

***Lack before identity: historicity at the level of the signifier***

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✘ ✘ ✘ ✘ ✘ ✘ *intro* ✘ ✘ ✘ ✘ ✘ ✘

Amidst tensions from the fictitious opposition between idealism and materialism, an increasingly popular move in modern discourse appropriates psychoanalytic theory into either a detached, abstract ideology or a hasty identity map (or both), risking alienation (in the Marxist sense) and missing its true structure: historical, Marxist, and deferential to the structure of desire. In all cases, the political power of psychoanalytic discourse is directly dependent on its conscious deference to desire (for it is always and already unconsciously deferential), as well as its deference to the inextricability of form and content.

I will be drawing upon bell hooks' and Frederic Jameson's work as representative of a larger pattern happening throughout: the wielding of psychoanalytic theory as *language*, beginning with identity rather than lack, and thus inadvertently obstructing a more true, robust, and complex political potential of psychoanalytic theory. In short, this move I see happening can be described as the insertion of identity before lack, premature politicization of psychoanalytic theory, or imbalanced content fixation. Another prominent piece of work that I see this happening in is in Sheldon George's work....but I will not be writing about him today. After I have conveyed current trajectories as representative of a larger move and my concerns for their implications, I will move toward a more positive case on how to proceed from lack rather than identity, touching on work from Barthes' and Žižek's insights on ideological

fantasy, pleasure at the level of the signifier, and more. This positive model can be described as historicity at the level of the signifier (as opposed to historicity at the level of identity), and necessitates the conscious privileging lack before identity for the kind of revolutionary, political pleasure that cannot be appropriated and mishandled by language.

✕ ✕ ✕ ✕ ✕ ✕ *hooks* ✕ ✕ ✕ ✕ ✕ ✕

In *The Oppositional Gaze* from *Black Looks: Race and Representation*, bell hooks introduces the concept of an empowered gaze as a form of resistance and a practice of agency, reclaiming narrative power and reinforcing form's accessibility and agency. She asserts, "There is power in looking," and, "Not only will I stare. I want my look to change reality" (hooks, *Black Looks*, 1992, p. 115). However, hooks also warns of "the masochistic look of victimization," describing it as a "spectacle of regression" that parallels a form of Stockholm syndrome where, ultimately, *jouissance* is an inevitable part of one's reality, and "we come home to ourselves"...a humanizing lens not to identify with either the victim or the perpetrator. Beyond the context of practical formal sentiment, hooks' powerful grasp on the power of opposition is an undeniable wall-breaking for black liberation.

I am in the interest of joining her endeavors; I wish to fervidly warn against becoming stagnant in a state of sociosymbolic opposition. Note carefully that what I'm about to say will appear to lead toward idealism or some sort of reduction to a model, but in fact is quite the opposite. The necessity of residing within a historicized-at-the-level-of-identity, symbolic realm in which one condemns the status quo is an inevitable and necessary position in the Lacanian circuit of the drive, beginning at the rim, looking up toward the aim, wherein lies the fantasy that identity is the master of lack. With regard to hooks' emphasis on a historicization of women, the position she resides in is closer to the symbolic, for clearly understandable reasons as her contingent state of affairs is an involuntarily material one.

And although the contingent and unequal access to theory and form is unspeakably traumatic to those confined to the painful sensations of their oppressive material environment (caused by content-based contingencies in the symbolic world), I heavily warn against conflating configurations of abstraction and form (especially in psychoanalytic theory) with hegemonic structures, an activity which belongs to the insertion of the social signifier before lack. This is *not* to say that much of theoretical discourse is *not* deeply flawed, wounded, and convoluted by hegemonic biases – rather, this is to fortify the genuine endeavors within psychoanalytic, feminist, Marxist, critical race discourse—a recognition of the tool-turned-obstruction that language becomes.

To insist on a historicization (at the level of identity) of subjects and to condemn abstraction or the form of theoretical structures as a whole is absolutely necessary at the beginning, but its prolonged practice ultimately worsens (Marxist) alienation in split subjects, and inadvertently obstructs a revolutionary kind of pleasure that sees no inhibition from neither the ideological nor material realm...temporality plays an incredibly important role here. What happens with the fantasy of identity mastering lack, is that it falls into ideological fantasy precisely because it overlooks the structure of fantasy.

Without harnessing form, the field's content can be manipulated into any purpose and become appropriated and abused for ulterior motives. A theory's form exists whether it chooses to acknowledge it or not. If critical race theory were to turn away from its formal potential, it would become extremely vulnerable to appropriation and exploitation for other disguised purposes (as it has already done so). In other words, a disproportionately content-based approach results in a completely inconsistent, arbitrary, and dangerously vulnerable form that moves about in a fickle manner.

A tendency that I frequently notice in this pattern of inserting the social signifier before lack, is a stagnant placement at the "aim" of the Lacanian circuit of the drive. Following the logic of this Lacanian circuit, an utterly anti-stance is indeed a necessary aim, however, this must be a temporary stance, which its object of desire becomes circumvented to return back to the rim and arrive at an unalienated (in the colloquial sense) resonance with a historical kind of form that reveals its primacy over the sociosymbolic hegemonies which may have delayed this access to begin with.

✘ ✘ ✘ ✘ ✘ ✘ *Jameson* ✘ ✘ ✘ ✘ ✘ ✘

In *Pleasure: A Political Issue*, Fredric Jameson navigates tensions between idealism and materialism while attempting to locate a genuinely political, revolutionary access to pleasure. He calls for “a politics and a historicity of jouissance,” and insists that “the proper political use of pleasure must always be allegorical...the thematizing of a particular pleasure as a political issue...” (Jameson 11). He continues: “This dual, or ‘allegorical,’ focus is indeed what makes for both the uniqueness and the difficulties of Marxism in general as a conception of revolutionary transformation... the right to a specific pleasure... if it is to become genuinely political... must always one way or another also be able to stand as a figure for the transformation of social relations as a whole” (Jameson 11).

I admire Jameson's concerns for grounding pleasure in historical and political contexts, as these are real concerns, especially in a system that so often strips subjectivity of even the capacity for pleasure. But in attempting to politicize pleasure by allegorizing it, he risks displacing the subject entirely. The question remains: how successful is this shortcut from form to content? My worry is that historicizing pleasure disproportionately at the level of identity spirals in on itself the same way the pursuit of metaphysical truth would. It doesn't bridge

material and symbolic, but instead gets stuck in a recursive loop between language and social designation, missing the actual structure of desire. To move from pleasure to culture to contingencies to a single event to a breath, quite linearly and efficiently—this shrinking, telescoping gesture—offers less access, not more. It mimics the trajectory of desire while severing itself from its structure. It is a fantasy all the same—it does not break through, precisely because it is solid.

What's most dangerous is that this displacement doesn't appear as displacement. It appears as political care, and *it is*. But by refusing the refusal of meaning – the very refusal that psychoanalytic theory insists is constitutive of both pleasure and politics – it collapses the process that would have made that pleasure revolutionary in the first place. When pleasure is taken as historical only at the level of identity, it fails to account for the real, for the nature of subjectivity as split. In other words, it risks reducing subjectivity to nothing but a purely material world, and, regardless of sociocultural status, having only the material accounted for has a profoundly violent effect that disregards the whole of psychoanalytic theory and subjectivity in general.

There was no need to call for a "historicity of jouissance" because jouissance was always and will always be deeply historical. Just because it is not "historical" at the level of language does not mean it is not deeply historical at the level of the signifier. This does not mean it is apolitical. Quite the opposite: it is *incredibly* political. To recognize this is not to evade history, but to acknowledge that the signifier is historical because the subject is formed through it, and, more importantly, *it is formed through the historical subject*. To insist on historicity at the level of the signifier is the very thing that protects pleasure from becoming paralyzed into an object of language, and falling into the trenches of ideological fantasy.

We must reject this hidden, motivating belief that refusal or de-emphasis of the signified are the same as pursuing ideological fantasy. It should also not be conflated with post-structuralism, because it does not seek beyond the signifier, nor the signified, nor the cultural context in the same, analytical, way. And it should certainly, by no means, ever be associated with being anti-historical nor anti-cultural, because it clings to history like a desperate child.

**✘ ✘ ✘ ✘ ✘ ✘ *the problem with identity* ✘ ✘ ✘ ✘ ✘ ✘**

When identity politics, therapy, and other forms of language become weaponized, it shows just how vulnerable depending on language or the metaphor is to manipulation and appropriation. This is why we cannot become hasty, with ‘shortcuts’ from content to form, via the metaphor, via premature politicization. For example: The phrase, “you’re gaslighting me,” being spoken by someone who is actually doing the gaslighting, suddenly obstructs the other subject’s entire access to realizing how they are actually being gaslit because the language is wielded against them.

If this subject had other means to access an understanding of the form of ‘gaslighting’ other than through the metaphor that language is, this wouldn’t be such a dangerous vulnerability. Purely content-based language, without sensitivity to form, then, becomes territorial, colonialistic—it belongs to who claims it first, or with the most aggression.

Similarly to the metaphor that language essentially is, we cannot let the social signifier dictate form. In other words, we cannot begin with identity before lack. Beginning with lack instead of a blind dependence on language and/or the social signifiers would immediately make obvious malicious manipulations and appropriations of the form, which is why it’s so important. No matter how language is wielded, if you begin with lack, it can never obstruct you from an unalienated pleasure or sentiment of form at the most basic level, nor can it be used as

a weapon against you.

Inserting the social signifier prematurely into the psychoanalytic network of desire evolves into a malicious, violent form of jouissance–chasing that becomes incredibly and efficiently masked by an appropriation of the form it feigns recognition and deference to – the fantasy structure. All premature politicization of ideology, even ideology about fantasy, will inevitably fall into ideological fantasy for this reason. This is why we cannot be hasty.

We must not divide lack into different subsections, which are to be either privileged or devalued. Lack will never play out so cleanly, so well–organized—lack *does not* follow identity—*identity follows lack*.

✘ ✘ ✘ ✘ ✘ ✘ ✘ ✘ Žižek ✘ ✘ ✘ ✘ ✘ ✘ ✘

Slavoj Žižek's work in *The Sublime Object of Ideology*, shows that ideological fantasy persists even in critique, and that disavowing fantasy only strengthens it. “Why must this inversion of the relation of aim and means remain hidden, why is its revelation self–defeating? Because it would reveal the enjoyment which is at work in ideology, in the ideological renunciation itself. In other words, it would reveal that ideology serves only its own purpose, that it does not serve anything—which is precisely the Lacanian definition of jouissance” (Žižek 1989, 92). This is crucial when addressing discourse—we must be careful to not separate the theory from the theorist: the fantasy that critique itself is immune, that one can disrupt the symbolic order without being implicated in its reproduction, is a dangerous fantasy to be complacent with. Žižek helps us understand that enjoyment isn't what resists ideology; it is what sustains it. And once the ideological fantasy has been 'sufficiently' captured, dissected, theorized—what now? This is not the true goal of theorists, but a placeholder to protect themselves from confronting this desire.

Žižek also expands this logic in *Enjoy Your Symptom!*: “The emergence of the shark as symbol does not add any new meaning, it simply reorganizes meanings which were already there by binding them to the same signifier... ideology is at work in this purely symbolic gesture, in the addition of a signifier which ‘quilts’ the floating plurality of anxieties... The analysis focused on the ‘ideological meaning’ of monsters overlooks the fact that, previous to signifying something, previous even to serving as an empty vessel of meaning, monsters embody enjoyment qua the limit of interpretation, that is to say, nonmeaning as such” (Žižek 1992, 134). This quilting function of the master-signifier configures anxiety in productive ways not by resolving it, but through *accumulation*. This is why it is historical. It’s precisely the same function that Barthes observes in *The Pleasure of the Text*: enjoyment occurs not because of what is said, but because of a historical kind of form that lets meaning hover. Meaning becomes a kind of side effect, it comes *after*.

Importantly, Žižek is not arguing for a full abandonment of meaning or language. He knows, like Lacan and like Barthes, that there is no enjoyment without the symbolic, no desire without mediation. He writes elsewhere, “The only successful disidentification occurs when I identify myself with the symptom, with the point of failure of the interpellation” (Žižek 1989, 126). That is: only by inhabiting the gap, by beginning from lack, from the place where the ideological fantasy fails, can one escape being fully captured by it. Not by denying ideology, but by identifying with its fracture. This is what theorists risk when they attempt to take a 'shortcut' from form to content, or confuse disavowal and distance for revolution – they inadvertently appropriate contradiction into diction—but this contradiction is where the genuine political aspect resides.

✘ ✘ ✘ ✘ ✘ ✘ ✘ *Barthes* ✘ ✘ ✘ ✘ ✘ ✘ ✘

In *The Pleasure of the Text*, Roland Barthes uncovers a relationship, a world, which resides quietly and paradoxically between the surfaces of identity and lack, language and silence, anachronism and historicity. This is the "pleasure of the text," which is "not necessarily of a triumphant, heroic, muscular type. No need to throw out one's chest. My pleasure can very well take the form of a drift. *Drifting* occurs whenever *I do not respect the whole...*" (Barthes 18). I have noticed that *drifting* becomes an important visual, and a key component of what makes it so radically different in a discourse full of 'whole' 'objects,' or the pursuit of 'wholing' them (more on this ideological fantasy in the Zizek section).

Roland Barthes asks: "How can a text, which consists of language, be outside languages? How can I *exteriorize* the world's jargons without taking refuge in an ultimate jargon wherein the others would simply be reported, recited? As soon as I name, I am named: caught in the rivalry of names. How can the text "get itself out" of the war, of fictions, of sociolects?" (Barthes). To 'exteriorize' language without the act of naming, as Barthes describes, is to recognize that the signifier's true political potential lies in refusing its 'evolution' into the signified, refusing appropriation. Theorists such as Frederic Jameson approach this piece as belonging to idealism, and in the interest of Marxism, turn the other direction, toward the metaphor as tool. But I argue that what is actually being invoked by Barthes has far more revolutionary power—historicity at the level of the signifier.

I also argue that Barthes is actually materialist here, because the level of the signifier is deeply historical, in a sense that is more revolutionary than historicity at the level of language. This is because it is a historicity of a motion involving both form and content, not just content, *even more material* than material because it accounts for both the subject and the world, because it is *not* what both conventional idealism and materialism are: an object of language.

This is not a still object — it *drifts, refuses the whole* (Barthes).

Barthes writes: "There are those who want a text (an art, a painting) without a shadow, without the "dominant ideology"; but this is to want a text without fecundity, without productivity, a sterile text...The text needs its shadow: this shadow is *a bit* of ideology, *a bit* of representation, *a bit* of subject: ghosts, pockets, traces, necessary clouds: subversion must produce its own chiaroscuro" (Barthes 32). I don't wish to be repetitive. Here, is the inextricability between form and content, here is the historical aspect of contradiction – representation and contingency forever have their place.

Barthes writes: "Then perhaps the subject returns, not as illusion, but as *fiction*. A certain pleasure is derived from a way of imagining oneself as *individual*, of inventing a final, rarest fiction: the fictive identity. This fiction is no longer the illusion of a unity; on the contrary, it is the theater of society in which we stage our plural: our pleasure is *individual*-but not personal." (Barthes 62). Here, is the purpose of identity still forever remains, pleasure of identity, but *not* before lack. I'm very interested in how he wields *fiction* and the act of *imagining*, and its relation to the return of identity. In a complicated way, it makes me imagine engaging with identity *at the level of the signifier*, but not *truly* functioning as identity—and the pleasure that proceeds from this act—"individual-but not personal" (Barthes 62). Certainly this has potentially dangerous implications if practiced without recognizing identity as a *false* or fictive function...but to wield identity as not a master signifier, but as a signifier in the most blurred, drowsy, undefined, unfulfilled sense...this is very promising to me. Also, I would totally draw from Barthes' *A Lover's Discourse* if I had more time to read it, especially because I see a difference between love and jouissance. Maybe another time.

✘ ✘ ✘ ✘ ✘ *historicity at the level of the signifier* ✘ ✘ ✘ ✘ ✘

This is a line of thinking that I am still developing, but it is called historicity at the level

of the signifier. Historicity by large is reduced to one dimension in discourse: historicity at the level of identity, meaning. So, by this logic, Roland Barthes' *Pleasure of the Text* could quite simply be configured as 'anti-historicist.' Is historicity at the level of the signifier an oxymoron? Yes, and no.

At the beginning of this essay I mentioned that the opposition between idealism and materialism is fictitious. Why do I say this? Because a deference to the structure of desire *is* deference to the inextricability between form and content, *is* the heart of psychoanalytic theory. Unable and unwilling to distinguish between form and content, idealism and materialism, historicity at the level of the signifier makes clear why and how Barthes' conception of bliss can be genuinely recognized in its revolutionary potential.

A premature sketch, here it is. To become historical at the level of the signifier is to terminate what we shall consider relevant to pleasure before meaning infiltrates perception. It is to refuse meaning, to insist on stagnation whilst the world, for all intents and purposes, is still blurry, unable to fully wake up like in a dream, but nevertheless holding onto your surroundings, not pushing for more. What does it feel like? It feels like the presence of a logic before examining it, it feels like being promised something you don't know of, it feels like your existence being affirmed by banal things and you'll never know why. Sometimes it feels pacifying, and other times it feels agitating or anxiety-inducing. What does it look like? It looks like a curtain flowing because there is presumably an open window behind it.

I think it might be different from *jouissance*, and closer to love. *Jouissance* has a tighter relationship to meaning and identity, depending on the signified as a medium to pass through. This is something I need to work on developing more, as Žižek is more on the surface of fantasy (it is more spiky), and Barthes, to me, seems to be more in the realm of blurring,

drifting, and plurality. Both are perverse in a way...counterintuitively, Žižek might be more neurotic than Barthes.

Historicity at the level of the signifier breathing in Barthes' work can also be seen here: "Whenever I attempt to 'analyze' a text which has given me pleasure, it is not my 'subjectivity' I encounter but my 'individuality,' the given which makes my body separate from other bodies and appropriates its suffering or its pleasure: it is my body of bliss I encounter" (Barthes 62). Barthes' distinction between 'subjectivity' and 'individuality' is also what makes me feel that historicity at the level of the signifier departs from jouissance. Furthermore, the *key* aspect as to why this is all historical: "And this body of bliss is also my historical subject; for it is at the conclusion of a very complex process of biographical, historical, sociological, neurotic elements... that I control the contradictory interplay of (cultural) pleasure and (non-cultural) bliss, and that I write myself as a subject at present out of place, arriving too soon or too late...anachronic subject, adrift" (Barthes 62-63). Can't you see? This complex, inherently historical and forever-contingent process (of "biographical, historical, sociological, neurotic elements") can *never* be irrelevant nor remotely insignificant to any kind of formal sentiment, to any kind of pleasure – subjectivity before meaning *is the true historical body*.

Historicity at the level of the signifier is historical in the sense that contingency builds upon itself to create this substance. It is historical in the sense that 'image reservoirs' (Barthes) come from history, develop into something like 'unconscious content,' and contribute significantly to each and every subject's unique relation to and perception of form in general. It is historical in the sense that one's libidinal response to the signifier alone is a kind of contingent content, but not the same content as things that can be named. We have names in psychoanalysis: neurotic, pervert, hysteric, obsessive, etc. But make no mistake: these are

anchors in the dream, or after-effects, names that we cannot begin from but only echo *after* the fact, names that do not hold fast against wind.

Is the inability to rid of contingency a weakness, a stain upon the psychoanalytic network of desire? *No* -- contradiction and irremediability are *the precise source* of sustenance for it to continue moving and spinning. Is *The Pleasure of the Text* a materialist text? Yes. I can't believe it is considered otherwise. *This is the activity of the world.* This is where we reside *more than where we reside.*

Let me say more. Stopping at the signifier is historical in the sense that we have *preference*, it is historical in the sense that residing in this space is quite literally the stuff of a split subject's grief. It is historical in the sense that it genuinely makes fewer abstractions, accounting for more of the material world, than identity and language do. It is historical in the sense that a metaphysical world does not exist other than as an object of language, *and this is not that.* It is historical in the sense that a refusal of the sterile separation of form and content has the potential to stay alive in the material world, and does *not* have to automatically submit to idealism. It is historical in the sense that it is completely possible to develop a new familiarity with this kind of relationship to subjectivity, and harness it for new political uses in the material world.

✘ ✘ ✘ ✘ ✘ ✘ *concluding thoughts* ✘ ✘ ✘ ✘ ✘ ✘

I would become distraught if this essay ever became considered an attempt to replace or criticize, or an exercise for the sake of expelling academic energy (but I'm not so naive as to think the last part is unrelated). For my questions, my frustrations, my hopes, my goals, my reasons, and my *lack* are the same as these theorists. Oftentimes people are hostile because they wish they could afford to be kind...similarly, I sometimes have cold responses to these thinkers because they are *almost* enough for me to join warmly, making it all the more

frustrating and painful to respond to at all.

The reason why lack before identity is difficult to realize is because it will effectively dismantle the crutch that many subjects to this fantasy, compelling them to privilege identity over lack (eg. the racist fantasy), can't afford to lose — they have built their lives, the entire foundation of their social identity, their fundamental relationship to language on this crutch. Upon encountering the trauma of being a split subject, this crutch might have been the only accessible option. When it becomes taken away, they can no longer function in relation to themselves and others as they once had.

This does not function as a mere crutch for many—it is a limb, maybe even a vital organ. To destroy it would be unfeasible—it might jeopardize a life altogether. It is unbelievably violent... the appropriations, the puppets, they no longer hold fast against wind. Perhaps this is impossible for some, I understand. But—this crutch is causing harm everywhere, and will continue to do so in increasing amounts. It mutilates both the subject on the crutch and the subjects whom they serve as Other to. I'm not sure what love is, but I think it may very well be the opposite of what this crutch serves. To truly humanize yourself and others in this world, you must begin by destroying this crutch.....it will be unfamiliar.

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