Ice* (1968):

> I had several sessions with a psychiatrist. His conclusion was that I hated my mother. How he arrived at this conclusion I'll never know, because he knew nothing about my mother; and when he'd ask me questions I would answer him with absurd lies. What revolted me about him was that he had heard me denouncing the whites, yet each time he interviewed me he deliberately guided the conversation back to my family life, to my childhood. That in itself was all right, but he deliberately blocked all my attempts to bring out the racial question, and he made it clear that he was not interested in my attitude toward whites. This was a Pandora's box he did not care to open. (11)

Suggesting the bad faith that informs psychoanalysis's encounter with politics, Cleaver articulates African American writers' and thinkers' distrust of such white disciplines. In the prison psychiatrist, he offers us the stereotypical image of a (psycho)analyst who imposes family romances on everything and hears repressed Oedipal secrets in every word communicated by the analysand, while remaining stubbornly blind to the life-and-death concerns of the latter's everyday existence. As Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari write, there remains "a fundamental relation to the outside of which the psychoanalyst washes his hands, too attentive to seeing that his clients play nice games" (*Anti-Oedipus* 356). Consequently, psychoanalysis appears for Cleaver not only irrelevant but directly oppressive: concertedly disregarding cultural and political specificity, it ignores the reality of disenfranchisement.

Cleaver makes a telling comparison in that, immediately before recounting the above dismal scene, he writes of his first encounter with Wright's work: "In Richard Wright's *Native Son*, I found Bigger Thomas and a keen insight into the problem [of black men's desire for white women]" (10). Whereas the psychiatrist will not listen to Cleaver, the problems with which the latter is struggling are brought into relief through an encounter with two "authentic" black men, Bigger Thomas and Richard Wright; the issues that take Cleaver to prison and to the psychiatrist are in fact better illuminated by Wright than by psychoanalysis. Contrasting the psychiatrist's myopic impositions to Wright's "keen insight," he effectively disassociates the two and implies that Wright, as a black man, can speak of African American experience where psychoanalysis remains impotent, blind, and oppressive.

Cleaver's example illustrates the argument that psychoanalysis is either impervious to the urgency of political questions or directly racist in its basic assumptions. For example, a number of writers point out psychoanalysis's colonial loyalties by referring to its analogy between "savagery" and infantilism. While examples abound in Freud, this is perhaps best evidenced by Octave Mannoni's *Prospero and Caliban* (1950), whose theorization of colonialism as a

response to the psychic "dependence complex" (40) of the natives has become, fairly or unfairly, an exemplary case of the political misappropriation of psychology and psychoanalysis.[7] Already in 1955, Aimé Césaire notes that the Eurocentric investment in these disciplines is evident in their insistence on depicting "Negroes-as-big-children" (40).[8] In addition to Mannoni's work, psychoanalytic anthropology has produced numerous other case studies that have elicited vehement criticism.[9] In Deleuze and Guattari's famous estimation, "Oedipus is always colonization pursued by other means" (*Anti-Oedipus* 170). At worst, psychoanalysis is seen as "conceal[ing] realities and legitimiz[ing] oppression" (Hartnack 233; qtd. in Seshadri-Crooks, "Primitive" 183), while Freud is identified as "the great colonizer of psyches" (Torgovnick 198).[10] Wright himself offers similar reservations, writing that any discussion of psychology of the colonized is usually rejected by enlightened commentators because it carries "an air of the derogatory" (*White* 41).

Yet, the last two decades have seen the emergence of studies that, without "exonerating" psychoanalysis, complicate these charges. In Freud scholarship, two trends have developed: one exploring questions of racialization in Freud, the other appropriating (aspects of) Freudian psychoanalysis to read "black" texts. For a number of scholars, Freud's anthropological texts, such as "Moses and Monotheism," "Totem and Taboo," and the early "cocaine papers," suggest "the historical importance of racial categories in Freud's work" (Marez 68).[11] Focus is placed on the significance of Freud's own racialized position in fin-de-siècle Europe, where, as Sander Gilman points out, the Jewish "race" was associated with effeminacy, disease, and "criminal perversions" ("Sigmund" 47).[12] Daniel Boyarin similarly argues that Freud's shift from the so-called seduction theory to the theory of oedipalization was precipitated by the racialization of the Jew, the invention of the homosexual, and the acceleration of racism and homophobia at the end of the nineteenth century (*Unheroic* 189–220).[13]

While Gilman and Boyarin tease out the historical complexities in psychoanalysis's emergence, others have accused Freud of purposefully utilizing the representations of the "savage," widely circulated in the rapidly expanding colonial Europe, to escape his own racially stigmatized position. In contradistinction to the "primitive," the argument goes, Freud could claim the privileges of whiteness and civilization, much like Jewish entertainers in early twentieth-century Hollywood could disappear, according to Michael Rogin's thesis, into racial unmarkedness by donning blackface.[14] Thus the significance of Freud's "race" to the formation of psychoanalytic knowledge is generally acknowledged, but its implications remain contested. While Marianna Torgovnick, for example, finds in Freud a more or less self-serving mechanism of displacement (199),[15] for Boyarin the necessity for such negotiations suggests Freud's "postcolonial anguish," making him "both the object and the subject of racism" ("Jewish" 42, 40). Jacqueline Rose similarly remarks that, because of his own racial markedness, Freud could not "unproblematically or unequivocally embody the master narrative of the West" (50), and Barbara

Johnson locates in Freud's position something akin to the Du Boisian "double consciousness" (*Feminist* 10).

Apart from considering Freud's racialized status, or the repression of racial difference in other early psychoanalytic texts,[16] critics have involved psychoanalysis in their readings of African American texts and culture, thereby attempting to redress "the poverty of language offered by psychoanalysis for addressing issues of race and culture" (Luciano 158). A number of biographies of African American literary figures, for example, are allegedly "quite Freudian" (Murray 163).[17] Similarly, given the psychoanalytic emphasis on family relations, it is not surprising that slavery's violent disruption of familial ties has been discussed in psychoanalytic terms. Without explicitly engaging psychoanalysis, Hortense Spillers's influential essay "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe" (1987) pointed the way for subsequent theorists to explore the forms of relatedness that African slaves created during their captivity.[18] In *Mastering Slavery*, for example, Jennifer Fleischner considers women's slave narratives as examples of the self-narration that psychoanalysis, according to her, solicits from the analysand with the hope of his or her "liberation" from childhood traumas (5 and passim).[19]

The question that more immediately concerns me in this study, however, is the precise way we can engage Lacanian psychoanalysis with African American literature. While Freud's anthropological texts have provided an obvious starting point for a consideration of his implication in colonialism, Lacan's possible contribution to an investigation into race is harder to tease out: as opposed to issues of sexual difference, there is very little in Lacan's writing that explicitly relates to questions of race or seeks to explain racism. Nevertheless, the recent turn in Lacanian criticism to politics suggests an opening for this investigation. Antonio Viego, for example, reads Lacan's abhorrence of ego psychology's adaptive models, especially their prevalence in the United States, in terms of a critique of "North American coercive assimilatory imperatives working on ethnic-racialized subjects . . . that demand of them a certain mandatory adjustment and adaptation to North American 'reality'" (5) and suggests an "overlap" between Lacan's antiassimilatory critique in the 1950s "and the similar critique of assimilation crafted by early Chicano movement activists" (25). Ernesto Laclau and Slavoj Žižek have similarly suggested some ways in which we can approach politics from a Lacanian perspective.[20] Recent examples of Lacanian scholarship that engage questions of race and colonialism include the collection *The Psychoanalysis of Race* (1998), edited by Christopher Lane, Kalpana Seshadri-Crooks's theory of racialized subjectivity in *Desiring Whiteness: A Lacanian Analysis of Race* (2000), Abdul JanMohamed's study of Wright, *The Death-Bound Subject: Richard Wright and the Archaeology of Death* (2005), and Viego's psychoanalytic reading of Latino/a cultures and literatures, *Dead Subjects: Toward a Politics of Loss in Latino Studies* (2007). Seshadri-Crooks, and some contributors to Lane's volume[21] may be seen as "the New Lacanians" of psychoanalytically inflected critical race theory, given their "emphasi[s on]

Lacan's late notions of drive, *jouissance*, and the real at the expense of his early concepts of desire, the imaginary, and the symbolic" (Mellard 395).[22] Perhaps because of the vagaries of Lacan translations into English, the question of the real, with which Lacan was increasingly concerned in the late 1960s and 1970s, has until recently been neglected in Anglo-American scholarship. If the impact of this shift in Lacanian theory from the imaginary and symbolic aspects of subjectivity to the nonhuman, asubjective realm of the real "has not yet fully registered with [Anglo-American] psychoanalytic theorists of gender" (Dyess and Dean 738), its ramifications for psychoanalytic theories of race has remained similarly unexplored. It is this question that Lacanian race theory needs to concern itself with. The current study is a contribution to this emergent field of scholarship.

Yet, the specter Cleaver evokes—of psychoanalytic arrogance that dismisses the concerns of African American subjects or texts—is not completely exorcised by the proliferation of these psychoanalytic studies of race and racialization. Given the history of psychoanalysis and race, any attempt to read Wright psychoanalytically will conjure up the threat of inflicting on him the reductive readings to which Cleaver was subjected. Predictably enough, this has been the exact outcome of many a psychoanalytic attempt at Wright scholarship. Two examples of this are Margaret Walker's psychobiography *Richard Wright, Daemonic Genius* (1988) and Allison Davis's chapter on Wright in *Leadership, Love, and Aggression* (1983): both demonstrate the necessity of relentless suspicion in the face of psychoanalytic approaches to questions of race. Apart from the many inaccuracies Michel Fabre points out in his "Margaret Walker's Richard Wright," Walker stands as a representative of a reductive tradition in psychoanalytic criticism that misreads not only the literary (or [auto]biographical) texts under consideration but also psychoanalysis.[23] Similarly, Davis's reading of Wright's autobiography exemplifies an elision of the social and political specificity of the "analysand's" situation. Davis writes that while "Wright may have allowed his public to believe that his character and behavior were formed by the impact of racial oppression by Mississippi whites," "[o]ne only needs to read his *Black Boy* . . . to understand that Wright considered his family the primary source of his anger and his hatred." In a reading that is both authoritarian and misogynist, Davis insists that Wright's revolt and anger were not primarily directed against his racist environment, or even that the family structures might have been determined by or mediating such oppressive social structures. Instead, Wright, like his father, was rebelling against his maternal family, "a long, grim line of puritan matriarchs," which "consisted of a clan of obsessively religious and sadistic women" (156–58). At the very least, Davis fails to realize that "[r]acism becomes a part of the subject's unconscious because the parents consciously and unconsciously reflect the racist values of the culture onto the subject from the first moment of life" (Tate, *Psychoanalysis* 133).

We may approach the thorny relation between race and psychoanalysis by noting how it echoes many other interdisciplinary encounters in which the

latter has been involved. Discussing its relationship with feminism, Jane Gallop writes: "the worst tendency, the inherent constitutional weakness of psychoanalysis, is to be apolitical (which is to say, to support the institutions in power)" (*Daughter's* 101). "One of psychoanalysis's consistent errors," she continues, aptly describing Cleaver's situation, "is to reduce everything to a family paradigm. Sociopolitical questions are always brought back to the model father-mother-child. Class conflict and revolution are understood as a repetition of parent–child relations. This has always been the pernicious apoliticism of psychoanalysis" (144).[24] Interrogating the link between literature and psychoanalysis, Shoshana Felman suggests that, to avoid such traps of psychoanalytic application—in which, according to her, psychoanalysis stands as the Hegelian master over the bondsman of literature ("To Open" 5)—we must "engage in a real *dialogue* between literature and psychoanalysis." We begin this by reversing the master–slave positions and by "consider[ing] the relationship between psychoanalysis and literature *from the literary point of view*" (6). The objective in establishing this dialogue, Felman continues, is not, however, simply to overturn the positions, but, rather, "to disrupt this monologic, master–slave structure" (6) altogether so that one can "avoid *both* terms of the alternative" and "deconstruct the very structure of *opposition*, mastery/slavery" (7). Yet, skeptical about the possibility of nonreductive psychoanalytic approaches to other disciplines, Françoise Meltzer, in her introduction to *The Trial(s) of Psychoanalysis* (1988), sees psychoanalysis as an inherently colonial project, a form of "empire-building"—what Deleuze and Guattari in *Anti-Oedipus* call "the analytic imperialism of the Oedipus complex" (23)—that seeks to incorporate all other disciplines within its own paradigm and assumptions (Meltzer 7). According to her, Felman's attempted reversal of the master–slave relationship of psychoanalysis and literature betrays the constitutive reductiveness and "totalizing teleology" of the psychoanalytic approach. For what guarantees that such a reversal has any deconstructive effects on the dialectic hierarchy? According to Meltzer, Felman's unstated assumption is that the positions of the master (for psychoanalysis) and that of the slave (for literature) are so "*natural*" that any role reassignment would, by its sheer absurdity, quickly abolish the structure itself (3). At bottom, Felman's argument is a mere variation of psychoanalytic narcissism in which all other disciplines are but mirroring surfaces for psychoanalysis to discover its inalienable and unchangeable truths: "Not content to see itself as one in a number of enterprises, the psychoanalytic project has at its foundation a vision of itself as the meaning which will always lie in wait; the truth which lies covered by 'the rest'" (2). According to Meltzer, psychoanalysis must be reduced from its position of metadiscursive arrogance: "Psychoanalysis is not on trial in order to be attacked," she writes, "but in order to be put back into its place—or, at least, into *a* place" (5). For her, the only way to bring psychoanalysis and other disciplines together is to return the violence of the previous encounters in the exact same form onto psychoanalysis.

Meltzer's response to Felman indicates the difficulty in engaging ethically and productively with any constellation of discourses contaminated by histories of violent hierarchies. (And we may suspect that all such encounters are marked by a certain degree of violence.) She correctly admonishes us that, rather than applying psychoanalytic theory to other disciplines, we must *interrogate* it. This does not mean primarily that we are to criticize it—rather, we must not assume that we are already familiar with its insights, which can then be applied to other fields of knowledge. Yet, what should give us pause is Meltzer's desire to repeat the dialectic of violent reduction of which psychoanalysis stands accused. Here we should ask, what is the ethics of a justice that announces the defendant's incarceration and confinement to "its place" in the opening statement of the trial? Moreover, wanting to "put [psychoanalysis] *back* into its place" (emphasis added), Meltzer assumes that *we already know what this place is*. In this, we are reassured that nothing unexpected will be uncovered during the trial, nothing new unearthed. The testimony will not complicate notions of guilt or responsibility; the whole procedure is committed to a rigid politics of foreseeability.

It is precisely an opening to the unexpected that Gallop points to as ethical engagement in analysis. She suggests that, as a way to negotiate the difficult division between psychoanalysis and politics—which Cleaver's example perfectly illustrates—we must involve the analyst in the scene of interpretation: "Analysis, if it is not to be a process of *adapting the patient* to some reigning order of discourse, must include the risk of unseating the analyst" (*Daughter's* 102; emphasis added).[25] For Frantz Fanon and James Baldwin, for example, the adaptive aims of psychiatry and psychoanalysis reveal the disciplines' colonialist and racist allegiances.[26] Always insisting on what may be called the maladaptive aims of treatment, Lacan, too, refers to the dangers of misdirected analysis when he writes that "the inability to authentically sustain a praxis results, as is common in the history of mankind, in the exercise of power" ("Direction" 216). Yet, while critics such as Deleuze and Guattari condemn psychoanalysis tout court—"It is certain that psychoanalysis pacifies and mollifies, that it teaches us resignation we can live with" ("Deleuze" 229)—Lacan identifies the adaptive methods of ego-psychology as *inauthentic* practice.

Hence, while observing the reductive approaches in the history of psychoanalysis—where psychoanalytic knowledge appears as an uncontested master interpreting its objects—we should note with Lacan that such a rigid postures of self-identity belong to the unethical subject whose relationship to the other is characterized by imaginary misrecognition. The ethical subject, for Lacan, is the mobile subject of desire or, increasingly in his later work, of the drive. That the institution of psychoanalysis is often characterized by rigid, masterly interpretative ambition should not prevent us from seeing what remains unfixable and mobile—that is, inherently ethical—in psychoanalytic discourse. Our inability to rest in one position long enough for it to materialize into a master's throne or the voyeur's keyhole constitutes the *ethics of psychoanalysis*. In this ethical perspective, moreover, lies psychoanalysis's availability for political

work. "Psychoanalysis," as Tim Dean writes, "is political precisely to the extent that the position of the analyst diametrically opposes that of the master" (*Beyond* 108). Correspondingly, Meltzer's assumption of already knowing what psychoanalysis can do and her ambition to firmly locate psychoanalysis—to "be actively reductive with psychoanalysis" (7) and to "put [it] back into its place" (5)—appear in this context as decidedly unethical. As Adam Phillips observes, "the fact that psychoanalysis is difficult to place . . . may be one of its distinctive virtues" (3).

One should nevertheless remain doubtful about all claims to "good-natured" exchanges between discursive fields. Edward Said argues that the seemingly neutral setting of "discursive situations" usually masks the fact that "far from being a type of idyllic conversation between equals, [these situations are] more usually of a kind typefied [*sic*] by the relation between colonizer and colonized, the oppressor and the oppressed" ("Text" 181–82; see also Gandhi 28). Like all exchanges established across disciplines, discourses, and knowledges, the dialogue between African American and psychoanalytic literatures is inevitably marked by disparities. Establishing such encounters is an effort where we find our "good intentions" always compromised and endlessly betrayed. However, while violence may indeed be unavoidable in these encounters, we must resist letting this violence solidify into a structure. Furthermore, in all their inherent dangers and pitfalls, such dialogues are precisely what psychoanalysis is all about. Through its engagement with an other, psychoanalysis—and, importantly, other disciplines participating in this dialogue—retains the mobility characteristic of the ethical subject of desire.

I am not the first to see such troubled encounters as potentially productive. The editors of *Female Subjects in Black and White: Race, Psychoanalysis, Feminism* (1997) observe in the intersection of race and psychoanalysis (and, in their project, of feminism) as many "transformative possibilities" as "stubborn incompatibilities" (Abel et al. 1). Encounters that take place or erupt in this treacherous middle-ground, they warn, must not be considered entirely reconcilable. Yet, through such implication we can avoid, however momentarily and without any guarantees of success, reductive psychoanalytic readings that, in their insistence on "reduc[ing] everything to a family paradigm" (Gallop, *Daughter's* 144), bypass sociopolitical questions of power and disenfranchisement. It is, exactly, this *reductive* analytical reading to which Cleaver objects in his account of his sessions in prison—not the fact that analysis implicates the family: "each time [the psychiatrist] interviewed me he deliberately guided the conversation back to my family life, to my childhood. *That in itself was all right*, but he deliberately blocked all my attempts to bring out the racial question" (11; emphasis added). (Psycho)analysis's emphasis on the familial is not necessarily oppressive; Oedipus becomes "the fountainhead where the psychoanalyst washes his hands of the world's inequities" (Deleuze and Guattari, *Anti-Oedipus* 128) only when the analyst refuses everything outside the family, turns a blind eye to the possibility that the family may be imbricated in

society and its politics. Thus, if psychoanalysis has participated in the Western projects of colonialism, Fanon's example clearly shows that its historical role in *anti*colonial and *anti*racist struggles is anything but negligible. Similarly, in African American thinking, Du Bois's disillusionment with the ability of objective, scientific knowledge to fight race prejudice coincides with his discovery of racism's unconscious support. In his autobiographical texts, he suggests that this "twilight zone" of "stronger and more threatening forces" that remain in excess of "conscious and rational" motivation behind race prejudice can be explored through Freud's insights (*Dusk* 282, 283, 296). I thus suggest that the question, *What can psychoanalysis do?*, can and must be answered only through the future encounters in which it will be engaged.

One way to think about the transformative potential of these encounters is to give the term its Deleuzian specificity. That is, we can think of the dialogue between psychoanalytic and African American texts as an *encounter between bodies*, as an opening onto an unforeseeable becoming that may transform the encountering bodies beyond recognition—with all the violence that this phrase suggests.[27] Deleuze teaches us that, unlike what Meltzer assumes in her trial scenario, encounters cannot be legislated. For him, bodies are always defined by their relations to other bodies, by their ability to be transformed by the "resonance" that exists between their internal and external relations. Our regarding bodies as autonomous betrays the fact that we have misunderstood their interimplication, have missed their profound resonance. Bodies, consisting of smaller bodies and their relations to one another, are separable yet interconnected: separable in the specificity of their internal relations, yet connected through the bodies they inevitably share with other bodies, in which they enter into a different relation. In their encounter, bodies are never completely compatible, never pieces of a puzzle that snugly complement one another, but are always held together by a certain friction, gravitational pull, or violent harmony. Our success in joining two separate bodies (of work) seamlessly cannot but betray the fact that we have dismissed their true complexity.

I suggest that the Deleuzian understanding of bodies' interimplication, eschewing any notions of harmonious compatibility, characterizes the most productive work emerging from the encounter between psychoanalysis and race. Conversely, the understanding of the necessary transformation that takes place in all encountering bodies reveals some problems in the recent studies on psychoanalytic and African American texts. I take Claudia Tate's *Psychoanalysis and Black Novels* as an example: her work warrants detailed attention because of the centrality it accords to Wright and the largely favorable reviews it has drawn as a timely opening between psychoanalysis and African American writing.[28]

As Tate notes in her introduction, many commentators, "demanding manifest stories about racial politics," have marginalized African American texts that engage questions not directly dealing with society's racial and racist structuring. Texts that "focus on the inner worlds of black characters without making that world entirely dependent on the material and psychological

consequences of a racist society" (5) have been rejected for neglecting to interrogate and critique racism and, consequently, considered "not black enough" (4). Tate counters this critical history by reading a number of novels that, from the perspective of the African American canon, have appeared "anomalous" in the output of their authors. She argues that these texts in fact reveal what has been implicit in the more canonical works: according to her, they are central to their authors' oeuvre and the concerns of the black canon in that they "not only inscribe[] but exaggerate[] a primary narrative, an 'urtext,' that is repeated but masked in the canonical texts" (8).

Tate in effect proposes that, rather than continuing what Henry Louis Gates, Jr., calls the "curious valorization of the social and polemical functions of black literature" that has stunted black literary criticism ("Criticism" 5–6),[29] critics of African American texts should pay attention to the workings of unconscious processes, which can neither be explained as effects of a (racist) environment nor contained by the authors' or readers' political designs. In her impressively researched readings, she shows how black texts are amenable to analyses that pay attention to what she calls "textual subjectivity . . . structured by the mediation of desire and prohibition" (25) or the "implicit narrative fragments of desire and pleasure inscribed in the rhetorical organization and language of the text" (27). Her range of references in psychoanalytic theory is similarly ambitious: she draws from Lacan, Freud, and Melanie Klein while gesturing to Karen Horney's and Marie Bonaparte's theories of femininity.

Although demonstrating her familiarity with the field of psychoanalysis, however, Tate does not extend to its theories the kind of detailed investigative effort with which she reads African American texts. This is a conscious choice: she writes in her introduction that, because her audience consists mainly of scholars and readers of African American literature, she is "not interested in consolidating and privileging the theoretical demands of individual schools of psychoanalysis" (12). For her, the numerous psychoanalytic theories "facilitate [her] analysis of unconscious textual desire in the novels as unacknowledged fantasies of lost and recovered plenitude" (13). What she ends up doing, however, is not merely refusing to take sides in intra-disciplinary debates around different psychoanalytic approaches. Rather, her neglect of critical engagement with psychoanalysis leads not only to a reductive theoretical understanding, but also to psychoanalysis's approximating the kind of "narcissistic," "ubiquitous subject, assimilating every object into itself," that Meltzer sees it as. In the mode of psychoanalytic "facilitat[ion]," where what is being read are the black novels, not the psychoanalytic texts, Tate unwittingly perpetuates a familiar hierarchy between literature and psychoanalysis: their potential dialogue is reduced to an application where *our understanding of psychoanalysis is not affected by its encounter with African American writing*.

Similarly, in *Mastering Slavery*, Fleischner, while sympathetic to a psychoanalytic approach to slave narratives, ultimately fails to achieve (what Deleuze would call) an *encounter* between, or (in Felman's terms) the *implication* of,

psychoanalytic and literary texts.[30] For Tate and Fleischner, psychoanalysis never emerges as *a body of text to be read*; rather, it surfaces as received theory, "enabl[ing] an approach" to literature (Fleischner 4). Immobilizing psychoanalysis as a body of texts with transparent meaning, texts that need not be read, such an approach reduces the "mutually illuminating and interpenetrative" (Spillers, "'All'" 77) encounter to an application. A failure to engage psychoanalysis allows it to function as a master discourse through which the meaning of other texts can be glossed. Such a dynamic can be discerned in the history of the institutionalization of psychoanalysis: psychoanalysis becomes most oppressive and normative precisely when it congeals into institutions with a received and well-understood canon; at the moment of institutionalization and canonization psychoanalysis loses its capacity for the kind of self-interrogation that I argue marks psychoanalytic approaches proper.

It is to avoid the kind of unintentional reduction that Tate and Fleischner exemplify that I will spend a fair amount of time considering psychoanalytic texts in this study, beginning with the first chapter, which outlines in detail Lacan's theory of the visible. Lacan allows us to understand how the process of racialization, in immobilizing the racial(ized) subject, also enables the "imaginarization" of the white symbolic order—a concept I will explicate as the study progresses—whereby the symbolic is rendered blind and vulnerable to challenges. Understood psychoanalytically, subject formation is not predetermined by societal or historical contingencies but opens a space for the subject's "incalculability" (Copjec, *Read* 208), premised on the unpredictable interventions of the unconscious and the real. Mobilizing such incalculability, Bigger Thomas—the protagonist of Wright's debut novel, *Native Son* (1940)—disappears from the disciplinary radar of the white symbolic order. Even though he is soon arrested in and by his own strategies of subversion, his "flight," in repeating the dynamics of dissemblance and performance familiar from African American history, opens the possibility of understanding contingency and unpredictability as politically salient strategies.

In Chapter 2, "The Grimace of the Real: Of Paranoid Knowledge and Black(face) Magic," I trace one strand of these volatile strategies by focusing on twentieth-century discussions of blackface minstrelsy and particularly African American actors' roles therein. I connect the dynamics of blackface to Bigger's game of paranoid identification. This allows us to further theorize the white symbolic order. As Žižek and others have pointed out, all symbolic constellations are supported by an inassimilable foreign body that simultaneously enables and threatens symbolic structures; this *objet a* marks the site where the real, whose foreclosure is the condition of the emergence of the subject and the symbolic, bleeds into the symbolic. I argue that in the white symbolic, this *objet a* is the mask of blackness, too close proximity to which is signaled by anxiety and the terror of symbolic disintegration.

Chapter 3 strictly speaking exceeds the parameters of "the American optic" in turning to Frantz Fanon's post-colonial work. In "Unforeseeable Tragedies:

Symbolic Change in Fanon, Wright, and Lacan," I continue sketching a Lacanian theory of racialization and symbolic change by bringing together the "tragic" female figures in the work of Fanon (the Algerian women of "Algeria Unveiled"), Wright (Aunt Sue in "Bright and Morning Star"), and Lacan (Antigone in *The Ethics of Psychoanalysis*). I argue that, when engaged with Lacanian psychoanalysis, Fanon's and Wright's work allows us to intervene in two ways in contemporary debates in psychoanalytic theory, particularly its feminist and critical-race-theoretical strands. First, Fanon's and Wright's characterizations of sexuation and racialization suggest, contrary to what a number of the New Lacanians have argued, that in symbolic constellations where race is of paramount importance, not only sex but also race can function as a real difference. We must, in other words, consider Luce Irigaray's argument that "[s]exual difference is one of the major philosophical issues, if not the issue, of our age" (*Ethics* 5) in conjunction with W. E. B. Du Bois's observation, "The problem of the twentieth century is the problem of the color-line" (*Souls* 17). In Fanon and Wright, certain racialized positions can precipitate access to (what Lacan calls) Other jouissance. As such, these positions are potentially analogous to the ethical persistence that Lacan locates in the figure of Antigone. Consequently, Lacan's theory of symbolic subject positions around the real allows us to theorize racialized symbolic structures; furthermore, Fanon's, Wright's, and Lacan's tragic female figures represent psychoanalytic ethics in pointing to the possibility of a radical symbolic overhaul. With the Algerian guerrillas, the lone terrorist Aunt Sue, and the unbending Antigone, the three male writers whose work concern me here attempt to theorize *becoming* beyond existing symbolic possibilities.

Second, an analysis of the descriptions of female resistance by Wright and Fanon suggests that the models of subversion described by the two strands of psychoanalytically inflected feminist theories that have developed since the early 1990s—namely performativity (linked to Judith Butler's work) and the ethics of the real (propounded by the New Lacanians)—are not as incompatible as is often argued. A psychoanalytic reading of Fanon's and Wright's female figures of resistance and subversion shows that performativity, or what Lacanians would call acting, bears an unpredictable relation to the potentially violent rupture of the ethico-real act.

Exploring further the possibilities of symbolic change, the final two chapters turn to Wright's autobiography.[31] "The Optical Trade: Through Southern Spectacles" considers how, in *Black Boy* and the slave narratives that its structure follows, the experiences of reading and writing enable perspectives beyond "Southern spectacles"—a term I adopt from Pauline Hopkins—that is, beyond the enforced perspectives of white supremacy inculcated, in large part, through the threat of the public terror of lynching. I argue that the experience of the literary—an eminently maladaptive art—sustains what Lacan would call the mobility of desire. In the final chapter, "Avian Alienation: Writing and Flying in Wright and Lacan," I propose that in Lacanian terms this mobility can

also be described as that of "alienation." In this, my argument diverges from Orlando Patterson's influential theory of the enslaved subject's "natal alienation" in his *Slavery and Social Death* (1982). I suggest that the dangerous and unpredictable, yet potentially productive, experience of the literary is described by slave narrators (and, following them, Du Bois and Wright) as providing an alienated distance from the Other's nonnegotiable demands. Lacan's discussion of alienation's role in subject formation suggests the reasons behind slave narrators' and Wright's ambivalence about the effects of reading and writing (both of which are described in the tropes of "flight" and "flying" in African American culture as well as in Lacanian psychoanalysis). In providing no definitive form for the potentially different symbolic world it points toward, the experience of the literary also functions as something like the drive, dangerously seeking the beyond—which is to say, the internal, implosive impossibility—of symbolic actualizations. As such, it courts, or demands, symbolic death. Consequently, I argue that, in Wright's, Du Bois's, and Booker T. Washington's discussions of the effects of "book learning," we find reconfigured the slave narrators' choice of self-destruction over enslavement. Unlike what Russ Castronovo claims in "Political Necrophilia," the choice of (symbolic) death should not be seen as a renunciation of worldly struggles, an orientation beyond the embodied exigencies of living. If we are to take seriously the psychoanalytic notion of *Todestrieb*, which Castronovo alludes to, we must understand the choice of death in terms of *the becoming of the death drive*. This becoming plays a central role in Lacanian ethics, whose contribution to critical race theory I seek in this study.

While I discuss a number of writers and issues in African American and postcolonial theories, literatures, and cultures in this study, Wright is the central figure to whom I return in every chapter. His centrality is warranted for two reasons. First, of all African American writers, even above Ralph Ellison, Wright is most consistent in dealing with the American optic—the questions of race and visibility—beginning with his early short stories and debut novel. Second, his reception seems to repeat, with uncanny precision, the racist strategies of confinement and (in)visibility that he himself explores in his texts. Ellison describes these strategies when he notes that black invisibility is inextricable from the curious condition of "'high visibility,'" which "actually render[s] one *un*-visible" ("Introduction" xxv). Similarly, I contend that Wright's presence in American letters is like that of "a purloined letter": as perhaps the most influential and visible work by a twentieth-century African American writer, his texts have become invisible on the literary scene, texts whose circulation is independent of their content. It is for this reason that, notwithstanding some exceptions, I will not take up Paul Gilroy's call for a reassessment of Wright's later work, namely, the texts he produced after his exile to France in 1947 (see Gilroy, *Black* ch. 5), where Wright increasingly distanced himself from the strictly African American subject matter and style of writing he had become associated with through *Native Son*, his autobiography, and the short story collection *Uncle Tom's Children* (1938/1940). By concentrating on