



## **“You Should Pray I Choose the Latter”: Rioting, Violence, & Jouissance**

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### **INTRODUCTION: “You Should Pray I choose the latter.”**

In the climactic scene from the film *The Great Debaters* (2007), James L. Farmer Jr. (Denzel Whitaker), speaking for the motion “Resolved: Civil Disobedience is a Moral weapon in the fight for Justice,” rebuts the opponent team from Harvard University and clinches a win for his team, Wiley College, with the following words:

St. Augustine said an unjust law is no law at all, which means I have a right, even a duty, to resist. With violence or civil disobedience. You should pray I choose the latter.

(1:52:20 – 1:55:45)

Farmer Jr.’s words receive a standing ovation from the predominantly white, upper class, urban and educated on-screen audience, and cues audiences watching the film to two things. First, and unsurprisingly, it references Wiley College’s historic win against Harvard that was announced moments later in the film. And, secondly, it reasserts what today has become a culture-cliché, namely, civil disobedience or nonviolent protests against social injustice are moral, even desired, compared to violent demonstrations that benefit no one. In so doing *The Great Debaters* becomes more than a partly fictionalized account of an historic event –

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Wiley College was the first historically Black college from Jim Crow South to win a regional debate championship (they defeated the University of Southern California depicted as Harvard in the film) –, it functions rather as an ideological tool teaching its viewers about not only what social changes to desire but also how to act upon realizing this desire for social change. Simply put, mass movements demanding social changes are necessary, even required, but these must always remain nonviolent. The choice given in Farmer Jr.'s last sentence – “You should pray I choose the latter” – is therefore not so much a choice as it is an affirmation of nonviolent civil disobedience as the *only* moral form of protest against unjust social laws.

We can hardly miss the irony: Farmer Jr.'s defense of nonviolence is delivered as a veiled threat – “pray that we do not respond to your unjust laws with violence” –, and succeeds by dredging up deep-seated racial anxieties that unconsciously structure race relations in the U.S., an anxiety which always haunts those who occupy the upper echelons of power and privilege. We witnessed this recently when a St. Louis couple, Mark and Patricia McCloskey, made headlines for drawing their automatic weapons on Black Lives Matter's protestors rallying past their mansion on a private road. Claiming to be threatened by the marchers, a defiant Mark McCloskey stated: “I'd do it again [...] Any time the mob approaches me, I'll do what I can to put them in imminent threat of physical injury because that's what kept them from destroying my house and family” (Fitz-Gibbon, “St. Louis couple,” n.p.).

The proposition wins, therefore, neither by appealing to morals nor by establishing an ethics of empathetic identification with the other sourced from, as some may say, a collective liberal-white guilt. Instead, the proposition wins by violently jerking the white affluent liberal audience into the recognition of their collective historical anxiety over the oppressed resorting to violence in order to secure their demands. This is an anxiety over the *return of the oppressed* – the oppressed rising up against their oppressors. Put differently, this is the anxiety about the

generationally oppressed, whose identities and lives have been forged in violence, acting out against their subjection. This is the dread of negated bodies putting to ruin the oppressor's entire state machinery –laws, institutions, social order, and their much-flaunted ways of life.

The insurgent dead resurface from the space of the non-living in order to destroy all that which segregate them from the social space and to a space outside of the living. It is thus the force of nonbeing pressing back against those in being: emerging from negation and seeking negation of all that has been proclaimed positive in or (only) due to its absence, the oppressed threatens the sociosymbolic as a “non-negated negativity” or as negativity most positively figurized (Marriott, *Whither*, 223). For those sequined in the glass palace of positivity, of imaginary and random affirmations about their exclusive sovereignty, the threat of the emergence of the unbearable other is not a question whether *if* this terrible moment will arrive but *when* it will arrive. This threat cannot be apprehended or calculated in time: it is always contingent on when the other will act.

Anxiety about this cataclysmic moment impacts the psyche of the oppressor in two ways. First, it causes dread over the disappearance of law and order, that is, the symbolic and imaginary matrices upholding an unequal social state (and the entirety of its founding logic of difference) which stand unraveled by the actions of the other. And, second, it compels the oppressor to encounter the oppressed at an extreme proximity. For as the oppressed unequivocally reciprocates the oppressor's mindless violence, the latter (en)counters in the oppressed a figure no longer seeking recognition from the oppressor as master; rather, having surfaced as the Thing of unbearable jouissance, the oppressed admits no one as its master and lays waste to everything around.

Staring into the dark abyss of the other's pure negativity, the master realizes that the oppressed's brutal violence cannot be legitimately symbolized or its demands hermeneutically uncovered. In effect, the master is left paralyzed, unable to make sense of the other's actions.

And even if this paralysis lasts for a moment, the other's enigma being eventually folded into some grand narrative or another of the master's choosing, those fleeting moments – of being suddenly reduced to nothing in the eyes of the other, from being deleted from the desire of the other – are nothing if not traumatic. As the master receives in inverted form through the violence of the oppressed the very same illogical violence with which he peddles his sovereignty, he is forced to confront the utter immateriality of his identity in the lives of others as well as the social order he pretends to control. It is this anxiety that Farmer Jr. evokes when implying that the other knows how to hit hard, so those in positions of mastery ought to be thankful that the other has decided not to do so.

### **Section I: The Liberal Critique of BLM riots**

We see similar anxieties in recent liberal critiques of riots that happened in the wake of the murders of George Floyd and Breonna Taylor and the widespread BLM protests against systemic racism in the U.S. Generally sympathetic to and supportive of the Black Lives Matter (BLM) movement, liberals draw a line when BLM protests turn violent resulting in rioting, looting and vandalism. Liberals argue their position on two fronts. First, in terms of moral reasoning, they say violence is unacceptable in democratic societies and that social justice movements should never deviate from the path of non-violence. Secondly, they identify rioters as misguided, lacking political consciousness and only bent on mischief.

While the first argument is typical of the current era of feelgood multiculturalism, it is the second which I find most interesting. For it is an odd amalgamation between the Marxist critique of false consciousness and the belief in the all-redemptive power of the Market. The argument that rioters lack knowledge about what is in their best interest as a social group and the larger movement they “claim” to represent, therefore, stakes that by harming local businesses—the sources of employment for the working class, including many in the black and brown minority communities, rioters only aggravate suffering for their own lot or the local working-class. With

businesses destroyed, the minority working-class have fewer options for employment and thus fewer chances of improving their economic standing in society. In other words, rioters stymie the advantages of the trickle-down effect of the free market economy by disrupting the Market which alone has the power to alleviate all citizens from social inequality through the creation of widespread economic prosperity. However, what is really at stake for the privileged liberal is not just the uninterrupted functioning of the Market but also the continuation of the unequal social order created by this same Market. For this unequal society contributes directly to the unprecedented economic prosperity and social status of the privileged.

Consequently, driven by their determination to secure the Market against collapse, the liberals (mostly white but not necessarily) overlook the most important question in the context of rioting: whether destroying institutions connected to the Market and the State express the racial minority's frustration over the failure of the State and the Market to uplift them from their abject social marginalization? In fact, far from being mindless acts of misguided anomie, rioting can be historically evidenced as the minority's actions against the Market-State *entente*. Viewed thus the liberal arguments against BLM-related rioting and their critique of the rioter's consciousness stand exposed: these are ideological veils hiding the liberal's unwavering (read, self-serving) devotion toward preserving the Market and their class privileges.

We should note, however, that similar concerns about the Market do not surface in most liberal condemnations of white supremacist violence. Nor do we hear many liberals chastising white supremacist violence as mindless and/or against (white) self-interest. Instead, liberals are most likely to decry white supremacy for their manifest ideologies, thereby recognizing them as political opposition but never as subjects lacking ideological grift.<sup>1</sup> It is not surprising then that

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<sup>1</sup> Though rare, some like Robert Reich, for instance, have made the point that white supremacists too on occasions act against self-interest, and not just when there's an important election. But the majority of liberal discourses tend to overlook the lack of ideological or rational principles in white supremacist violence. A case in point would be the discourses about the January 6<sup>th</sup> attack on the Capitol which is interchangeably described as a "riot" and an

though conservative and liberal positions on social justice movements are opposed –the former (who would not claim to be sympathetic to these movements) and liberals (who do) –, they unanimously condemn BLM protests on the same principle, namely, the sovereignty of the Market and its all-redeemable Invisible Hand must not be challenged. Accordingly, conservatives and liberals alike represent BLM rioters as perpetrated by malignant social agents who prefer nothing but destruction and chaos.

One cannot also dismiss the racism inherent in liberal critiques of BLM rioters – this critique of rioters as misguided negates the rioter from claiming subjectivity qua ideological commitments. Their actions are determined solely in terms of their irresponsible attacks on the Market. But even though this negating gesture is troubling, it alone does not make the liberals racist. What is truly racist is buried inside liberal discourse in form of a troublesome (racist) fantasy about the racialized other as paradoxically childish or innocent and as prone to violence and mischief. This other, therefore, is both lacking and excessive, which makes them figures existing outside law. No wonder then that the only way to rein in this excessive other appears to be through excessive acts of law-preserving violence. And herein lies another connection between liberal and conservative discourses about BLM rioters – they are both premised on the idea of the rioter as a racialized other who’s excessive, unwarranted enjoyment (achieved through looting and destruction) poses a threat to a world imagined by and as arranged around the sovereign signifier of “whiteness” as universal order. Those who identify themselves with this order raise concerns over what it means for the order to disappear – a “white” life and “white” society disappearing under the onslaught of black, irrational, violence.

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“insurrection” (Bauder, “Words Matter” n.p. Also, McBride, “From ‘Protest’ to ‘Riot’ to ‘Insurrection’ n.p.). Indeed, the use of the word “insurrection” versus “riot” is important here because we never find the first being used to describe the BLM protests.

In what follows I look at both aspects of liberal critique starting with the liberal critique of the rioter as lacking political consciousness. In making this argument, I shall be *repositioning* Lacan's concept of the *objet a* or the other in terms of its radical – illicit and/or excessive – enjoyments (*jouissance*), that is, enjoyments which border on the *theft of the subject's jouissance*, for illustrating how this imaginary of the other's fundamental alterity structures the (racist) subject's fantasies about the (im)possibility of social belonging and deriving fulsome gratification through the social. I elaborate this hypothesis in most detail in section IV of this essay with the two intervening sections (II & III) being devoted to the analyses of "contemporary" liberal critiques of race riots framed by a revisiting and reframing of Lacanian theory in light of contemporary social reality.

## **SECTION II: Can the Rioter's Organize?**

What if the argument that rioters "do not know what they are doing;" that is, rioters act without any ideological basis and are only intent on causing trouble is mistaken? What if violence is the only way left to change their social destiny? The oppressed do not lash out at the Market because they are ignorant about what the Market promises but due to long-standing frustrations over this promise remaining unfulfilled: the oppressed cannot conceive an equitable political and social life for themselves within a society arranged by the Market. They know that the Market cannot secure their salvation and is responsible for reducing them to the status of disposable labor perpetually trapped in a gig-economy. Is it possible, then, that the rioters might be reacting against their treatment as mere fungible labor, and their actions are demands for inclusion into the modes of production?<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> The black body in itself does not matter except as potential for labor which is integral to the functioning of the Market. But the body must be negated for realizing this labor. Outside of labor, the black body exists only as an anxiety provoking excess – a trespasser, a freeloader, or a criminal who must be constantly monitored, contained, and eliminated. From being refused entry into their own apartment complexes to being questioned over entering an

In “Not Just an American Problem” (1965), Malcolm X underlines this very aspect of rioting when commenting on the Harlem Riots of 1964. Reacting to accusations that rioters destroyed property and their consequent depictions in the press as “hoodlums, criminals, [and] thieves,” he writes:

[I]t is true that property was destroyed. But look at it from another angle. In these Black communities, the economy of the community is not in the hands of the Black man. The Black man is not his own landlord. The buildings that he lives in are owned by someone else. The stores in the community are run by someone else. Everything in the community is out of his hands. He has no say-so in it whatsoever, other than to live there, and pay the highest rent for the lowest-type boarding place, pays the highest prices for food, for the lowest grade of food. He is a victim of this, a victim of economic exploitation, political exploitation, and every other kind.

Now, he’s so frustrated [...] that he would like to get at the one who’s exploiting him. But the one who is exploiting him doesn’t live in his neighborhood. He only owns the house. He only owns the store. He only *owns the neighborhood*. So that when the Black man explodes, the one that he wants to get at isn’t there. So he destroys the property. He’s not a thief. He is not trying to steal your cheap furniture or your cheap food. He wants to get at you [:] landlords [and] merchants [and] politicians who sit in the city hall and who are [...] in cahoots with the landlords and the merchants.

(161 [emphasis added])

We witness the repetition of the same pattern in history: “Rioters” in nineteenth-century colonial India burned down Churches, Police stations, and English schools in order to strike at institutions compliant with and responsible for maintaining the British regime. During the 2005 French Riots, North African and Arab “immigrants” hailing from economically-depressed suburbs of Paris burned 10, 000 cars and torched 250 public buildings during a 20-day protest over French police actions against job-less immigrant youth. Rioting is the ultimate expression of the oppressed’s social dehiscence – the abused’s infinite scream cutting through the social order demanding love, dignity, and restoration of rights. It is unfair therefore to characterize riots

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upscale clothing shop, black bodies are always under survey resulting in incarceration or murder. Therefore, any time demands are made for the reinstatement of the rights and dignities of the black body, these demands are considered disruptive of exchange or harmful for the Market. Rioting in this context constitutes the extreme or excessive form of this demand – it aims directly at the tangible components constituting the Market and the discriminatory society created by the Market.

as “unchannelled explosion[s] of nihilist, self-destructive anomy” as these are “expressions of political mobilization?” (Jobard, “Rioting,” 236).<sup>3</sup> The recent BLM riots are no exception.

A *New York Times* report from June 2020 on BLM riots in NYC demonstrates this well in spite of its biased representation of the rioters. Reporting on the looting of the Macy’s flagship store in Herald Square, for instance, the report employs the usual stereotypes for describing the “rioters”:

The looters tore off the plywood that boarded up Macy’s flagship store in Herald Square, swarming by the dozens inside to steal whatever they could find [...] strik[ing] yet another blow to a city reeling from the nation’s worst coronavirus outbreak.

(Goldbaum, Stack and Traub, “After,” np).

The rioters are not only looters or anti-socials but they are also “like” animals (“swarm”), lacking or devoid of humanity, rational understanding, and compassion. Otherwise, how could they bring such destruction to their own beloved city, especially at a time of the pandemic? The report however does not hold this judgement for peaceful protestors but only those instigating riots; the latter they identify as irrational and charge for derailing the entire social justice movement.

Interestingly, amidst all this outrage, the report also contains a rather curious observation. Describing the scenes of looting, it notes:

As [the rioters] hopped from store to store, they grabbed clothing [...] But many high-ticket items were left untouched. On Fifth Avenue, a crowd smashed the window of a

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<sup>3</sup> This is true as well for when rioting affects other minority communities. A case in point is the 1994 L.A. riots when rioters from one minority community destroyed properties owned by another minority group. As Sumi K. Cho notes, the clashes which occurred in the wake of the non-guilty verdict in the Rodney King case between two “subordinated groups” – Korean American and African American –, resulted from the economic and psychological interactions between these racial groups. Korean Americans operating businesses in African American communities, compounded with their status as a “model minority” within U.S. society, and the internalization of this stereotype by African Americans, resulted in Asian American being “seen as ‘outsiders’ exerting unfair control and power in the community” (“Korean,” 198). For rioters targeting Korean American businesses it was an action motivated by their longstanding frustrations over the system and an erroneous belief that “Korean immigrants unfairly compete with aspiring entrepreneurs from the Black community because Korean Americans receive preferential treatment over African Americans for bank and government loans” (ibid., 200). As Cho’s essay aptly demonstrates, both minority groups were victims of a system that functions by keeping deprived classes divided along race, gender, and other axes.

Camper shoe store, but did not take the pair of \$800 sneakers advertised prominently by the entrance.

A different group shattered the windows of a boutique tea shop, leaving a traffic cone hanging, nose out, through a hole in one of its windows. But they disturbed almost none of its merchandise, creating a surreal scene of smashed glass and delicate, carefully preserved tea sets — their bright red cups and saucers balanced in an avant-garde display.

(Goldbaum, Stack and Traub, np).

It is indeed peculiar that instead of stealing expensive merchandise the rioters “creat[e] a surreal scene of [...] avant-garde display” out of a broken-in high-end boutique store (Goldbaum, Stack and Traub, np). How are we to reconcile these actions with the destruction caused?

To the *NYT* writers, though, these are nothing except mindless vandalism. The rioters, they reason, were less interested in stealing and more into enjoying “the thrill of destroying.” This is even characterized as a thrill which filled them with a sense of “powerful feeling of impunity” — a view corroborated by the widely held belief about rioters as mindless anarchists who exhilarate in their boggled pursuits of mischief and annihilation (Goldbaum, Stack and Traub, np).

But what if the creation of this avant-garde display is a political statement against the economic system that keeps black and brown bodies disenfranchised, impoverished, and silenced? The very boutique stores which these black and brown bodies service as disposable labor remain beyond their means. And if this appears to them as a cruel joke, and if they accordingly decide to transform the scene(s) of their exploitation into art, does that not exhibit a cruel optimism, to wit, a perverse political statement? The rioters know their actions cannot bring them out of social dispossession or closer to gaining political-economic power, yet the recreation of the boutique store into a spectacle of low-brow grotesque “art” offers them a brush with subjective agency. This “art” is the signature of their invisible exploited bodies; them leaving their inscription on the privileged space of the boutique store.

Sadly, the voice of the oppressed is never heard by the center. Lacking access to hegemonic discourse and/or being totally cut off from hegemonic discourse, this other is destined to remain mute as its brief flirtation with subjective agency is characterized as senseless violence. The other thus faces a catch-22 situation: it is only through the loud noise of violence that it can hope to awaken or gain attention from the otherwise “deaf” system; however, its every act of subjective enunciation is symbolized as irrational and canned to the rubbish-bin of History.

Unsurprisingly, the *NYT* report too accuses the rioters for not only lacking political consciousness but also for misusing the freedoms they already enjoy in the country. In an emotionally charged passage, the report states:

When the group happened upon a New York-themed gift shop whose storefront had already been smashed open, they ransacked the store once again. As they tore through the merchandise, one person lobbed a Statue of Liberty figurine outside. It landed, fractured, in the street.

(Goldbaum, Stack and Traub, np).<sup>4</sup>

Aimed at provoking emotional outrage in their readers over the rioters’ display of disdain toward this globally recognized symbol of U.S. national identity, the report fails to understand how this act constitutes yet another political statement – Destroying Lady Liberty is a symbolic attack on the ideals organizing the U.S. national imaginary as the purveyor and protector of the unalienable rights of all humans – for equality, liberty, and freedom. By demolishing the statue, the protestors attack the hypocrisy of those in the United States who hold the principle of social equality as sacrosanct (“All Men are created equal”) yet act oblivious to the existence of systemic and blatant racism in the U.S. Their action highlights their abject sufferings in a society where to be black is to be negated from all access to social equality.

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<sup>4</sup> More than one news report about rioters destroying the Lady Liberty statute is in existence. One of these notes that after rioters ransacked Macy’s, they broke into an adjacent gift store but instead of pillaging it they retreated after breaking off the torch from the hand of a Lady Liberty statue that was on display next to shop’s entrance.

The rioters' action highlights their abject sufferings in a society where to be black is to be negated from all access to social equality. Their action explodes what Jürgen Habermas terms "the liberal model of the public sphere," that is, an "ideal realm" distinct from "the economic, the private, and the political" (cited in Mitchell "Public Art," 886). This ideal realm claims to allow *all citizens* an image and space to contemplate as "a transparent emblem of their own inclusiveness and solidarity, and deliberate on the general good, free of coercion, violence, or private interests." But the explosion of this sphere truly exposes the fiction of this space as only possible through "the rigorous exclusion of certain groups" (Mitchell 886). The "image" of Lady Liberty welcoming the world's *poor, wretched refuse yearning to breathe free* therefore needs to be punctuated ... the rioters only continue what Chaplin's tramp started in "the Immigrant" (1917): They expose the hypocrisy of the image and the system anointing the image. Thus, these ragged rioters not only occupy a continuum with Chaplin but also with the history of the West which is best "rewritten as a history of iconoclasm" (Mitchell, 884). The rioter's anger toward the promise and guarantee of "Lady Liberty" is therefore an act of singular dissent – it is the social non-part demanding their rightful station in society.

### **SECTION III: Order vs. Justice: What does the Liberal Want?**

In his open letter written from Birmingham jail, Martin Luther King Jr. brutally chastises white moderates for impeding the national movement for social justice. The white moderate, or liberal in our case, he says, is more concerned about preserving social order than committing to the creation of a just society. Here is the passage in full:

I must make two honest confessions to you, my Christian and Jewish brothers. First, I must confess that over the last few years I have been gravely disappointed with the white moderate. I have almost reached the regrettable conclusion that the Negro's great stumbling block in the stride toward freedom is not the White Citizens Council or the Ku Klux Klanner but the white moderate who is *more devoted to order than to justice*;

who prefers a negative peace which is the absence of tension to a positive peace which is the presence of justice; who constantly says, "I agree with you in the goal you seek, but I can't agree with your methods of direct action;" who paternalistically feels that he can set the timetable for another man's freedom; who lives by the myth of time; and who constantly advises the Negro to wait until a "more convenient season." Shallow understanding from people of good will is more frustrating than absolute misunderstanding from people of ill will. Lukewarm acceptance is much more bewildering than outright rejection.

(King, "Letter from Birmingham Jail," n.p. [emphasis added])

Though King does not state this explicitly, it is safe to assume that white moderate or liberal objection about the methods adopted by the movement was just a surface narrative masking their unconscious desire for order. And this unconscious investment raises the question: what do the white liberals gain from preserving social order? That is, if they know a just society is better than the currently existing social order, and if some of them also actively identify with the goals of the movement, then, why would they act in a manner which stymies the possibility of creating a just society? The answer is simple: creating a just society would involve dismantling the existing social order, and the liberals do not like that. For lurking beneath the liberal objection, albeit unknown to the liberal, is their stake in preserving the existing social order. Thus, if we have to answer the question "what does the liberal want," we will need to address the white liberal's unconscious investment in the status quo; or, the unacknowledged knowledge driving white liberal actions against what they claim to consciously want, namely, an equitable society where justice applies equally to all without regard to color.

To put this contemporary issue in Lacanian terms, we might say that what is at stake for the liberal is the sense of belonging and enjoyment that existing society offers. Their desire for maintaining this order, accordingly, is not simply a concern about social unrest – a law and order problem, as former President Donald Trump tweeted in the wake of the social justice protests against George Floyd's murder –, rather, it is about sustaining the liberal subject's bonds with a collective united through their shared belief in the big Other's promise of fulsome

enjoyment, subjective wholeness and phallic plenitude. This desire, which is the desire of the Other, as Lacan reminds us repeatedly, is a desire for an impossible fantastic object which, insofar as the subject can never attain nor finding which can the subject be fully satisfied, implies the subject is forever suspended in desire. By remaining unattainable, and thus holding within it the promise of a fantastic wholesome satisfaction, the object sustains desire and the subject in continuous pursuit of this object of desire. In this context, fantasy ( $\$ \diamond a$ ) rejigs this zero-sum game by offering a solution: fantasy introduces the *objet a* as the object cause of desire and/or as responsible for creating a barrier between the subject and its desired object. By thus structuring the divided subject ( $\$$ ) in a relation to the object cause of desire ( $a$ ), fantasy mediates the traumatic impossibility of desire by representing (satisfaction of) desire as futural. Satisfaction or possession of the desired object is possible once all-external impediments to the desired object is obliterated. As such, the *objet a* keeps the desiring subject invested in desire without having to confront the impossibility of desire. In other words, the *objet a* rescues the subject from encountering the abyss of desire by covering this real and offering the subject instead a “semblance of being” (Miller, “Extimité,” 85). The *objet a* is an “instrument or plaything with which the subject do as they like, manipulating it as it pleases them” in order to make sense of being and desire (Fink 60). But where do BLM rioters and liberal unconscious racism fit into all this?

The shift from paternal prohibition (“No” of the Father) to the paternal injunction to “enjoy” (Miller, “Unconscious,” n.p.), Lacan had cautioned as early as 1970s, would make social bonding or collective identities impossible except through a segregation of the other for the latter’s unique *jouissance*. The problem that Lacan perceives in the replacement of social prohibition of enjoyment with the injunction to freely enjoy, and which leads him to prophesize the rise of racism, Eric Laurent explains, has to do with the fact that we “have no knowledge of the *jouissance* from which we might take our orientation” (“Racism 2.0,” n.p.). But since we

“know only how to reject the jouissance of others,” rejecting the other for its jouissance were to become the central pivot for fashioning social bonds or collective identities (Laurent, n.p.).

The creation of a collective identity in a world bereft of the prohibitive Father, Lacan writes, happens in three steps or stages: (1) “A man knows what is not a man”; (2) “Men recognize themselves among themselves as men”; and, (3) “I declare myself to be a man for fear of being convinced by men that I am not a man” (Lacan, *Écrits*, 174). We can simplify this further as follows: On the one hand, a subject enunciates its singular identity through negation of the other as “not man,” that is, the other “whom I reject for having a jouissance distinct from my own,” and, on the other, the subject affiliates or claims identification with a collective who bond through their mutual rejection of the other (Laurent, n.p.).

This imaginary other as “not man,” that is, the other possessed of excessive or illegitimate jouissance, structures the subject’s fantasy wherein it occupies the position of the *objet a*. Additionally, this fantasy glues the collective.<sup>5</sup> And though anyone can occupy the position of this other, even those without visible or audible signifiers of racial difference (skin color or accent), in societies like the U.S. which has a long history of unconcealed and structural racism this fantasy is best named the racist fantasy (McGowan, “Bedlam,” 20). McGowan who coins the term “racist fantasy” explains,

Although there are purely individual fantasies, there are also collective ones that enable societies to cohere around them. The racist fantasy is the primary example of a collective fantasy.<sup>8</sup> It establishes a bond between members of the society by separating those who belong from those who don’t belong through their mode of enjoying themselves. The irony is that the enjoyment of those who belong depends on their identification with the enjoyment of those who don’t. This identification occurs through the racist fantasy.

(21)

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<sup>5</sup> As Miller reminds us there is no distinction here between individual and collective fantasies, that “collective formations [or] groups” are “made up of a multiplicity of individuals taking the same object as ego Ideal.” Or, “from the Freudian point of view, the being of the collective is only an individual relation multiplied.” See, Miller “Turin” n.p.

Without this racist fantasy obfuscating the failure of Capitalism to deliver unlimited satisfaction, people would lose faith in the Market. The racist fantasy keeps the potential of “unlimited satisfaction alive by erecting the racial other as a barrier to it;” that is, the racial other becomes the reason why society fails to deliver its promise of absolute plenitude (McGowan, 21 ; 23). Thus, the racial other functions both as an impediment restricting the subject from enjoyment and, paradoxically, as the object through whom the subject enjoys vicariously (McGowan, 26-32).

If manifest racism is hatred directed toward “what grounds the Other's alterity, in other words, *jouissance*” (Miller, “Extimité,” 79), expressions of which are in evidence in the skinhead’s declared intent of finding a “total solution” for ridding society of the racial other and thus making his society great again, this fixation on the other as a “mode of enjoyment” also structures the racist fantasy except the subject of this fantasy is unconscious about his racism (Laurent, n.p.). The subject of racist fantasy might voice moral outrage over the excesses of social justice protests, even make arguments about the political impracticality of such movements, but he will never consciously admit himself as a racist. Yet, as I note above, such objections are almost always galvanized by concerns over the protests being excessive and the protestors’ illegitimate enjoyments.

It is a mistake therefore to think that liberal sentiments about BLM rioters disclose a failure of communication across the class divide. If anything, the liberal critique is underwritten by the racist fantasy. This fantasy structures the liberal’s relation to society, the social bond, and their conservative cousins and explains their anxiety about (social) order.

Anxiety over the disappearance of social order, which King correctly recognizes in his “Letter from Birmingham Prison” as the ultimate pressure point for his most avid white liberal supporters, also underwrites the final words of James L. Framer Jr. His final proposition to the white liberal affluent audience is not so much an invitation for making a moral choice as it is an

offer of choice between radical change in the social order versus the slow grind of social reform. In fact, Farmer Jr.'s position is the exact opposite of King's – the former is proposing that the majority white liberal audience should be content with the fact that he and those like him who have seen the violence of white America are not willing to forsake the path paternalistically laid down by liberal America for their freedom. This is in stark contrast to what King writes in his letter about white liberals sabotaging the movement by constantly advising “the Negro [to] wait until a ‘more convenient season’ [,]” avoid creating tension in society etc (King, n.p.). But it is by obfuscating these issues through an invocation of the specter of social violence that the film sadly submits to the white liberal desire for order. It is no surprise then that Farmer Jr. receives a standing ovation from the film's audience.

We need to recognize the constant liberal references to the immorality of violence is an ideological deception. It functions as a stop gap restricting us from asking important questions like what is this “order” which is so dearly loved by liberals and what contributes to the liberal's anxiety over the disappearance of this order? Only by sidestepping that ideological trap, can we ask: what is the true reason for the liberal's existential investment in the order?

The first point to be made is that the “order” in question is not a matter of law and order. In other words, it is not a question of disorderly conduct – good versus bad social behavior – or social acts performed by individuals or groups which violate written and unwritten rules regulating our participation in and the functioning of society. Put differently, it is not a matter of morality even though the liberals seek to represent it as such. For at stake for liberals is the guarantee of the big Other, in fact the existence of the big Other itself, whose Law alone enables the subject to identify itself as “I” (or, man) in difference from a self-consolidating negative racial “other” (not man). Insofar as the subject is represented by a signifier that stands in for another signifier – “The signifier [...] is characterised (*sic*) by the fact that it represents a subject to another signifier” (Lacan, *Encore*, 49), and because the signifier, as part of language,

gains its meaning by opposition to another signifier – White is “pure” or “pristine” only because Black is “negative” –, or “white” derives its meaning in the absence/exclusion of black,<sup>6</sup> relations within the symbolic order, i.e., social bonds, can only exist through a “relationship of mutual opposition” (Hewitson, “Signifier,” n.p.).<sup>7</sup> The subject as (represented by a) signifier “is a presence based on absences, having meaning only because it distinguishes, contrasts, and excludes” an other; and it is the big Other who guarantees meaning on basis of presences and absences, as such warranting the order (Jaanus Kurrick, *Writing*, 1). To lose this order would mean admitting the failure, to wit the absence, of the big Other.

Herein lies the difficult truth (and my second point) about order or structure of society: it is made up of (non)relations whose interactions are not determined by their imaginary differences but, rather, strictly by a fundamental antagonism – the other’s radical alterity qua jouissance. However, this traumatic real of social non-relationality cannot be admitted in society. It is thus continually recast in terms of imaginary differences with politics pretending to provide solutions for the eventual eradication of these differences. Historically, though, such efforts at “abolishing the non-relation (and replacing it with a relation)” have only resulted in social repression (Zupančič, *What*, 25). For admitting the reality of non-relationality would mean acknowledging the fiction of the imaginary – the absence of meaning between signifiers, hence the random and arbitrary character of the entire symbolic order. The anxiety over the collapse of the social order is, therefore, an anxiety over the constriction of the gap keeping the real segregated from the symbolic. Anxiety surfaces through the realization that the imaginary is founded on nothing (Chiesa, *Subjectivity*, 106). Or, as Lacan teaches in seminar X: it is the

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<sup>6</sup> “The signifier is a sign which refers to another sign, which is as such structured to signify the absence of another sign, in other words, to be opposed to it in a couple” (Lacan, *Psychoses*, 167).

<sup>7</sup> We should remember, however, that the (Lacanian) subject is not the exclusive imaginary self and an equally imaginary other (represented through signifiers deemed “not I”), but, rather, it is the gap or void existing between this imagined self (as a signifier: “I”).

moment when an imaginary – “situatable,” “locatable,” and “exchangeable” object is replaced by a “private, incommunicable” opaque object (*Anxiety*: 88). Anxiety is a response to the constriction of the gap between desire and jouissance.

Politics, especially in liberal multicultural democracies, remain invested in obscuring the impossibility of actualizing social relations and our (in)capacity to ethically react to the impossibility of relations, for instance, between sons and their father (Freud); man and woman (Lacan); the bourgeois and the proletariat (Marx); the center and the subaltern (Spivak) etc., by translating these into issues of unequal distributions of power and representation resulting in identity-politics and discourses about rescuing and rehabilitating the other and advocating for the other’s rights-based entry into hegemony. What gets erased in the process is the impossibility of accommodating the other whose radical alterity is grounded in our imagination of the other’s relation to a unique enjoyment. This imagined relationship between the other and its exclusive enjoyment constitute the fantasy of social belonging and the anxiety over the disappearance of social order. The real (of non-relationality) is thus both constitutive of social relations and the threat driving our continuous efforts to secure this order.

#### **Section IV: The Racist Fantasy**

The liberal wish for a multicultural society based on mutual trust and tolerance (of the other’s difference) is tethered to their unconscious dissatisfaction of living in a society where the other enjoys more or in excess of what they should. In a situation as this, Lacan states, it is impossible to think that social equality can exist without erasing the other. He observes in

*Television:*

Without our jouissance 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.

Given, too, the precariousness of our own mode, which from now on takes its bearing from the ideal of an over-coming [*plus-de-jouir*], which is, in fact, no longer expressed in any other way, how can one hope that the empty forms of humanhysterianism [*humanitaire*] disguising our extortions can continue to last?

(32-33).

Simply put, in a world marked by the depletion of the Name-of-the-Father, where the Father's "no" does not count and this prohibition is no longer symbolized into or recognized as Law unto the Father's name, the other's radical jouissance remains disturbingly opaque or impossible to assimilate in the symbolic. But this situation is rectified when the other's jouissance instead of being considered a problem is coopted into the regime of desire as the object cause of desire. In this role, it functions to consolidate both individual identity and unify a group.

This repositioning of the other (*objet a*) in terms of its complex (new) role in enveloping and developing the (barred) subject in relation to its radical conjunction with and disjunction from the other (see, Fink, *Lacanian*, 59), reinstates desire for order – to recognize the big Other in spite of rumors about its death and thus be recognized by the big Other as one of the remaining faithful's. As Nietzsche noted famously, the problem is not that God is dead but that Man refuses to believe God is dead and still continues to sing peans in His praise. What we must add here by way of Lacan is that we are not ignorant about God's demise, but, rather, that we continue to believe in Him out of hope that God is alive and will recognize us for keeping faith in Him at a time when everyone else is acting as if God is dead. For, as Lacan knew, the problem with the death of God hypothesis was not that it made Man free but that it made Man totally unfree. A world without God is a disenchanted world, as Max Weber observed, and while private meanings are possible in this Godless world there remains no possibility for a universal meaning in this world. Therefore, retaining faith in God's continuing presence is crucial for Man to claim the support of a universal meaning supporting a sense of subjective agency for Man (against other Men) even if that agency is contingent on Man's original sin against God.

Interestingly, Lacan anticipates the rise of religious fundamentalism alongside the increasing racism in the post-war “global” world – both, he said, result from the weakening of the Name -of-the-Father and both create newer forms of heightened social segregation based on the opacity of the other’s inadmissible *jouissance* (See, *Television* 33). Noting “our future [...] will be balanced by an increasingly hardline extension of the process of segregation” (Lacan, “Proposition,” 12), he advises analysts to prepare for responding to this heightened segregation (Lacan, “Address,” 271).

Blatant acts of racism as well the racist fantasy are thus not incongruent with today’s dominant principles of democratic multiculturalism. For conscious and unconscious hatred of the other structure our sense of social belonging apropos our imagination of the racial other’s particular modes of excessive enjoyments. As Miller puts it,

Racism is founded on [...] hatred of the particular way, of the Other’s own way of experiencing *jouissance* [i.e.,] about the way in which the Other obtains a *plus-de-jour*: either he does not work or he does not work enough, or he is useless or a little too useful, but whatever the case may be, he is always endowed with a part of *jouissance* that he does not deserve.

(Miller, “Extimité,” 80)

Or,

The essence of the matter is that the Other is unfairly subtracting from you of a part of your *jouissance*. [...] The question of tolerance or intolerance [...] is that of the tolerance or intolerance of the *jouissance* of the Other – of that Other inasmuch as this Other is fundamentally the one who is robbing me of my *jouissance*.

(Miller, “Extimate Enemies,” 39)

If racism directly marks the other as responsible for social disturbance, the racist fantasy does the same, albeit unconsciously. And both in so marking the other’s *jouissance* as responsible for their own failures to enjoy, they equally sustain their respective positions as desiring subjects under the Law of a big Other. Concerns over the disappearance of social order due to the racial other is a concern over the disappearance of the big Other and desire, that is, to avoid confronting “the traumatic impossibility of desire” (McGowan, 22).

This explains the difficulty of dislodging racism from society. For the racist subject would not find gratification or total satisfaction if the racial other is somehow stopped from enjoying. Though the complaint is that the other is not abiding by the law, the solution is never as simple as the law intervening, ending the other's enjoyment, and, resultantly, quelling the racist subject's anxieties. For even when racialized bodies are incarcerated, and most disproportionately in the United States, racist concerns over racial other's ability to continue enjoying do not cease to exist.

Nor would the complaints would also not cease if the racist subject were to be suddenly allowed free access to the same (prohibited) enjoyments. In fact, the racist subject will not be satisfied by this solution because its true enjoyment lies in enjoying vicariously through the fantasy of the other's illicit enjoyment. Lacan teaches us that enjoyment is impossible without the framework of fantasy ( $\$ \leftrightarrow a$ ); or, we only desire an object or find an object enjoyable when there is an impediment to fully enjoying this object. Without the fantasy of the racial other stealing off our enjoyment and thus stymieing our access to plenitude, there can be no desiring subject and/or objects to desire in the first place. It is therefore to keep enjoying our dissatisfaction of enjoyment that the phantasmatic figure of the racial other must remain free to enjoy.

This is why liberal condemnations of BLM rioters should not be taken at face value but exposed for what they are: racist or underwritten by a racist fantasy. For the self-righteous condemnations of "black" rioters seek more than to curb the racial other's excessive enjoyment by bringing them under the control of law. It is also a defense against confronting the racist subject's unconscious investment in the other as the only route to enjoyment for the former.

### **Conclusion: Order | Violence | Justice**

Liberal fixation with social order allows us to reconsider the function of *subaltern* violence directed toward the state and the Market. I use the word "subaltern" with equal

measure of deliberation and caution. First, I use it as a check against the overgeneralizing, oversimplified moral critique of all violence originating in or resulting from minority led protests against the social order. Second, I use it to balance the above perspective by distinguishing the subaltern from all other minoritized groups, and subaltern violence from other kinds of minority violence.

Gayatri Spivak, from whom I borrow the term subaltern, continuously reminds us that the subaltern is not “just a classy word for oppressed [...] for somebody who’s not getting a piece of the pie” (“Interview,” 45). A discriminated against minority group on a U.S. university campus, for instance, Spivak says, cannot claim the label of subaltern because they are already within the discourse of hegemony and they are perfectly capable of voicing their demands by being within the system. By contrast, the subaltern is completely cut off from hegemonic discourse, they inhabit a differential space, and for this their voices remain unheard in hegemonic discourse. Taking cue from Spivak’s definition of the subaltern, I claim that the subaltern has no option for correcting its social condition except through total violence against the social order which keeps them subjected.

Violent riots like the ones I discuss in this essay, therefore, need to be read differently. And I wish to conclude this essay with two remarks about that. Or, I wish to ask how to read riots for asking what does the rioter want? However, these remarks will be brief, more akin to theoretical interjections inviting future critical analysis and thinking, since developing these here would lengthen this essay quite a bit. Also, the remarks should not be considered as exclusive—both can help answer the question ‘what the rioter wants’ just as both may not be adequate to answer. After all, given the communicative divide between the subaltern and us, it is never possible to know what the other wants? So, we must be also open to the argument, theoretically at least, that the rioter could be acting without the kinds of conscious intent that I am seeking to ascribe them here regarding their political objectives. If anything, I am only suggesting that we

not dismiss the potential for liberation inherent in their actions even if the actants are unaware of the true and direct measure of their actions.

First, the actions of the rioters can be identified as an enunciation of demand or a politics of demand for being regarded (*regardé* or seen/looked at) as equals and humans in society. In what I have argued so far about rioters sending a political message through recreating the scene of plunder or destroying the Lady Liberty statue, this appears as a certain possibility. I wish to nuance this point further though by noting that the demand is not for immediate inclusion into the social order, but, rather, their actions are aimed at making possible the creation of conditions of possibility for them becoming part of the state on equal terms with everyone else (Spivak, "Trajectory," n.p.). In other words, this is not a simple demand for greater representation in society since without ending social apartheid such representation, even when pursued with best of intentions, can only end in tokenism. Rather, it is about generating those social conditions which will eventually allow the racial other to claim the social.

Second, it can be argued that rioting represents the other's desperate attempt to totally eviscerate the symbolic order responsible for keeping them oppressed. Treated as abject and "superfluous" by society, those who are daily "humiliated, whose dignity is not recognized, whose rights can be violated with impunity, including [the] right to breath," these subjects have no prospect of making their voices heard in the hegemonic space (Mbembe, "Ignorance," n.p.). In the absence of any real possibility of social change through peaceful demands, they are left with only one option – the complete destruction of the social order for creating a radical new social reality. What Saroj Giri observes in the context of violent Maoist movements in South Asia apply too in our context(s): the aim is "not merely [...] to intervene in reality" but "redefine what counts as reality" by violently dismantling "the co-ordinates of current socio-economic and political matrix" guilty of generating class apartheid ("Maoists," 40).

I am willing to concede that riots (BLM, France 2005, colonial India) are the most extreme or radical expressions of the other's (black/colonized/refugee) demands to live – stay alive, to breathe— and for racial justice. But moral condemnations heaped on rioters result from a liberal socio-symbolic imaginary where all forms of violence as enunciation of truth are viewed as illicit and/or illegal. We must strive instead to understand this violence as quintessentially democratic articulations of the other's right to demand a process for creating a more equitable society where they are no longer suppressed, dismissed, and decimated.

Theirs is a democratic demand from start to finish. As Slavoj Žižek notes in “A Leftist Plea for ‘Eurocentrism’,” the real character of any democracy should be measured by the role of the non-part as they hold the majority accountable. That is to say, demands and aspirations of the majority group in a democracy do not constitute the true ethos of democracy. Rather the demands of the minorities and dissenters constitute democracy and, as such, their demands should be acknowledged as proper democratic expression.

It is also misguided to characterize protestors seeking racial and social justice as seeking recognition for the particular against a universal “All.” Far from seeking a position outside the universal “All,” advocates of racial and social justice movements aim to make the “not-all” the true measure of society. This is not simply a politics for recognizing the “not-all/non-part” as part of the whole, but, rather, making the entirety of politics about the “not-all.” This means moving politics away from identity-based rivalry and toward a politics articulated around humanity's shared condition as ontologically lacking. Riots, in this context, uphold a radical albeit uncomfortable truth, namely, such change cannot be accomplished through the slow grind of reform but requires the violent rearrangement of the idea of the Whole in terms of our shared universal negativity.

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