

**On reflexive racism: disavowal, deferment and the lacanian subject**

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## **On Reflexive Racism: Disavowal, Deferment and the Lacanian Subject**

### **Abstract**

The term ‘reflexivity’ continues to maintain an interpretive hegemony in discussions on modernity and the Self. As a form of praxis, applications of reflexivity frequently rely upon an acknowledged awareness of one’s self-conscious attitudes, dispositions, behaviors and motives. This paper will take aim at such contentions, exploring the extent to which examples of racism rely upon a level of reflexivity, best encapsulated in Žižek’s ‘reflexive racism’. Specifically, it is highlighted how examples of non-racism/anti-racism assert the formal promotion of a monadic subject, solely adept at ‘uncovering’ and ‘relinquishing’ their racism (disavowal); and, an equally unhelpful social constructionism, which depoliticizes racism by relocating and relativizing it to a particular socio-historical context (deferment). In outlining this response, specific attention is given to Lacan’s subject of enunciation and subject of the enunciated, from which it is concluded that it is in the obfuscation of one’s ‘position of enunciation’ that examples of reflexive racism reside.

### **Contributor’s Note**

Jack Black is a Senior Lecturer at Sheffield Hallam University. His research examines the interlinkages between culture and media studies, with particular attention given to cultural representation and ideology. His forthcoming publication *Race, Racism and Political Correctness in Comedy – A Psychoanalytic Exploration* (Routledge, 2021) critically considers the importance of comedy in challenging and redefining our relations to race and racism.

## Introduction

Reactions to the death of George Floyd have delivered unprecedented global attention for the Black Lives Matter (BLM) movement, sparking numerous international protests.<sup>1</sup> This has been echoed in ongoing calls for statues to be removed, curriculums to be decolonized; and, for a litany of well-known celebrities and media entertainers, the online sharing and criticism of past performances depicting them in ‘blackface’ makeup or other ‘racial’ prosthetics.<sup>2</sup> In the U.K. (United Kingdom), media coverage of the comedian, Leigh Francis, and his depiction of black celebrities during the 2002-2009 comedy series *Bo’ Selecta!* (Fremantle), as well as David Walliams and Matt Lucas’s, *Little Britain* (BBC Worldwide), proved notable: with the release of a public apology from Francis and the cancellation of Walliams and Lucas’s comedy series from streaming platforms. In fact, what remained significant in these examples was how their responses proved elucidative in exhibiting a formal ‘self-reflexivity’ directed at both the actor’s themselves as well as the social context in which their series’ were broadcast. On the face of it, such ‘self-reflection’ may seem a warranted and largely welcomed response; but as the following analysis will make clear, it is in the *form* of these self-reflexive assertions that examples of racism continue to reside.

To help elucidate on this ‘formal’ importance, this paper will critique the mediated responses that were provided by Francis, Walliams and Lucas. As revelatory examples, there is neither the intention nor inclination to view their replies as mere public relation exercises; instead, specific attention is given to the interpretive dominance of the notion of ‘reflexivity’: a term that is perhaps best reflected in the ‘reflexive modernization’ thesis.<sup>3</sup> Indeed, what this paper will argue is that it is in the very act of ‘reflexivity’ that examples of racism play out via a process of ‘reflexive

disavowal' and/or 'reflexive deferment'. The merits of this proposal will be situated in relation to Slavoj Žižek's 'reflexive racism',<sup>4</sup> with further support provided by Richard Sennett's analysis of the decline of public culture<sup>5</sup>. Together, this work will culminate in the concluding sections, whereby attention will turn to Lacan's subject of enunciation and enunciated.<sup>6</sup> This will assert that analyses of racism, as well as examples of apparent anti-/non-racism, must take into consideration the underlying subjective form: that is, the divided/alienated position of Lacan's subject.

### **Reflexive Projects of the Self**

Within the social sciences, critical discussion on the importance of reflexivity has continued to underscore epistemological concerns regarding knowledge and praxis as well as the relative capacity of the subject to reflexively acknowledge their habitual dispositions and practices.<sup>7</sup> Indeed, such thinking would undergo both a cognitive and political significance in the work of Beck, Giddens and Lash, for whom, 'reflexivity' constitutes a universal characteristic of modern society.<sup>8</sup> Emanating in their analysis of the modern state, each would explore the emergence of a global society that increasingly compelled the subject to make reflexive judgements, based upon a calculable orientation grounded in one's knowledge, action and future orientation. In effect, reflexivity becomes a tactic for the subject's full embrace of a modernity grounded in 'risk' and reflexive projects of the Self that seek to imbue and empower the subject with a sense of agency.<sup>9</sup>

Criticisms of this approach have highlighted how such assertions work to reify 'the transformation of a critical strategy into an interpretation of political and social reality'.<sup>10</sup> That is, for Bewes's, there is an underlying apprehension in the potential for

such ‘reflexive projects’ to enact socio-political change, especially when they remain tied to forms of critical thinking that simply re-evaluate modernity’s inherent (and, accepted) limitations. Though examples of reflexivity are undoubtedly apparent in the configuration of new ideas, tools and concepts, this often serves to support the social system it seeks to ‘reflexively’ critique. In other words, reflexive modernization proposes a process of rational reform, which, on the one hand, remains open to the concern that ‘globalization’ can be challenged and critiqued, while, on the other, works to implement this critique in the very ideals that it seeks to criticize – a process that speaks more to the ‘formal’ acceptance of the liberal democratic order. Here uncertainty, fragmentation and ambivalence are no longer critically abated but, in lieu of any universal reason, now constitute the individual’s reflexive responsibility. Suoranta and Vaden propose:

The theory of reflexive modernity does recognise some of the problems of postmodernity and the need for new conceptual and pragmatic models, but the tools it offers (the politics of the everyday, creativity, new solutions to new problems, new single-issue movements) are not sufficient to shake the structures of economic production or social life. The liberal system is by definition ecumenical, listening to every group (from feminists to fair trade activists) equally and patiently, as long as these groups do not threaten democracy itself. All critique is allowed, even welcomed, as long as the plethora of critiques is under the umbrella of ‘critique of globalisation’ and without any meaningful unity.<sup>11</sup>

This ‘politics without the political’,<sup>12</sup> is echoed in the criticisms provided by Slavoj Žižek, for whom, in an apparent era of ‘post-ideology’, a ‘reflexive’ tendency underscores the symbolic play of different opinions, diverse interpretations and ‘new’ global initiatives – all grounded in a desire for change, but a change which never seeks to challenge the very form in which this change is proclaimed.<sup>13</sup> As a result, such projects serve only to return their own non-reflexivity. For example, in a widely recited

(hypothetical) illustration, Žižek notes how, today, when ‘the neo-Nazi skinhead ... is really pressed for the reasons for his violence, [he] suddenly starts to talk like social workers, sociologists and social psychologists, quoting diminished social mobility, rising insecurity, the disintegration of paternal authority, [and] lack of maternal love in his early childhood’.<sup>14</sup> In so doing, ‘the unity of practice and its inherent ideological legitimization disintegrates into raw violence and its impotent, inefficient interpretation’<sup>15</sup> – so that, now, even the perpetrators can reflexively ‘make sense’ of their actions (be it personal pathology, upbringing or environment). The ‘impotence of interpretation’ is laid bare in the immediacy (the enjoyment itself) afforded by one’s self-reflexivity. It is in this way that reflexive interpretation ‘loses its ... “symbolic efficiency”’,<sup>16</sup> leaving the ‘problem’ – racist violence – unresolved.

These criticisms remain largely ignored in work that has considered the importance of reflexivity in combatting racism, both in society and academia. Notably, Emirbayer and Desmond highlight how ‘our understanding of the racial order will forever remain unsatisfactory so long as we fail to turn our analytic gaze back upon ourselves, the analysts of racial domination, and inquire critically into the hidden presuppositions that shape our thought’.<sup>17</sup> In following this path, they present ‘a basic set of distinctions and insights that one can employ in elucidating and perhaps *disavowing* oneself of unfounded assumptions and intellectual habits that encumber scientific thought’.<sup>18</sup> What remains unconsidered (and unchallenged) is how it is in accordance with this very ‘disavowal’ that examples of ‘reflexive antiracism’ – i.e. the adoption of ‘a reflexive stance towards one’s own and others’ attitudes, beliefs and behaviours’ – becomes *the* tactic for achieving ‘both equanimity in emotional reactions and a positive white identity’.<sup>19</sup>

To this end, it is asserted that examples of reflexive anti-racism rely upon a reflexivity that puts to use a (absent) ‘Self’ to be reflected upon; indeed, a malleable, yet distinguishable ‘self-content’ that can be looked upon, acknowledged and worked with. Importantly, what this ignores is the extent to which these claims become embroiled in and used for the perpetuation of racist assertions that just as easily maintain their own impotency via a false form of individualization (much like Žižek’s fictional neo-Nazi skinhead). On this basis, we may ask: what happens when racism itself becomes ‘reflexive’?

### **Reflexive Deflection**

We can position the turn to reflexive self-projects in accordance with Richard Sennett’s, *The Fall of Public Man*. In this account, Sennett traces how public presentation, over the course of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, became tied to one’s ‘innate’ credibility: that is, by focusing on one’s ‘intentions’ and ‘character’, the ‘truth’ of the individual could be inferred. As a result, the growing prevalence of a ‘personality politics’, predicated on ‘a deflection of public interest away from measuring personal character in terms of effective public action’,<sup>20</sup> was one that remained directed towards one’s ‘personal impulse’ and an inner-directed condition of self-assertion and discovery.<sup>21</sup> Whereas such forms of ‘Self-truth’ indicate a pragmatic, ‘cards on the table’ projection of one’s thoughts and actions, ultimately, Sennett’s analysis highlighted how examples of self-expression reveal – but also, rely upon – a level of deflection and disavowal.

This is brought to bear in Sennett’s account of the former Governor of Alabama, George Wallace, who, on June 11, 1963, stood at the door of the Foster Auditorium at

the University of Alabama in order to protest the enrollment of black students. An entirely symbolic protest, Wallace's action garnered national media attention. Sennett notes:

When the news focused on the man [Wallace], ... it became enmeshed in a vicious circle: it tried to understand the personal history, motivation, and feelings of Wallace himself in order to uncover these hidden layers of resentment. The media lost sight increasingly of the fact that the protest was meaningless in terms of actual resistance; the politician succeeded in a transfer of attention so that his personality became a code to be broken, without reference to the power of that personality to act. Indeed, interpreting his intentions as incarnations of hidden forces in the society, the media succeeded in legitimating him as a person worth listening to, no matter what he did. In this way, the 'symbolic' protest of an entrepreneur of *ressentiment* was metamorphosed so that the intentions never had to be tested by their consequences, efficacy, or, indeed, their morality.<sup>22</sup>

In its desire to understand, interpret and, ultimately, make sense of Wallace's racist assertions, the media deflected from the relative futility of his protest, and, instead, managed to promote a level of 'personal reflection' grounded in Wallace's own reflexivity. Certainly, the suggestion here is not to disregard Wallace's obviously racist beliefs, but to consider how such actions helped to support a racial symbolic order, predicated on the disavowal that occurs when the 'truth' of one's racist convictions are laid bare. That is, by focusing on his political intentions (notably, his populism and policy of protecting segregation), Wallace's racial politics were, in a certain sense, legitimized: they were essentially 'his' to bear, and, therefore, readily available for him to confidently promote. In so doing, the media were able to project an imaginary sense of wholeness on Wallace's identity, allowing Wallace the opportunity to reflexively present his beliefs on segregation, while also effectively 'broadcasting' these beliefs as part of its coverage. It didn't matter whether Wallace was right or wrong: his views were undoubtedly *his*, and, therefore, to a certain extent, legitimated.<sup>23</sup> As Sennett's



discussion reveals, at no point was Wallace's *position* (Governor of Alabama) considered; indeed, at no point was the position that allowed Wallace to enact his racism accounted for. Instead, it was the *content* of Wallace's politics that took center stage in media coverage. What becomes apparent from the Wallace example, is how the presentation of racist beliefs – whether intended or mistaken – relied upon a formal logic that ultimately maintained their racist significance.

### **Reflexive Racism**

Littered throughout his comments on racism, and, specifically, the racism directed towards the Balkans, Žižek outlines how 'A liberal policy of "anti-racism" becomes ... the vehicle of a postmodern ideology of "reflexive racism"'.<sup>24</sup> Such racism occurs in two ways: 1) by offering a liberally tolerant, politically correct racism directed at the illiberal Other (usually the 'uneducated' working-class); and, 2) a form of reversal, whereby the 'exotic authenticity' of the ethnically privileged Other is both celebrated and affirmed.<sup>25</sup> Indeed, while, for the former, Žižek frequently recites Western-European interpretations of the Balkans War, whereupon, 'The Balkans constitute[d] a place of exception with regard to which the tolerant multiculturalist is allowed to act out his/her repressed racism';<sup>26</sup> for the latter, racism occurs by 'paradoxically ... articulat[ing] itself in terms of [a] direct *respect* for the other's culture'.<sup>27</sup> In both accounts, we can begin to see how, for the 'tolerant multiculturalist', the return of one's racism or the perpetuation of one's anti-racist credentials is underscored by a 'reflexive' depoliticizing.

This depoliticization bears a notable connection to the aforementioned example from Sennett. In fact, while Sennett's reference to Wallace details how a focus on

Wallace's personality resulted in the depoliticizing of his position of power, for Žižek, the political/interpretive impotence of this depoliticization is echoed in a foreclosure of the political that so often returns in more virulent ways. Žižek explains:

One of the commonplaces of the contemporary 'post-ideological' attitude is that today, we have more or less outgrown divisive political fictions (of class struggle, etc.) and reached political maturity, which enables us to focus on real problems (ecology, economic growth...) relieved of their ideological ballast – however, it is as if today, when the dominant attitude defines the terrain of the struggle as that of the Real ('real problems' versus 'ideological chimeras'), the very foreclosed political, as it were, *returns in the Real* – in the guise of racism, which grounds political differences in the (biological or social) Real of the race.<sup>28</sup>

In what follows, I will seek to locate this return in the Real via a political foreclosure that works to: 1) *reflexively disavow* one's racism, conceived through attempts to 'change' and 'rectify' one's self; and, 2) *reflexively defer* one's racism, by 'contextualizing' one's actions as socially inscribed.

#### *Reflexive racism – disavowing the 'Self'*

As evidenced in the above critique, examples of reflexivity are often achieved when one is encouraged to assess the 'essence' of one's individuality, such as, one's character, beliefs and personality. Accordingly, while, today, examples of racism are often assumed to reveal some inner 'racist' pathology,<sup>29</sup> such forms of individualization take place within a socio-political culture that seeks to affirm and encourage one's particularity (evident in debates on 'identity politics') and/or the valorization of one's affectivity. In the case of the latter, Alenka Zupančič takes aim at the 'gross ideological mystification' that underscores this process.<sup>30</sup> Here, the:

Valorization of affectivity and feelings appears at the precise point when some problem – injustice, say – would demand a more radical systemic revision as to its causes and perpetuation. ... Social valorization of affects basically means that we pay the plaintiff with her own money: oh, but your feelings are so precious, you are so precious! The more you feel, the more precious you are. This is a typical neoliberal maneuver, which transforms even our traumatic experiences into possible social capital. If we can capitalize on our affects, we will limit out protests to declarations of these affects – say, declarations of suffering – rather than becoming active agents of social change. I’m of course not saying that suffering shouldn’t be expressed and talked about, but that this should not ‘freeze’ the subject into the figure of the victim. The revolt should be precisely about refusing to be a victim, rejecting the position of the victim on all possible levels.<sup>31</sup>

Notably, the depoliticizing of social change follows a path of turning one’s personality into forms of social capital, which is subsequently promoted and even revered. Moreover, we can see how this process is one that relies upon a sense of personal validation, performed through acts of individual self-development. In this sense, further attention can be given to Machin and Mayr’s account of the work of Deborah Cameron, who highlights how a “‘talking cure” ... now pervades the therapeutic models that have become the templates for much of enterprise culture’.<sup>32</sup> According to Cameron, the promotion of the individual as responsible for their own participation and personal development, is a now ubiquitous requirement in ‘personal development and self-assessment plans’.<sup>33</sup> In such instances, the ‘members of society, like the employees of a company, are encouraged to participate in self-understanding’.<sup>34</sup> Equally, we can see how the impact of ‘This notion of personal responsibility, of which individual choice has been a core element’, ultimately results in examples of anti-racism being ‘watered down by “listening” and “learning”’.<sup>35</sup> This assumes ‘justice ... can be acquired through the awakening of people’s hearts and minds – instead of through a clear-cut democratic process’.<sup>36</sup> Ultimately, this ‘awakening’ relies upon a ‘hermeneutic temptation’ grounded in what Žižek refers to as ‘the search for some deeper meaning or message hidden in [... the racist’s] outbursts’,<sup>37</sup> as well as ‘a process of inversion’ that rests upon

one's capacity to feel and then project a sense of remorse for one's actions, behaviour or performance.<sup>38</sup>

Certainly, while the above does not seek to denounce one's sense of injustice, there is the concern that such forms of 'self-appraisal' can support and enact a sense of 'white guilt'. Through a process of self-accusation, the capacity to identify *within* oneself hidden forms of racism, paradoxically relies upon a sense of libidinal moral satisfaction, from which the logic of identifying with one's 'white guilt' ultimately reinvents a perverse 'white man's burden'.<sup>39</sup> These criticisms are echoed in Zalloua's critique of white privilege.<sup>40</sup> What brings together examples of 'white guilt' and the cry to check one's (white) 'privilege' is the sense that one can 'display their "progressive" leanings by calling for inclusivity and tolerance, parading their own self-critique ... as a model for others to follow'.<sup>41</sup> What is more, by reinforcing the underlying assertion that ethnicity can be privileged, declarations of white guilt/privilege rely upon an inherent *self*-disavowal:

If privilege theorists are pressed, they will gladly confess that they know that it is not enough to denounce the unearned privileges of others without simultaneously attending to the networks of power relations that sustain such advantages. And yet in their active scholarly activist lives, they act as if it were enough, displaying the psychoanalytic structure of fetishistic *disavowal* (*I know very well, but all the same*).<sup>42</sup>

Moreover, we can begin to identify two important processes in these 'confessions'. First, it is clear that such 'calling out' very rarely challenges the forms of systemic and institutional inequality that both upholds and maintains such privilege, serving instead as a locus of fear and anxiety.<sup>43</sup> In fact, this anxiety resides around the desire to 'discover' one's inherent racism, which is then subsequently disavowed through public displays of self-flagellation. In so doing, examples of guilt can allow:

... one ... [to] lie in the guise of (telling the) truth, that is, in which the full and candid admission of one's guilt is the ultimate deception, *the* way to preserve one's subjective position intact, free from guilt. In short, there is a way to *avoid* responsibility and/or guilt by, precisely, *emphasizing* one's responsibility or too readily *assuming* one's guilt in an exaggerated way, as in the case of the white male PC academic who emphasizes the guilt of racist phallogocentrism, and uses this admission of guilt as a stratagem *not* to face the way he, as a "radical" intellectual, perfectly embodies the existing power relations towards which he pretends to be thoroughly critical.<sup>44</sup>

It is here that we can begin to elucidate on the second process underscoring the act of confession: the extent to which one can reflexively disavow one's genuinely racist/stereotypical assertions via a 'truthful' and candid admission of one's 'self-development'.

We can see this in the case of the British comedian, Leigh Francis, who, in the wake of the BLM protests, used his Instagram account to post an apology for his former series, *Bo' Selecta!*. *Bo' Selecta!* was an English television sketch series, which aired from 2002 to 2009. The series was written by and involved performances from Francis, who would seek to lampoon popular celebrity culture by performing accentuated and largely fictional depictions of well-known celebrities, all while wearing exaggerated facial latex prosthetics. What was unique to the performances, however, was the inherent ineptitude of both the masks and the character depictions. In no way did Francis act or sound like the celebrities he was mimicking, but, rather, it was the stereotypical way that he presented these individuals through popular 'racialized' tropes, or other widely acknowledged features, which characterized his various sketches (for example, in his depiction of the Spanish musician, Enrique Iglesias, Francis performed as Iglesias's 'mole', a reference to Iglesias's prominent facial mole, since removed; the mole, however, spoke with a 'Geordie accent', a dialectic associated with those from the Tyneside area in North East England). On this level, some, albeit

tenuous, association could be made between the real celebrity and the performance. What bears particular concern is that this tenuity was clearly recognizable in those characters that performed, mimicked and accentuated popular racial impersonations.

For example, while performing as Michael Jackson, Francis's 'Jackson mask' would include red bandana, goatee and rimmed glasses. While these features bared no resemblance to Michael Jackson, Francis would accompany the mask with a red leather jacket, similar to that worn in his famous 'Thriller' music video. This well-known Jackson image was followed by Francis's performance, which included exaggerated mannerisms associated with Jackson's popular dance moves. Francis would moonwalk, grab his crutch and pump his waist as well as frequently announce: 'Shamone... mutha fucka'. Presumably, the reference to 'shamone' was drawn from Jackson's 1987 single, 'Bad', where Jackson frequently cites the phrase (the phrase is itself, a deliberate mispronunciation of 'come one'); the additional, 'mutha fucka' ('mother fucker'), however, alludes to a popular depiction of black, urban culture. In hearing the phrase, one may be reminded of its connection to the black U.S. actor, Samuel L. Jackson, for whom the term has served as an on-screen trademark.

As is clear from the Jackson example, many of these sketches required Francis to don latex masks that were essentially a form of 'blacking-up', while also drawing from a number of racialized tropes associated with U.S. and U.K. black culture. Other sketches involved Francis playing Mel B (Melanie Janine Brown), from the girl group, *Spice Girls*, who was subsequently 'performed as' as a drunk older, woman, with a strong Northern-English accent and a mask containing ginger hair, large nose as well as a hairy chest; the American illusionist, David Blaine; the musicians, Ozzy Osbourne, Elton John and George Michael; and, the former professional athlete, David Beckham. In particular, Francis's impressions of black celebrities had previously been criticized

by those depicted. Notably, the British television presenter, Patricia Gloria Goddard, criticized Francis's 'over the top' depiction of her.<sup>45</sup> Goddard explained that her children had since suffered bullying and harassment due to the performance.

In the wake of the BLM protests, Francis subsequently explained that the protests had caused him to do 'a lot of talking and learning', resulting in the following apology, filmed and broadcast via his Instagram channel:

Back in 2002 I did a show called *Bo' Selecta!*, I portrayed many black people. Back then I didn't think anything about it ... I didn't realise how offensive it was back then. I just want to apologise, I just want to say sorry for any upset I caused whether I was Michael Jackson, Craig David, Trisha Goddard, all people that I'm a big fan of. I guess we're all on a learning journey.<sup>46</sup>

While stating that, at the time, 'people didn't say anything', Francis, nonetheless, regretted his former portrayals. To note, the contention here is not to challenge the 'truthfulness' of Francis's apology. Instead, Francis's 'journey' – a journey that we can only assume included the sudden realization that racist stereotypes were wrong – and his tearful apology – which was filmed and uploaded to a public social media account – draw attention to the very subjective position from which this apology was enacted.

Indeed, what underscores the significance of this apology is its inherent *self*-disavowal; a process akin to the aforementioned confessions (white guilt/privilege) which seek to mitigate one's actions. That is, while, on the face of it, Francis's apology can be seen to reflect a certain recognition that his former performances were largely offensive, this 'recognition' remains tied a disavowal of the very position in which these performances were made. To this extent, Francis's apology formally echoes Octave Mannoni's, 'I know well, but all the same...'.<sup>47</sup> Mannoni's account of disavowal is unique in its capacity to convey the structural split that occurs in examples of disavowal: a structure that can very much maintain the status quo, or, in this instance,

one's subject position. Following this, we can highlight how one's reflexive disavowal reveals a process whereby the repudiation of one's racism, thus acknowledged ('I know well'), ultimately works to reflexively maintain this position in the very apology that such acknowledgment requires ('but all the same'). The underlying difference between disavowal and deferment, discussed below, is that, rather than deferring *to* something else, in examples of disavowal it is the enaction of a 'Self', thenceforth disavowed, which subsequently works to maintain the very position that presents this 'Self' as *that* which must be disavowed. Before elaborating upon this significance, we can consider our second form of reflexive racism: reflexive deferral.

#### *Reflexive racism – context deferral*

As noted by Mansfield, 'reflexivity ... can be thought of as detour behaviour'.<sup>48</sup> In the above discussion, this detour was achieved by 'reflexively' asserting one's 'inner self-development'; a paradoxical process that diverts from one's actions and the position which allows one to act, towards a display of Self-exposure. At the heart of this critique, is the sense in which such processes neither achieve nor effect any real change. Indeed, when 'thinking on', 'talking through' and 'learning from' one's 'racists' actions, what is to be expected or discovered, but one's racist confirmation? Accordingly, while examples of 'cultural sensitivity' provide 'an essential mask for what would be worse still – the exposure of the absence or emptiness of "our" own values',<sup>49</sup> what is of greater concern for the subject is the realization that such 'emptiness' compels a hermeneutic desire to learn and 'fix' one's racism.

Accordingly, if we assert, for the time being, that there is no 'inner Self' to be discovered; that one's attempts to find a sense of inner-truth speak more to a protracted



‘journey’ of learning and discovery; then, on a formal level, great solace can be taken in the contextual deferment that *distances* oneself from examples of ‘former’ racism. This works contrary to disavowal, which assumes but then disavows this very ‘inner Self’ as part of its own enaction. Instead, the act of contextual deferment is not a critique of contextualization *per se*, but, rather, an acknowledgement of how associating one’s actions in accordance with a particular (historical) period can help to contextually distance (relativize) one’s former Self. Colloquially, this often occurs when emphasizing how an action was ‘a sign of the times’ or when asserting that something was accepted and different ‘back then’.

For example, in the widely successful *Little Britain*, writers and performers, David Walliams and Matt Lucas, took part in a number of sketches that stereotypically portrayed Thai, black, disabled, transgender and working-class individuals. Beginning as a radio show in 2000, the show continued to have large popular success, spawning three full series, one-off specials and ‘spin-offs’, including *Little Britain USA* (HBO) and *Come Fly With Me* (2entertain; BBC). The performances of Walliams and Lucas drew upon perceived self-deprecating parodies from popular British culture, with the show’s ‘Little Britain’ title drawn from the reference, ‘Little Englander’ (a popular derogatory term referring to English xenophobia; subsequently, re-employed during the 2016 EU referendum). Consequently, the performances involved Walliams and Lucas drawing upon and acting-out stereotypical depictions, themselves grounded in popular associations with the U.K.’s cultural, class and ethnic make-up. This included the performance of the fictional character, Desiree De Vere, who Lucas performed in full black face and latex suit.<sup>50</sup> Following criticisms of *Little Britain*, BBC iPlayer, BritBox and Netflix removed the show from its online streaming catalogues. This included the

pair's later series, *Come Fly With Me*, which, again, involved Lucas performing as the British Pakistani character, Taaj Manzoor.

Indeed, both Walliams and Lucas had stated in previous interviews that, if they were to bring the show back, they 'would "definitely do it differently" now',<sup>51</sup> with Lucas adding: 'If I could go back and do *Little Britain* again, I wouldn't make those jokes about transvestites. I wouldn't play black characters. Basically, I wouldn't make that show now. It would upset people. We made a more cruel kind of comedy than I'd do now'.<sup>52</sup> While Lucas concluded that, 'Society has moved on a lot since then, and my own views have evolved',<sup>53</sup> Walliams confirmed that 'he would "definitely do it differently" in today's cultural landscape'.<sup>54</sup> In fact, Lucas and Walliams's sentiments were echoed by a BBC spokesperson, who stated that, 'Times have changed since *Little Britain* first aired so it is not currently available on BBC iPlayer'.<sup>55</sup>

As evident in the Walliams and Lucas responses (as well as the BBC), locating their acts in relation to a past, served to achieve a certain distance between themselves and their performances. That is, the belief that the performances were clearly allowed 'back then', and, thus, presumably OK, underscored their assertions that seventeen-years (bearing in mind that the first *Little Britain* series aired on UK television in 2003) was enough to account for an alternative cultural period that stood in stark contrast to 2020. What remained clear in their responses, however, was the extent to which such reflexive contextualization worked to occlude the very position from which Walliams and Lucas sought to offer their response. How could they be at fault, when it was simply the attitude of the time? On a certain level, such claims can work to justify or even ignore present forms of inequality. To assert that something was (rightly or wrongly) accepted in the past, posits an immediate question upon the present: what is wrong with our 'present' so that, at some point in the future, what we are currently doing will be

considered inappropriate? Thus, in relegating something to the past we end-up adopting a form of temporality that serves to maintain one's 'present' position via a deferment that never considers this very position (and its current impact).

Therefore, in similar fashion to Francis, what we see in the Walliams/Lucas account is the extent to which examples of reflexive racism revealed a shared process of subjective deferment. Despite Olusoga's concern that attention should be drawn to the fact that, 'Blame ... lies not just with the comedians, ... but also with producers and commissioners',<sup>56</sup> it was a formal disavowal/deferment that worked to distance each comedian from their former performances. That is, by attempting to 'discover', fix and validate one's personal anti-racism and/or by contextualizing one's former performances as merely reflecting the period in which they occurred, each comedian could maintain a reflexive distance: a process that, in the case of Francis, was paradoxically achieved by dissociating one's racism in the vagaries of the Self; and, in the case of Walliams and Lucas, presented in an equally dissociative contextual relativism.

What is significant to examples of disavowal and deferment is the efficacy that is achieved when one interpretively transposes meaning in their actions: that is, it is in the very act of reflexivity that a subjective, 'critical distance' can be performed. Here, critical reflections and relative justifications prove adept at providing 'a transference of knowledge from the subject on to the Other'.<sup>57</sup> Taylor elaborates upon this formal logic by highlighting how this transference serves as 'a way of registering one's compliance with the big Other of the Symbolic order'.<sup>58</sup> For example, in publicly pronouncing, and, thus, acknowledging one's racism, it is the subject's distance towards this 'Other as the subject supposed to know',<sup>59</sup> which, paradoxically, serves to divest the subject of the pressure to know (instead, the act of 'knowing' is located in the knowledge of the

Other). The distinction being drawn here is crucial in that ‘when the other is supposed to know, I do not know through him’,<sup>60</sup> and, as a consequence, it is this non-knowledge that defers the subject’s recognition of the inherent lack *in* the Other (which, neither prescribes nor ‘contains’ this knowledge).<sup>61</sup> What such failure exposes, therefore, is ‘the very opacity of the “subject of the enunciation”’.<sup>62</sup> It is to this subject we now turn.

### **Subject of Enunciation and Subject of the Enunciated**

To recap, this paper’s critique of reflexivity has sought to emphasize how the notion has become ‘a quasi-transcendental universal feature’; a ‘historical a priori’,<sup>63</sup> from which one’s capacity to live under modernity now requires a reflexive sense of Self and an ability to live with difference, risk and contingency. A now common feature of contemporary society (and academia), such forms of reflexivity can be identified in examples of racism, which are reflexively presented through formal processes of disavowal and deferment. The remainder of this paper will seek to locate the above discussion in relation to Lacanian accounts of the subject, and, specifically, Lacan’s subject of enunciation (*sujet de l’énonciation*) and subject of the enunciated (*sujet de l’énoncé*).

Lacan develops his account of enunciation and enunciated in relation to Descartes *res cogitans* as well as Kant’s transcendental subject. For Lacan, the subject is split between the ‘I’ of the statement, the enunciated subject; and the ‘I’ of enunciation, the ‘position’ from which one speaks. While the former refers to the content of what is spoken, the latter designates the act of speaking, from which Lacan proposed an ‘unconscious ... structured like language’.<sup>64</sup> In this respect, the words one speaks, the desire one holds and the fantasies that frame our reality are never simply at

the behest of the subject but, instead, convey the subject's reliance on a socio-symbolic order/big Other, for whom the subject's very enjoyment (*jouissance*) is founded. In effect, therefore, any imaginary identification or sense of subjective 'wholeness' is based upon one's identification with an Other; or, as Lacan exclaims: the 'I is an other'.<sup>65</sup>

In part, the distinction between enunciation and enunciated allows us to identify how the same content (enunciated) – such as, calls for 'freedom', 'equality', 'diversity' – can have very different interpretations depending on one's position of enunciation (be it a revolutionary party; a free market liberal; or a Christina/Islamic fundamentalist).<sup>66</sup> As a result, there is, for Lacan, no place or 'ultimate' signifier which can 'locate' the subject a permanent position within the symbolic order, providing it some sense of concluded fullness. Instead, the distinction between the 'I' of the statement (the enunciated, grammatical 'I') and the position of enunciation (the unconscious 'I') serves to expose how the subject is, for Lacan, irreducibly 'split'. McGowan summarises:

The failure of the speaking being to coincide with itself becomes evident when one says, 'I am I.' The simple statement of identity does signify identity, but it simultaneously signifies difference through the existence of the two terms in the statement. The speaking subject must separate itself from itself in order to identify itself – Lacan refers to these two entities as the subject of the enunciation and the subject of the statement – and this necessity bespeaks the self-division of subjectivity along with the centrality of the unconscious for the subject.<sup>67</sup>

This self-division is brought to bear in the 'liar's paradox'.<sup>68</sup> This posits that when a subject asserts: 'I am a liar', we can begin to see the distinction, or, rather, the asymmetry, between the enunciation and enunciated. If we believe the content (the enunciated), then we have no reason to believe the position from which it is spoken (the

enunciation). In effect, the gap *between* the content and the position is only maintained by a final acceptance of the content. Alternatively, however, we can uphold the inherent ‘gap’ between the enunciation and enunciated as constitutive of the subject itself.

Certainly, such a ‘gap’ does not present the subject as ‘non-existent’, rather it points to how existence is both inconsistent and itself predicated on the formal questioning of this existence. Here, Žižek frequently refers to the ‘position’ held by cognitive scientists, for whom one’s neuronal activity constitutes the ‘inner-workings’ of one’s subjectivity. In so doing, ‘the cognitivist speaks from the safe *position* of the excluded observer who knows the relativity and limitation of all human knowledge, including his own’.<sup>69</sup> However, it is this inclusion (‘including his own’), which relies upon a disavowal: that is, the disavowal of one’s position from the statements (enunciated) that are made consequent to the very ‘gap’ which necessarily constitutes the scientist’s ‘excluded’ position (‘excluded observer’).

By locating the gap at the position of enunciation, we can elucidate on Žižek’s reference to the film *Blade Runner* (Ridley Scott 1982), and, in particular, the line, ‘I am a replicant’. Here:

it is only when, at the level of the enunciated content, I assume my replicant status, that, at the level of enunciation, I become a truly human subject. ‘I am a replicant’ is the statement of the subject in its purest ... In short, the implicit thesis of *Blade Runner* is that replicants are pure subjects precisely in so far as they experience the fact that every positive, substantial content, inclusive of the most intimate fantasies, is not ‘their own’ but already implanted. In this precise sense, the subject is by definition nostalgic, a subject of loss. Let us recall how, in *Blade Runner*, Rachael silently starts to cry when Deckard proves to her that she is a replicant. The silent grief over the loss of her ‘humanity’, the infinite longing to be or to become human again although she knows this will never happen; or (the reverse of this) the eternally gnawing doubt about whether I am truly human or just an android – these are the very undecided, intermediate states that make me human.<sup>70</sup>

It is in this way that the replicant's 'undecided, intermediate states' (the enunciated) identify the very position that underscores the location of a gap in the enunciation – in effect, acknowledging one's 'loss' of humanity, effectively avers one's humanity.

Again, the suggestion here is not to valorize this 'gap', but, rather, to conceive it as a constitutive feature in the subject's delimitation and in the inherent opacity that works to support any project of *Self*-discovery.<sup>71</sup> It is on this ground that we can conceive of the 'gap' as equivalent to Hegel's 'negation of negation' in that it exposes the illusory nature of the subject's inherent illusion – the sense that behind the subject, lies the subject's personal identity: 'a reflexive, self-related illusion, an *illusion of illusion itself*, an illusion which, precisely, lures us into thinking that what we see directly is just an illusory surface concealing some opaque depth'.<sup>72</sup> This illusion highlights how 'the subject is a cause for which no signifier can account', from which Copjec adds: 'Not because she transcends the signifier but because she inhabits it *as limit*. This subject, radically unknowable, radically incalculable, is the only guarantee we have against racism'.<sup>73</sup>

Therefore, in accounts of reflexivity and examples of 'reflexive racism', it is this 'unknowable', 'incalculable' subject which remains disavowed or deferred. As a consequence, examples of paranoia – directed at both the subject and Other – continue to shape an 'us' and 'them' rhetoric, matched only by the false promise that identifying one's guilt and acknowledging one's privilege can, in some way, help to distance one from the very opacity which underscores the Other's enjoyment. What is more – and what sits at the heart of this paper – is the contention that such actions ultimately make use of, and, thus, support, one's position (and power) of enunciation. In effect, when one acknowledges one's 'guilt/privilege', they perpetuate a formal logic of

disavowal/deferment that upholds their ‘position’ – in this case, a position of ‘whiteness’ grounded in a racial symbolic order, that privileges this position.<sup>74</sup>

It is in this way that we can consider how the Francis and Walliams/Lucas examples worked to maintain their subjective position of enunciation via an inherent disavowal and deferment. In the Francis example, we see a direct attempt to procure a ‘discovery of one’s true Self’ via an ‘inner journey’, which, if truly followed, would ‘confron[t] [Francis ...] with the void of subjectivity’.<sup>75</sup> That is, ‘the ultimate victim of the “journey into one’s Self” is this Self itself’.<sup>76</sup> In this way, Francis’s reflexivity ultimately relied upon an immediate non-reflexivity: a formal recognition of one’s racism that is then disavowed under a performative ‘subjective destitution’.<sup>77</sup>

Correspondingly, much like the former ‘Nazi-skinhead’, Walliams and Lucas’s deferment to the context in which their comedy was performed, seeks to provide a path of reflexive interpretation: a postponement of one’s intentions or actions *onto* the context in which they occurred in. As a ‘victim of circumstances’,<sup>78</sup> this echoes the ideological mystification in Zupančič’s, previously cited, neoliberal maneuvering.<sup>79</sup> Here, ‘Fantasies of victimization, of irresponsibility (it’s not my fault!), and of instrumentality (I had no choice!) protect the fragile agent from a confrontation with its accountability. They provide the imaginary cover for a more fundamental deadlock’.<sup>80</sup> Again, what this ‘cover’ provides is a distancing *between* the enunciated content and the position of enunciation it relies upon.

### **Masking and Obscuring: ‘there is no neutral medium’**

As highlighted in the previous section, the adoption of Lacan’s subject of enunciation and subject of the enunciated helps to elucidate on how examples of reflexive racism



work to maintain one's racism by reflexively relying upon a formal disavowal/deferment. What this paper further proposes is that such reflexivity obscures and masks the nothingness that both precedes but also structures the subject, so that the open propagation of the 'nothingness' inherent to one's private life and the attempt to either assert or divert one's (non-)racist actions, can, very easily, provide a safeguarded way of concealing and/or 'managing' the significance of one's racism.

Indeed, this path is echoed in Olusoga's account of the actor, Liam Neeson, who, in February 2019, retold the story of the rape of a close friend.<sup>81</sup> After hearing his friend's account, Neeson immediately asked what colour the rapist was, for whom the friend responded, he was black.<sup>82</sup> Neeson then recounted his desire to go out and find a 'black bastard' to murder in retaliation for his friend's rape. Commenting upon the interview, Olusoga noted:

What I imagine Neeson thought was that by being frank, open and self-critical, people would take his words in that spirit. He did, after all, tell a series of difficult truths. He acknowledged that both the way he had felt and the way he had acted had been 'horrible' and 'awful'. He saw the danger of the hatred he had harboured in his soul, and expressed regret. There was no lack of honesty. The problem was not a deficit of honesty but a paucity of honest self-analysis.<sup>83</sup>

While Olusoga's account re-employs its own (non-)reflexivity (what was Neeson to find in an honest self-analysis, beyond his 'racist' conviction?), the Neeson example formally matches the responses of both Francis and Walliams/Lucas, revealing how, 'as an apparatus of being', race can be conceived 'as a tool for *masking* the central lack of subjectivity', which so often results in racist violence.<sup>84</sup> Essentially, this propagates a path where 'the enunciator himself, ... accomplishes what, at the level of locution, is the object of his denunciation'<sup>85</sup> – i.e. a form of reflexive acknowledgment that upholds the racist assertion(s).

We can conclude this section by considering how the protection of one's position of enunciation relies upon an inherent disavowal of the universal position it seeks to maintain. Here, Žižek routinely recites the declared prohibitions of 'white identity', which, at its heart, seeks to avert 'the particular identity of white men', for whom 'the admission of their guilt, nonetheless confers on them a central position'.<sup>86</sup>

In fact:

The problem with the self-denial of white identity is not that it goes too far but that it does not go far enough: while its enunciated content seems radical, its position of enunciation remains that of a privileged universality. So, yes, they declare themselves to be 'nothing,' but this very renunciation to a (particular) something is sustained by the surplus-enjoyment of their moral superiority.<sup>87</sup>

This 'self-denial' of one's universal position is closely tied to the sense of enjoyment that is so routinely ignored in accounts of self-reflexivity, but which, nonetheless, works to maintain one's position of enunciation. Ultimately, what we see in examples of reflexivity (and, to a larger degree, the project of reflexive modernization itself) is a certain naivety, encapsulated in the neutral, universal position it seeks to uphold. Instead, what the split subject avers and what the position of enunciation and enunciated content present is the recognition that 'The whole point is that there is no neutral medium, no neutral way to inform the individual'.<sup>88</sup> There is no 'disengaged universality'.<sup>89</sup>

## **Conclusion**

It has been the purpose of this paper to critically explore how examples of reflexive racism were, in the case of both Francis and Walliams/Lucas, grounded in a reflexive inscription of disavowal and deferment. Importantly, this reflexivity was considered in

light of the contradictions between Lacan's subject of enunciation and enunciated. Certainly, this application, and this conclusion, do not seek to dismiss the significance of reflexivity outright. Instead, under the guise of reflexive modernization, as well as research which has considered reflexive non-racism, it is argued that pronouncements of reflexivity maintain an interpretive hegemony; one that inherently ignores the position of enunciation and which, in the end, simply provides an inefficient, non-reflexivity. In contrast, this paper has sought to divert from such accounts by exploring 'the intrinsic contradiction between the position of enunciation and of the enunciated, central to psychoanalytic theory'.<sup>90</sup>

To this end, it is proposed that it is in the very act of saying (enunciation), that examples of anti-racism/non-racism can work to maintain the 'position' from which such examples are made. Though the content of the enunciated may very well present a politically correct disposition and/or anti-racist assertion, there remains, in the position itself, an 'offensive surplus'.<sup>91</sup> Here, Yao highlights how 'simply avoiding certain configurations of words is [not] enough to prevent the offensive surplus – in its avoidance, it perpetuates the power of those configurations to guarantee that one is absolved from responsibility'.<sup>92</sup> In this case, examples of reflexivity rely upon 'a formally neutral, metalinguistic claim', one which 'is evidence of the effort to try to occupy the pure position of metalanguage at the level of the enunciation'.<sup>93</sup> In occupying this position, the management of those represented groups is maintained in their very absence – both in the performances themselves and the proceeding responses.

As a consequence, under reflexive racism, the other maintains a detoxified and silent role. In fact, 'the view that black people in Britain should be passive citizens, sitting at the back, not making a fuss and hoping that eventually change will come and discrimination will decline' is continued in Olusoga's frustration that, 'Asking white

comedians to learn about the poisonous history of blackface and not engage in racial impersonation ... is deemed to be crossing a line'.<sup>94</sup> Olusoga's account clearly alludes to the very dismissal which underscores the 'post-racial' occlusion of those being racialized. Instead, to make such an assertion falls foul of 'the phrase "playing the race card" ... [which] is now more often intended as a criticism of people of colour, held to be injecting victimology into otherwise neutral proceedings for their own individual or communal gain'.<sup>95</sup> In this paper, such assertions find their obverse in the work of Sennett as well as the emergence of an identarian ethos that simply propagates guilt and anxiety; paradoxically culminating in the (racist) individual as 'victim' (this can often be seen in examples of media 'witch hunts'). What is more, and what remains key to examples of reflexive racism, is how this anxiety can procure an ethical engagement with the other, and, more importantly, one's racism.

To do so, we should not ignore, or even dismiss, the examples of both Francis and Walliams/Lucas, but, rather, consider them for the political and ethical potential they allude. Commenting upon this potential, Žižek notes:

It is difficult to imagine a more trenchant political example of the weight of Lacan's distinction between the 'subject of the enunciated' and the 'subject of the enunciation': first, in a direct negation, you start by wanting to 'change the world' without endangering the subjective position from which you are ready to enforce the change; then, in the 'negation of negation', the subject enacting the change is ready to pay the subjective price for it, to change himself, or, to quote Gandhi's nice formula, to be himself the change he wants to see in the world.<sup>96</sup>

It is on this basis that the responses afforded by Francis and Walliams/Lucas fail to enact a 'negation of negation', instead, disavowing the subject's constitutive decentrement through a journey of 'Self-learning' or by deferring one's actions in

relation to the past. What is occluded through these forms is the very experience of one's vulnerability and anxiety.

While it has been the concern of this article to reveal how examples of reflexive racism work by either disavowing or deferring the subject's 'racism', through the propagation of a distance *between* the enunciated content and the position of enunciation, it is in relation to anxiety that the act of acknowledging one's racism, and, thus, one's position of enunciation, can hold an ethical imperative. Indeed, though Copjec refers to Lacan's account of anxiety as 'the "central affect" around which every social arrangement is organized',<sup>97</sup> for McGowan, such anxiety bears witness to an 'ethical position ... [that] necessarily involves the embrace of this anxiety'.<sup>98</sup>

To help situate such an embracement of anxiety requires us first to acknowledge the very enjoyment that underscores one's reflexivity. Indeed, it is the paradoxes which underscore this enjoyment that remain key. That is, by reflexively acknowledging the content of one's racism (enunciated), the *absenting* of one's position (enunciation) to this racism can be upheld, via 1): a process of disavowal, which endeavors to find one's Self through a journey of forgiveness; or, via 2): an equally paradoxical process of acknowledging the deferral that effectively postpones *the acknowledgment* of a subject responsible for their racism. In either case, we see the absence of the subject – the very 'gap' in the position of enunciation – reflexively played with and enjoyed. Thus, it is in reflexively acknowledging one's racism that one confronts and manages their inherent absence (as subject). In effect, this 'provides the subject with a sense of distance from the other and breathing space for itself'.<sup>99</sup> As is now clear, it is this very form of reflexivity – a form of reflexive racism – which this article opposes. In sum: it is, for the reflexive subject, their acknowledged reflexivity which supposes an absence that is disavowed or deferred.

This form of reflexive racism ignores the ethical importance that anxiety can avail for the subject. Indeed, rather than acknowledging absence, for Lacan, anxiety does not prescribe ‘a confrontation with *absence*’, but, instead, presents a confrontation ‘with an overwhelming *presence*’.<sup>100</sup> Note the change in direction that underscores this assertion: rather than facing an absence (which, in the above critique, is reflexively managed), anxiety confronts a presence where absence should be perceived; in effect, it confronts the lack of a lack. What is more, we can consider this relation between absence and presence by acknowledging that it may not necessarily be the case that anxiety occurs when, *something* that should be absent is present, but that anxiety occurs when one is confronted with the *presence of absence*.<sup>101</sup> McGowan further outlines how anxiety offers the opportunity to engage with the other in a way that does not seek to manage this engagement through false forms of toleration. As a result:

It is only the encounter with the other in its real dimension – the encounter that produces anxiety in the subject – that sustains that which defines the other as such. Authentic tolerance tolerates the real other, not simply the other as mediated through a symbolic structure. In this sense, it involves the experience of anxiety on the part of the subject.<sup>102</sup>

I add that what is being asked for in examples of authentic tolerance *is* the presence of the other’s absence – an absence that is anxiously shared by the subject. While this experience of anxiety posits a relation with the other, to what affect does it have for the subject who reflexively acknowledges their racism?

On the face of it, the examples of reflexivity that have been explored in the above discussion may very well be perceived as notable forms of apology. What they disavow and defer, however, is a form of authentic reflexivity that bears a real confrontation with the presence of shame in one’s racism: a presence that accurately conveys and elicits the subject’s (racist) position. The efficacy of this confrontation is

posited on the contention that, rather than being disavowed or deferred, the subject's acknowledged racism avers an ethical engagement that draws attention to the anxiety that occurs in the very presence of the object of racism itself: *their racism*. The concern here is not that the reflexive racist does not confront anxiety; on the contrary, the responses provided by both Francis and Walliams/Lucas reveal that some level of anxiety must have been faced, if only to elicit the subsequent responses they provided. What these responses prevented, however, was an authentic acknowledgement of their racism. It is this object that the reflexive racist is presented with, and which is then disavowed or deferred. In part, this maintains the gap in enunciation (the subject's inherent absence), by redirecting attention to the content of one's 'apology'. It is this absence which works to maintain one's position, by anxiously seeking the very content – the reflexive 'apology' itself – that, in some form or another, exonerates the subject's position. This exoneration is effective: ultimately, it absolves the identification of a 'definite subject', who could be responsible, via a reflexive position that either disavows or defers this 'definite subject' via the subject's (own) exoneration.

Thus, if we return to Žižek's example of the Nazi-skinhead, who openly acknowledges a lack of 'paternal authority', or, the excessive honesty of Liam Neeson's candid confession, which countered any lack of honesty with a demonstrably open confession; then, in both instances, we can begin to determine how examples of reflexivity continually mask the racist injunction. Does not the Nazi-skinhead reflexively acknowledge their lack, to then continue their racism? Equally, does not Neeson's reflexive acknowledgment allow him to abstain from the very acknowledgment of racism that any real admission would confront? In both cases, one's lack can be deferred (to one's upbringing) or disavowed (to one's 'honest' *self*-appraisal), thus eluding the very 'gap' constitutive of the subject. Instead, in these

examples, lack and absence, though acknowledged, are, nonetheless, reflexively managed via the enunciator's enunciated content (their 'reflexive response'). Accordingly, while reflexive racism can be perceived as accepting lack, it is always an acknowledgment predicated upon the absencing of lack (either disavowed or deferred), and, in so doing, fails to posit an embracement of anxiety grounded in the *presence* of an authentic form of acknowledgment that accedes one's racism. Ultimately, to achieve this embracement would require an encounter that confronts the anxiety inflicted in acknowledging one's enjoyment in racist tropes, stereotypes and fantasies.

Certainly, the argument here is not to promote examples of racism, but, rather, to fully acknowledge racism's presence and significance in relation to the subject and Other's enjoyment: to recognize how the very recourse to racism – of which examples of reflexive racism can be allocated to – serves to fill, mask or obscure the presence of absence in both the subject and social (symbolic) order. An ethical anxiety requires one to acknowledge how this advertence of absence can expose the presence of this advertence at play. This works against humanitarian discourses, examples of political correctness and accounts of multicultural tolerance that seek to mitigate against the very anxiety which defines the subject's lack, and, more importantly, the subject's relation to/with the Other. Indeed, 'This is why, for Lacan, the real point at which something in [... a] relationship can be effectively shifted is not the abolition of Otherness, or its absorption into the subject, but the coincidence of the lack in the subject with the lack in the Other'.<sup>103</sup> It is also why applications of psychoanalysis can prove effective in identifying false forms of (racist) self-deception.

Therefore, in drawing attention to Francis's self-discovery and Walliams and Lucas's contextual deferment, we observe the inherent failure to fully account for one's subjective responsibility; for, in the case of Lacan, to fully account for the *presence* of



the ‘gap’, the abstract nothingness, that begins with the irreducible ‘gap’ in enunciation – the very position from which one speaks.<sup>104</sup> What underscores such a position is the redirecting of a universal, based not on one’s particular ethnicity, culture or ‘self’, but ‘the fact that the subject is already completely “without roots” and that its true position is in the emptiness of universality’.<sup>105</sup> Grounded in the overwhelming presence of that which we find in shared absence,<sup>106</sup> such a position of enunciation does not negate the universal, but, rather, lays bare the very ‘gap’ that defines the subject’s universality.

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## Notes

<sup>1</sup> George Perry Floyd Jr. (1973-2020), was killed by a white police officer during an arrest on May 25, 2020.

<sup>2</sup> Milan, “What celebrities have apologised for using blackface so far this year?”; Criss, “Virginia isn’t a one-off.”; Harrison, “Colston Hall renamed to Bristol Beacon in wake of Black Lives Matter protests.”; Muldoon, “Academics: it’s time to get behind decolonising the curriculum.”

<sup>3</sup> Beck, Giddens and Lash, *Reflexive Modernization*.

<sup>4</sup> Žižek, *The Fragile Absolute*, 5-7.

<sup>5</sup> Sennett, *The Fall of Public Man*.

<sup>6</sup> George, “From alienation to cynicism” 363-368; Lacan, *Ecrits*, 23-86; Lacan, *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psycho-Analysis*, 154, 203-215.

<sup>7</sup> Bourdieu, *Homo Academicus*.

<sup>8</sup> Beck, Giddens and Lash, *Reflexive Modernization*.

<sup>9</sup> Giddens, *Modernity and Self-Identity*, 6.

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- <sup>10</sup> Bewes, *Cynicism and Postmodernity*, 194.
- <sup>11</sup> Suoranta and Vaden, *Wikiworld*, 35.
- <sup>12</sup> Suoranta and Vaden, 35.
- <sup>13</sup> Žižek, *The Ticklish Subject*
- <sup>14</sup> Žižek, *Fragile Absolute*, 9.
- <sup>15</sup> Žižek, 9.
- <sup>16</sup> Žižek, 9.
- <sup>17</sup> Emirbayer and Desmond, “Race and reflexivity,” 574.
- <sup>18</sup> Emirbayer and Desmond, 589-590, italics added.
- <sup>19</sup> Kowal, Franklin and Paradies, “Reflexive antiracism” 326.
- <sup>20</sup> Kowal, Franklin and Paradies, 286.
- <sup>21</sup> Kowal, Franklin and Paradies, 282.
- <sup>22</sup> Kowal, Franklin and Paradies, 285. As Governor of Alabama, Wallace had campaigned under the slogan: ‘segregation now, segregation tomorrow, segregation forever’. In view of his protest, Henry V. Graham of the Alabama National Guard asked Wallace to step aside, which he eventually did.
- <sup>23</sup> Here, the former U.S. President, Donald Trump, and his frequent wavering of the ‘facts’ as ‘fake news’ offers a contemporary example.
- <sup>24</sup> Bewes, *Reification*, 75.
- <sup>25</sup> Zalloua, *Žižek on Race*, 24.
- <sup>26</sup> Žižek, *Fragile Absolute*, 6, italics removed.
- <sup>27</sup> Žižek, 6.
- <sup>28</sup> Žižek, *The Plague of Fantasies*, 211.
- <sup>29</sup> Lentin, “Post-race, post politics”.
- <sup>30</sup> Seltman, “Too Much of Not Enough”.

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<sup>31</sup> Seltman.

<sup>32</sup> Machin and Mayr, “Antiracism in the British government’s model regional newspaper” 474; see also Cameron, *Good to Talk?*

<sup>33</sup> Machin and Mayr, “Antiracism in the British government’s model regional newspaper” 474.

<sup>34</sup> Machin and Mayr, 474.

<sup>35</sup> Gundy, “The False Promise of Anti-Racism Books”.

<sup>36</sup> Gundy.

<sup>37</sup> Žižek, *Violence*, 65.

<sup>38</sup> Sennett, *Fall of Public Man*, 9.

<sup>39</sup> Kapoor, “Žižek, Antagonism and Politics Now”, 11-12.

<sup>40</sup> Zallou, *Žižek on Race*, 21-42.

<sup>41</sup> Zallou, 38. Equally, there is a certain level of libidinal enjoyment in calling out the racist Other.

<sup>42</sup> Zallou, 36.

<sup>43</sup> Kowal, Franklin and Paradies, “Reflexive antiracism”, 323-324; see also Marques, “How politically correct is political correctness?”.

<sup>44</sup> Žižek, *The Fright of Real Tears*, 46.

<sup>45</sup> BBC, “Trisha Goddard ‘hated’ Bo’ Selecta portrayal”.

<sup>46</sup> Keithlemon, “Video”.

<sup>47</sup> Mannoni, “‘I know Well,’”. For an elaboration of the concept of disavowal see Rothenberg, Foster and Zizek, “Perversion and the Social Relation”.

<sup>48</sup> Mansfield, “Involved-detachment”, 132.

<sup>49</sup> Hides, “The Ideology of Performative Pedagogies”, 330.

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<sup>50</sup> Moses, “Little Britain removed from BBC iPlayer, Netflix and BritBox due to use of blackface”.

<sup>51</sup> Moses.

<sup>52</sup> BBC, “Little Britain pulled from iPlayer and Netflix because ‘times have changed’”.

<sup>53</sup> BBC.

<sup>54</sup> Davison, “Holly Willoughby and Phillip Scholfield admit they now ‘wince’ at ‘incredibly popular’ Little Britain blackface sketches after show is removed from streaming services to avoid offence”; see also Hope, “Yeah, But No!”.

<sup>55</sup> BBC, “Little Britain pulled from iPlayer and Netflix because ‘times have changed’”.

<sup>56</sup> Olusoga, “The Little Britain affair is a reminder of the UK’s long and toxic love affair with blacking up”.

<sup>57</sup> Taylor, ““There are more of you than there are of us””, 131.

<sup>58</sup> Taylor, 131.

<sup>59</sup> Taylor, 131.

<sup>60</sup> Žižek, “The Interpassive Subject”.

<sup>61</sup> This line of thinking follows McGowan’s contention that knowledge is founded in contradiction; essentially, knowledge *is* knowledge in contradiction (*Emancipation After Hegel*, 11-36). In addition, Žižek has considered responses to the COVID-19 pandemic as a form of ignorance grounded in a ‘will not to know’ (“The Will Not to Know”).

<sup>62</sup> Žižek, *The Parallax View*, 220.

<sup>63</sup> Žižek, *The Ticklish Subject*, 278.

<sup>64</sup> Lacan, *Four Fundamental Concepts*, 20, italics removed.

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<sup>65</sup> Lacan, *Ecrits*, 18.

<sup>66</sup> Žižek, *Fragile Absolute*, 110.

<sup>67</sup> McGowan, *Psychoanalytic Film Theory and The Rules of the Game*, 42.

<sup>68</sup> Higgins, “Forgetting Williams”, 130-131.

<sup>69</sup> Žižek, *Real Tears*, 15, italics added.

<sup>70</sup> Žižek, *Fragile Absolute*, 41.

<sup>71</sup> In contrast to Cartesian ‘unity’, presented as ‘I think therefore I am’, Lacan’s splitting of the subject dissolves any sense of unity, instead conceiving of the ‘I’ as both subject and object. The subject’s alien source is found in the unconscious, or, the discourse of the Other.

<sup>72</sup> Žižek, *Parallax View*, 220.

<sup>73</sup> Copjec, “Introduction,” 22.

<sup>74</sup> George, “Alienation to Cynicism,” 371.

<sup>75</sup> Žižek, *Welcome to the Desert of the Real*, 110.

<sup>76</sup> Žižek, 110. This quotation is adapted from Žižek’s criticism of Western appropriations of Zen Buddhism.

<sup>77</sup> Hook elaborates: ‘Subjective destitution names thus a condition in which one has precisely foregone the attachments to any potentially transcendent qualities. It is a state of ego-dissipation where one might truly hear and accept what is most terrible about myself and the symbolic-historical heritage that I am heir to’ (“White privilege, psychoanalytic ethics, and the limitations of political silence,” 500-501). Lacanian Psychoanalysis does provide its own subjective destitution, linked, instead, to Lacan’s traversal of the fantasy, as noted by Wood: ‘Subjective destitution involves acknowledging that *nothing* in me merits the Other’s desire. This shattering realization opens the space for the act, in which one risks everything by traversing the

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fantasy. The hero traverses the fantasy and recognizes that the (imaginary) treasure within her is worthless' (Wood, *Žižek*, 134).

<sup>78</sup> Myers, *Slavoj Žižek*, 104.

<sup>79</sup> Seltman, "Too Much".

<sup>80</sup> Dean, "Why Žižek for Political Theory?", 26.

<sup>81</sup> Olusoga, "What does Liam Neeson's 'primal urge' really tell us about racism?".

<sup>82</sup> For a critical elaboration of this incident, see Black, *Race, Racism and Political Correctness in Comedy*.

<sup>83</sup> Olusoga.

<sup>84</sup> George, "Alienation to cynicism," 360, italics added.

<sup>85</sup> Žižek, *Tarrying with the Negative*, 133.

<sup>86</sup> Žižek, *Sex and the Failed Absolute*, 355.

<sup>87</sup> Žižek, 355.

<sup>88</sup> Žižek, *Interrogating the Real*, 55

<sup>89</sup> Wood, *Žižek*, 18.

<sup>90</sup> Tupinambá, "Other Others," 133.

<sup>91</sup> Yao, "Learning to Tickle," 3.

<sup>92</sup> Yao, 6

<sup>93</sup> Boucher, *The Charmed Circle of Ideology*, 113.

<sup>94</sup> Olusoga, "The Little Britain affair is a reminder of the UK's long and toxic love affair with blacking up".

<sup>95</sup> Lentin and Titley, *The Crisis of Multiculturalism*, 76.

<sup>96</sup> Žižek, *The Universal Exception*, xiv.

<sup>97</sup> Copjec, "May '68," 106.

<sup>98</sup> McGowan, *Enjoying What We Don't Have*, 105.

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<sup>99</sup> McGowan, 113.

<sup>100</sup> McGowan, 133, italics added.

<sup>101</sup> To help explain: imagine an argument with a partner, where, in the midst of the argument, you exclaim that you do not want them to attend the family gathering, which has been organised at the weekend. Obviously, you still want this person to turn-up, but what happens when they don't? What happens when the *presence of their absence* results in the anxious reply: why didn't they turn-up?

<sup>102</sup> McGowan, 117.

<sup>103</sup> Zupančič, "The 'Concrete Universal'," 175.

<sup>104</sup> Historically, we can see echoes of this 'failure' in Arendt's account of Adolph Eichmann, who, in his 'banality of evil', deferred any subjective responsibility onto the Furher's orders and the subsequent Nazi bureaucracy (Arendt, *Eichmann in Jerusalem*).

<sup>105</sup> Žižek, "Multiculturalism", 44.

<sup>106</sup> McGowan, *Universality and Identity Politics*.

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