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# Rhetorical Failures, Psychoanalytic Heroes: A Psychorhetoric of Social Change

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RHETORICAL FAILURES, PSYCHOANALYTIC HEROES: A PSYCHORHETORIC OF  
SOCIAL CHANGE

by

KIMBERLY DANIELLE HUFF

Under the Direction of Angelo Restivo

ABSTRACT

This dissertation confronts the rhetorical discipline with the Real of an antagonism illuminated through its encounter with Lacanian psychoanalysis. Rather than eliding the desire of subjects in favor of traditional discursive rhetorical solutions, the psychorhetorical response I will propose locates desire and the subject in the moments where communication fails and seeks to make public the realization of desire. Through the psychoanalytic analysis of three acts of agency that comprise rhetorical failure, I will argue that rhetorical analyses of social change are actually not persuasive enough in their acceptance that social reality is entirely mediated. The cases will show that rhetorical failure is tantamount to psychoanalytic heroism. Utilizing what I call psychorhetoric, I will argue that rhetoric's investment in social change can be much enhanced by opening to the concept of a nonsymbolizable ethics of the Real.

INDEX WORDS: Psychoanalysis, Rhetoric, Lacan, Desire, Symbolic, Real, Imaginary,  
Persuasion, Social change, Poststructuralism

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SOCIAL CHANGE

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KIMBERLY DANIELLE HUFF

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## **DEDICATION**

I would like to dedicate this dissertation to my perfect mother, Dotty, the best father in the world, William, and Carlton, who holds my heart. Without you this dissertation would not have been possible. I love you more than you know.

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### Introduction: Psychorhetoric and Social Change

On August 30, 2006, in an assembly held at Jena High School in Jena, Louisiana, a student asked the assistant principal if black students were allowed to sit under a tree that historically served as a congregating place for white students. The assistant principal answered that the students could sit wherever they wanted. The next day, however, three nooses were found hanging from the tree. This incident set off a rash of racially-motivated events among the students of Jena High. A group of black students sat under the “white tree” in silent protest. On December 4, 2006, six black students heard a white student, Justin Barker, bragging about a racial assault. The students assaulted Barker, who sustained minor injuries. The six black students, now known as the Jena Six, were arrested and initially charged with felonies, including a charge of attempted murder.

In response to the unfair treatment under the law of the Jena Six, civil rights leaders, including Jesse Jackson and Al Sharpton, led a rally in Jena attended by adults and youth from all over the country. A news article in *The Louisiana Weekly* proclaimed, “Youth response to Jena 6 seen as a sign of readiness” (Williams 1). Reverend Al Sharpton declared, “Today is the day that the 21<sup>st</sup> century civil rights movement started in a little town called Jena, Louisiana” (quoted in Williams 1). Jesse Jackson said, “There’s a Jena everywhere. Jena is [Amadou] Diallo being shot 41 times in New York by police and they walk away; Jena is Rodney King in LA; Jena is why you have more Blacks in jail than in college in every state. It indicates – number one – that we never should have stopped marching in the first place because we are free, but not equal” (quoted in Williams 1). What the activists are asserting is that the structure of racism has not been altered in any fundamental way in the United States and oppositional action is still required.

While a number of civil rights leaders occasioned the events in Jena as a rhetorical situation calling a renewed civil rights movement into being in the United States, no such movement followed from the well-attended rally. Instead, the events in Jena directly confronted the public with the fact that the civil rights movement actually did little to alter the structure of racism in the United States. The immediate trauma of the event, however, did not stop various constituencies from rushing to Jena to give meaning to the events that occurred there. Arguments were staged concerning the symbolic meaning of the noose, the institutional racism of the criminal justice system, and in the case of white supremacist groups, calls for a white counter-action.

In this dissertation, I will argue that there is another response possible to events like those in Jena that directly faces the trauma of the event and aims at further confronting the subject with his/her own division in contrast to the usual symbolic overdetermination. This other response, however, is not one that engenders social meaning and comprises a message or argument in the usual sense of a reply to a rhetorical situation. Instead, its “agent” takes seriously the failure inherent in communication and social bonds and aims at the amplification of such failure. Rather than eliding the desire of subjects in favor of traditional discursive rhetorical solutions, the pschorhetorical response I will propose locates desire and the subject in the moments where communication fails and seeks to make public the realization of desire. In other words, while traditional rhetorical responses aim at finding a solution to social ills, such as racism, the solution I advocate in this dissertation consists in the abandonment of the possibility of a solution that could repair the problem of social abjection.

If the events associated with the Jena Six prove that racism is still alive and well despite the gains of the civil rights movement, the same events also face rhetoricians with a quite similar

problem. Rhetorical methods that rely on demystification or possibilities of resignification within purely discursive realms are not able to explain how structures, such as that of race, persist. Most rhetorical explanations of social change insist that social reality is purely discursive.

Psychoanalysis, in contrast, introduces the order of the Real, a blockage within the Symbolic that haunts all social relations and motivates all human action. Through the psychoanalytic analysis of three acts of agency that embrace the Real lack, I will argue that rhetorical analyses of social change are actually not persuasive enough in their acceptance that social reality is entirely mediated. Instead, utilizing what I call psychorhetoric, I will argue that rhetoric's investment in social change can be much enhanced by opening to the concept of a nonsymbolizable ethics of the Real.

In this introduction, I will first situate my project in relation to other characteristic responses to psychoanalysis offered by rhetoricians. While some admit that the rhetorical discipline and psychoanalysis exist in an antagonistic relationship, others embark on projects that attempt to build a bridge between rhetoric and psychoanalysis. In contrast, the response to psychoanalytic investigation that I advocate involves embracing an antagonistic division between the study of rhetoric and psychoanalysis while simultaneously admitting that both systems of knowledge are fundamentally lacking. After providing a brief review of those who employ Lacanian psychoanalysis toward the theorization of contemporary social change, I will explore a psychoanalytic critique of traditional rhetorical methods. Rhetorical theories of social change can take us right up to the point where communication and meaning falter, but psychoanalysis illuminates actions that exist beyond the limits of the rhetorical discipline. While purely discursive accounts are highly amenable to the discipline of rhetoric, Lacanian psychoanalysis poses a threat to the borders of the rhetorical discipline. Implicit in this critique is a defense of

my use of psychoanalysis as a useful method when theorizing possibilities for social change. Next, I will turn to accounts of psychoanalysis and social change within the field of rhetoric. Several rhetoricians have already begun working on the problematic relationship between rhetoric and psychoanalysis; however, this type of scholarly work is rare. Finally, I will introduce the three cases analyzed in the dissertation. The relationship between the cases advanced in this dissertation and social change is a paradoxical relationship that aims directly at social organization itself. Ultimately, I argue that when the limits of the rhetorical discipline are embraced, possibilities for and characterizations of social change can be envisioned anew through psychoanalytic investigation.

#### RHETORICAL RESPONSES TO PSYCHOANALYSIS

While there are a number of rhetoricians who take a position with regard to the preferred place of psychoanalytic theory in the rhetorical discipline in different ways, I argue that all these responses follow three characteristic forms. The first way that rhetoricians respond to psychoanalysis is to ignore it. For these rhetoricians, the rhetorical discipline is untroubled by psychoanalysis. In an entry on a blog titled “On Rhetoric and Psychoanalysis” found on *Blogora*, the Rhetoric Society of America’s blog website, one respondent answered that he “didn’t get a degree in rhetoric to study subjectivity, agency, jouissance, and ideology.” Instead, he chose rhetoric as an area of study to focus on language. Another respondent simply includes that psychoanalysis is too difficult and would take too much time to grasp. Hence, rhetorical theory and criticism do not require the use of psychoanalysis. Those who advocate this response to psychoanalysis generally hold that the rhetorical discipline is not lacking.

The second stance that rhetoricians take with regard to psychoanalysis is to ultimately reject the claims of psychoanalysis. For those who respond in this way, rhetoric and psychoanalysis exist in an antagonistic relationship, and psychoanalysis is viewed as the “enemy.” In the blog cited above, one respondent displayed “deep reservations about psychoanalysis.” His particular blog entry is titled, “hostilities.” For him, psychoanalytic theory lacks the rationality that rhetoric requires. Another respondent finds psychoanalytic theory fascinating, but “just not right.” This respondent concludes that “there’s reason to read it [psychoanalytic theory] and think that a good portion of it is predicated on an unsustainable notion.”

The responses that exist following this antagonistic form resemble what Christian Lundberg, in his article “Dueling Fundamentalisms,” calls “rhetorical fundamentalism.” Rhetorical fundamentalism requires conceiving of rhetoric as a system of knowledge that is totalizable, regardless of whether the totalization is forever deferred. Lundberg locates a sense of fundamentalism in rhetoric’s “proselytizing for a particular vision of the subject, communication, ‘public space,’ and ‘civic responsibility’” (“Dueling” 108). More generally, Lundberg argues that the discipline of rhetoric maintains a different definition of antagonism than that proposed by Lacanian psychoanalysis. For psychoanalysis, antagonism is an inherent stumbling block of sense that insists itself within every utterance. This is why Lacanian psychoanalysis rejects the idea that antagonism can be overcome through any method. The rhetorical discipline, in contrast, conceives antagonism as “resolvable provided sufficient attention is paid to the available means of persuasion” (Lundberg “Dueling” 108). The opposed relations to antagonism adopted by rhetoric and psychoanalysis become particularly clear when approached through the lens of social change. For rhetoricians, the stumbling block of the antagonism experienced in projects

for emancipation is to be negotiated via rhetorical invention. Psychoanalytic approaches to inequality involve embracing the antagonism as itself a political position. As a number of rhetoricians approach the limits of rhetoric, the perceived antagonism is displaced onto psychoanalysis as that which must be eliminated if the rhetorical discipline is to exist untroubled.

The third characteristic response of rhetoricians to psychoanalysis actually admits that all knowledge, including rhetorical knowledge, is fundamentally lacking. This response is the one made in different ways by Chris Lundberg, Josh Gunn, and Barbara Biesecker. Unlike the first two responses, these rhetoricians find that psychoanalytic theories and vocabulary can enhance rhetoric, especially through bringing the rhetorical discipline more in line with newer poststructuralist conceptions of the subject and agency. In effect, this third response is akin to using the language and concepts found in psychoanalysis to do the work of rhetoric. For example, in “Enjoying God’s Death: *The Passion of the Christ* and the Practices of an Evangelical Public,” Christian Lundberg asserts the significance of his project as the use of the “vocabulary drawn from the *intersection* of rhetoric and psychoanalysis centering on the concepts of ‘trope’ and ‘affect’” to “provide insight into publics...” (388 my emphasis). Similarly, Barbara Biesecker claims that psychoanalysis “*both* makes visible the limits of a number of contemporary theories of rhetoric...and gestures toward strategies for overcoming them” (222).

While the third type of response to psychoanalysis admits a lack within knowledge, it ultimately betrays one of the most important insights psychoanalysis offers. Attempting to find “intersections” between rhetoric and psychoanalysis in order to “overcome” the lack perceived within rhetoric treats antagonism in much the same way as the second response that completely rejects psychoanalysis. Lundberg criticizes “rhetorical fundamentalism” for its misrecognition of

Real antagonism, but the attempt to repair the lacks in rhetoric through the addition of psychoanalysis commits a similar error. Even those who champion psychoanalysis as a useful method within rhetoric end up treating antagonism as something that can be overcome.

Opposing my project to all three characteristic responses to psychoanalysis, I argue that we gain something altogether different if we approach rhetoric and psychoanalysis as antagonistic and lacking. The rhetorical discipline meets its limits when rhetoricians attempt to explain phenomena that resist meaning and sense. As a discipline concerned with communication, rhetorical concepts and terms fail to explain the necessary failure of communication in positive terms. Psychoanalysis, on the other hand, focuses attention on precisely those instances where communication fails and the Real (antagonism) keeps insisting.

One example of the limits of rhetoric and the unshakable antagonism between rhetoric and psychoanalysis is the way that each theoretical framework treats the figure of the queer, which is explored in greater detail in chapter three of this dissertation. Psychoanalytic theorists, such as Lee Edelman, define the queer as representing nothing other than the necessary failure of communication. Queer is not an identity, but instead it is that which disturbs the process of identification. While psychoanalysis offers the vocabulary required to discuss the lack in positive terms, rhetoricians have only ever been able to approach “queer” through the negative. For example, “queer” rhetoricians often argue that “this is *not* a queer text because...” From Ellen DeGeneres to *Will and Grace* and from “coming out” narratives to media representations of homosexuality, many rhetoricians have shown us that the only conceivable way to define what a “queer text” *is* involves defining what it is not. The purpose of this example is not to criticize the rhetorical discipline for not being able to say it all, but rather, to argue for the acceptance that no system of knowledge can say it all. Further, refusing to admit a lack within rhetorical knowledge

blinds us to thinking social change in ever new and paradoxical ways. The following section highlights another road to social change that aims not at change within the social, but rather at changing the terrain of the social itself. While the rhetors investigated by the rhetorical discipline make various arguments over either wanting an equal “piece of the social pie” or arguing that the recipe for the “pie” should be altered to make the pie better, psychoanalytic “agents” insist through their acts that society is missing a key ingredient that is required to make pie at all. Further, that missing ingredient does not and can never exist.

#### PSYCHOANALYSIS AND SOCIAL CHANGE

Although Lacan rarely gave his linguistic reading of Freud’s psychoanalytic theory a political telos, many have theorized various ways to push Lacan’s insights into the service of progressive social change. Perhaps none are more well-known than Slovenian Slavoj Žižek, who combines the insights of Lacan with those of Marx and Hegel to provide a rather sophisticated theory of ideological critique. Particularly instructive for Žižek are Lacan’s unique definition of the subject, as well as the intersections of Lacan’s Imaginary, Symbolic, and Real orders.

While Lacan’s early work focused on the constitution of the subject as a result of the opposition between the Imaginary and Symbolic orders, Lacan’s later work shifted to a conception of the subject as an effect of the division of the subject between the Symbolic and the order of the Real. The Imaginary order is the order of binary relations, and it is most directly theorized in Lacan’s “mirror stage.” In this stage, the infant identifies with an image in the mirror. This image, however, is a coherent image that belies the actual lack of coordination of the young child. According to Fredric Jameson, “Whatever else the mirror stage is, indeed, for



Lacan it marks a fundamental gap between the subject and its own self or *imago* which can never be bridged” (353). The “mirror stage” comprises the subject’s first alienation.

Lacan repeatedly notes that the order of the Imaginary cannot be thought independently of the Symbolic. The Imaginary order, however, continues to persist in identification. Again, according to Jameson:

As with the axis of Imaginary space, we must again try to imagine something deeply sedimented in our own experience, but buried under the adult rationality of everyday life (and under the exercise of the Symbolic): a kind of situational experience of otherness as pure relationship, as struggle, violence, and antagonism, in which the child can occupy either term indifferently, or indeed, as in transitivity, both at one. (356)

Hence, the child’s first identifications are of the order of the Imaginary.

The advent of the subject that Lacan will refer to as the “divided subject” will emerge with the child’s accession to the Symbolic order (the order of language). The divided subject involves two lacks. First, following Freud, Lacan argues that the moment the child enters the Symbolic order as a sexed subject, he/she loses the mythical experience of original satisfaction and absolute *jouissance* with the mother. The death drive is inaugurated as a drive to return to this mythical state of satisfaction that is forever lost to the subject. In the words of Paul Verhaeghe, “From the moment an organism becomes capable of reproducing itself in a sexual way, it loses its individual immortality and death becomes an unavoidable necessity. At birth, the individual loses something and this loss will be represented later on by all other substitute objects” (“Causation” 169). This primary lack corresponds to Lacan’s notion of the Real order, and the substitute objects that are circled by the drive are known by Lacan as *objects a*.

The second lack Lacan argues constitutes the divided subject is the lack in the signifying chain of the Symbolic (big Other). When the child enters the Symbolic order, he/she must identify and attempt to communicate through signifiers that are never quite up to the task. In language, the subject is confronted with the abyss of the desire of the Other. According to Verhaeghe, “In Lacanian terms, this reads that the subject, confronted with the enigma of the desire of the Other, tries to verbalise this desire and thus constituted itself by identifying with the signifiers in the field of the Other, without ever succeeding in filling the gap between subject and Other” (169). Hence, desire can never be completely expressed or satisfied.

For Lacan, the interaction of the two lacks is not a complementary interaction. Lacan describes the interaction, “It is a lack engendered from the previous time that serves to reply to the lack raised by the following time” (quoted in Verhaeghe “Causation” 170). The failed interaction of the two lacks accounts for the unavoidable blockage of the Real within the Symbolic order, and it coincides with Lacan’s famous statement that there is no sexual relationship. At the same time, however, the interaction of the two lacks within the Symbolic also accounts for the appearance of choice in the Symbolic instead of complete determinism. The Symbolic lack is situated in the chain of signifiers and the lack between them. This is the level of law in which the signifier represents the subject for another signifier. Underneath the chain of signifiers is the primary lack that corresponds to Lacan’s Real order characterized by a lack of a signifier. “Hence the always missed encounter, due to the lack of a signifier as meeting-point” (Verhaeghe “Causality” 172).

Verhaeghe describes the interaction between the two lacks in the following way: “The interaction between the two levels consists in the never ending attempt of the chain of signifiers to produce an answer to the real. This attempt fails and results in the exact opposite: the more

signifiers produced, the further one moves away from this real” (“Causality” 173). The order of the Real is what lends to the subject a choice; however, that choice has everything to do with the position the subject takes in relation to the desire and Real *jouissance* of the Other. In what follows, it will become clear that those who use psychoanalysis to theorize possibilities for social change are primarily concerned with the position the subject takes with regard to the Real lack, which is the lack that opens the space for the indeterminacy of the subject and its interventions in the Symbolic order.

In the *Sublime Object of Ideology*, Žižek turns to Lacan’s graph of desire from his *Écrits* to explain why poststructuralist critiques of ideology are not sufficient to explain how ideologies capture our desire beyond symbolic interpellation. While poststructuralist ideological critique concerns itself with the contingency and indeterminacy of the subject and the partiality involved in every universal positing (the bottom level of the graph), Lacan enables critics to recognize that the order of the Symbolic or (big Other) is itself lacking. The lack in the big Other confronts the subject with the abyss of its desire. When the body is submitted to the order of symbolic identification, its *jouissance* is evacuated. In the words of Žižek:

Its general result is clear: by being filtered through the sieve of the signifier, the body is submitted to *castration*, enjoyment is evacuated from it, the body survives as dismembered, mortified. In other words, the order of the signifier (the big Other) and that of enjoyment (the Thing as its embodiment) are radically heterogeneous, inconsistent; any accordance between them is structurally impossible. (*Sublime* 122)

This statement comprises Žižek’s definition of Lacan’s order of the Real and its Symbolic effects. It relates directly to the explanation of the incompatibility of the double lacks described

above. The nonsensical signifier of *jouissance* is what cannot be symbolized. It holes the Symbolic order appearing only in its effects and rendering the big Other inconsistent.

It is because of the inconsistency of the Symbolic order that we are able to maintain a distance from our symbolic identities. Through identifying his/her own lack with the lack in the Other, the subject is able to avoid “the total alienation in the signifier” (Žižek *Sublime* 122). The fantasy is the subject’s response to the traumatic inconsistency of the big Other. Through the fantasy, we are able to experience the world of meaning as consistent and not lacking. We also learn through fantasy how to domesticate the leftover of *jouissance* that remains after the imposition of the Symbolic order. For, according to Žižek, the evacuation of *jouissance* is never complete. There are always leftovers or fragments of the body that remain permeated with *jouissance*. The Freudian drive circulates around these sites of *jouissance* that dissect the body through the Symbolic order.

At this point, Žižek is able to arrive at a definition of ideological critique that accounts for the unbearable *jouissance* that renders the Symbolic order fundamentally inconsistent. Hence, “the last support of the ideological effect (of the way an ideological network of signifiers ‘holds’ us) is the non-sensical, pre-ideological kernel of enjoyment. In ideology ‘all is not ideology (that is, ideological meaning)’, but it is the very surplus which is the last support of ideology” (Žižek *Sublime* 124). Beyond the interpretation of the meaning of an ideological edifice, Žižek’s Lacanian reading of ideology adds another necessary procedure in the critique of ideology that involves “articulating the way in which – beyond the field of meaning but at the same time internal to it – an ideology implies, manipulates, produces a pre-ideological enjoyment structured in fantasy” (Žižek *Sublime* 125).

Žižek's Lacanian definition of ideology guides his interventions in possibilities for social change. His paradigmatic figure for understanding social abjection is the figure of the Jew. While, according to Žižek, it is not difficult to locate the ways in which the operations of displacement and condensation (metonymy and metaphor) lend to the symbolic overdetermination of the figure of the Jew (through the procedures advocated by poststructuralist theories), the way that the figure of the Jew captures our desire only becomes apparent through recourse to the social fantasy and the way that it structures enjoyment. Society displaces its own impossibility (Real or antagonistic split) onto the external figure of the Jew. This figure becomes a positive representation of social negativity. In Žižek's words, "Society is not prevented from achieving its full identity because of Jews: it is prevented by its own antagonistic nature, by its own immanent blockage, and it 'projects' this internal negativity into the figure of the 'Jew'" (*Sublime* 127). The majority of Žižek's work since the *Sublime Object* is invested in ways to confront society with the fact that social fantasies, such as the fantasy of the "Jew" preventing society from its own realization, are actually myriad ways of refusing the confrontation with the Real within every symbolization. The fantasy is only a screen masking a lack within the Symbolic. Through confrontation with this lack, Žižek advocates the possibility of altering the structuring principles of society.

Saul Newman begins "Interrogating the Master: Lacan and Radical Politics," with a similar orientation to that of Žižek. Newman states:

One of the central questions for the social application of psychoanalysis is whether it can promote significant social and political change, and to what extent it can provide a coherent theoretical foundation for a radical critique of existing political practices, discourses, and institutions. (298)

Žižek, Newman, and many others are interested in pushing Lacanian concepts to the service of social change. Newman finds his answers in Lacan's revision of Hegel's master/slave dialectic.

For Hegel, the master (who is recognized) is dependent on the identity of the slave (the one who recognizes). The answer to the opposition between the master and the slave is the universal State, through which the master and the slave recognize themselves in each other. According to Newman, it is any sense of reconciliation that Lacan rejects: "For Lacan, the self-recognition that was at the heart of the Hegelian dialectic is actually based on a fundamental misrecognition or *méconnaissance*" (Newman 302). The "fundamental misrecognition" owes to the fact that the subject's desire is not a desire for recognition. It is, instead, a desire opened up by the lack in the Other. This desire is never fulfilled, and it is only overcome in death. Rather than confronting the impossibility at the heart of desire, "one *objectivizes* it – that is, one invents an external impediment to it that functions as an excuse for it not being realized" (Newman 303). Therefore, Lacan's slave invents the master as an answer to the abyss of his own impossible desire.

Analyzing the operation of the dialectic through the lens of anarchism, Newman is able to show that revolutionary desire invents the State as external impediment to its impossible desire. In other words, in anarchism, "the identity of the subject is characterized as essentially 'rational' and 'moral' – that is, capable of a full realization of humanity – only in so far as the unfolding of these innate faculties and qualities is prevented by the State" (Newman 303). This operation hides the lack, inaugurated by the imposition of the signifier, in the subject.

In order to theorize a way out of the seemingly impossible conditions faced by the subject of social change, Newman turns to Lacan's theory of the four discourses. The four discourses,

introduced in Lacan's *Seminar XVII*, are that of the master, university, hysteric, and analyst, and they are different ways of understanding various social bonds. Lacan theorized the four discourses in response to the student strikes in France in May 1968. He argued that the demands of the students remained bound to the master as a result of the position the students occupied in relation to the double sense of lack described above. The four discourses are essentially four ways of dealing with the two lacks. One finds the level of desire at the top level of Lacan's discourse structure marked by impossibility, and *jouissance* is found on the bottom level of the structure marked by impotence. The four discourses will receive further elaboration in chapter two; however, it is important for Newman's argument that "these discourses show that the link between revolution and authority is constituted by a structural and indeed inevitable, relation between discursive positions" (Newman 304). Lacan is important for Newman because he argues that political discourses (and social movements) are trapped within the master's discourse and inevitably perpetuate it (305).

In the top level of the master's discourse, for example, one finds the master signifier (S1) in the position of agent. The master signifier is addressed to the other (S2). Here one finds the formal representation of the lack in desire, which correlates to Lacan's dictum that the signifier represents the subject for another signifier. Between the S1 and the S2 there is an impossibility that comprises the impossibility to symbolize the desire of the Other. On the bottom level of the structure, the level of Real *jouissance*, one finds the formula for fantasy. The subject, divided by language, stands in a relationship of impotence to the *object a*, or object cause of desire. In the master's discourse, the fantasy is repressed.

The significance of the four discourses will be the subject of chapter two; however, for Newman, the four discourses present a way of taking a position in relation to the Real that allows

social change. According to Lacan, the discourse of the analyst is the only discourse capable of breaking from the hold of the master. Newman explains “the role of analysis is to allow the subject to own his or her alienation and desire, by confronting him with his own unconscious fantasy – producing a gap between the subject and ego ideal – and to accept that the other, which supports this fantasy structure, is itself deficient, lacking and ungrounded” (307). In radical politics, Newman cites the discourse of the analyst in the realization that “the political is always radically *ungrounded, indeterminate and contingent*” (308). Newman finds such an “an-archic” politics in the contemporary anti-globalization movement. This movement is characterized by “a heterogeneous series of struggles that, although ‘quilted’ around a general politics of resistance to capitalism, does not have a definite master signifier...Paradoxically, what holds the movement together is a rejection of transcendental identities...” (312). Hence, Newman theorizes an action that does not invoke a master and remains open to the abyss of desire and the indeterminacy of the political.

Like Newman, Mark Bracher turns to Lacan’s four discourses to promote a theory of social change. Bracher’s project, however, is to liberate the practice of cultural criticism from the grips of the discourse of the university, a discourse that aims within the university to create subjects of a preconstituted disciplinary knowledge that these subjects are charged to reproduce. In *Lacan, Discourse, and Social Change*, Bracher valorizes the use of Lacanian theory not as a set of master signifiers, but instead as a way to map the ways that various texts operate on the desires of the audience in order to move people. With an approach that I will use heavily in this dissertation, Bracher places as much emphasis on the actual reception of a text as he does on the text itself. For example, Bracher locates Lacan’s discourse of the hysteric operating in the speeches of Jesse Jackson. Bracher shows how Jackson reveals the lack in the big Other and then



offers himself as a means to fill the lack experienced by his hystericized audience. None of the cases offered by Bracher, however, are able to break from the hold of the discourse of the master. It is precisely this break that the cases in this dissertation seek to exemplify.

Another more specific Lacanian analysis of social change is Kalpana Seshadri-Crooks's *Desiring Whiteness: A Lacanian Analysis of Race*. Much like Newman's link between revolutionary desire and authority and Žižek's questioning of the ways that discursive ideological formations capture our desires, Seshadri-Crooks turns to the structure of race to ask how a structure that is admittedly socially constructed continues to persist despite discursive demystification. She writes:

Racial difference...has no other reason to be but power, and yet it is not power in the sense of material and discursive agency that can be reduced to historical mappings. If such were the case, as many have assumed, then a historicist genealogy of the discursive construction of race would be in order: Foucault not Lacan, discourse analysis not psychoanalysis. But race organizes difference and elicits investment in its subjects because it promises access to being itself. It offers the prestige of being better and superior; it is the promise of being more human, more full, less lacking. (7)

According to Seshadri-Crooks, the master signifier, "whiteness," installs itself in the lack in the Symbolic inaugurated by the lack of a binary signifier for sexual difference. This master signifier orders all racial difference through reference to "whiteness" and secures racial differences through visible differences marked on the body.

The structure of race allows subjects of race to avoid confrontation with the Real by holding out the promise of wholeness through the master signifier "whiteness." Seshadri-

Crooks's explanation is pivotal in understanding why the structure of race is so difficult to give up. Her explanation also allows us to grasp why some resist race as social construction while remaining bound to a logic of visible phenotypal difference. Like Žižek and Newman, Seshadri-Crooks advocates separating the subject from the master signifier "whiteness" in order to confront him/her with the lack in the Symbolic that the fantasy of wholeness serves to mask. More specifically, hers is an attempt to "confound race itself as bodily reference" (10) through a "symbolic" passing "that will alter the subject's relation to the signifier in ways that risk his/her de-subjectification as a subject of race" (10).

Like Seshadri-Crooks, Lee Edelman utilizes Lacanian psychoanalysis to interrogate an oppressive structure. In *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive*, Edelman analyzes the structures of sexual identification. Instead of race, Edelman finds a similar desire for wholeness structured by a social ideological fantasy that he calls reproductive futurism. According to Edelman, reproductive futurism is the unconscious fantasy of all contemporary political structures. The fantasy promises full being to the subject in a future that is always to come. This future horizon of full meaning is represented in the figure of the innocent child of the future. Edelman locates the fantasy of reproductive futurism in all political interventions from both the right and the left.

According to Edelman, a politics invested in a teleological reproduction oriented toward the future necessarily abjects queers who are constructed as those who stand against the logic of reproduction. Like Žižek's "Jews," queers are burdened with embodying the external cause of the impossibility of society's completeness. Also like all of the authors cited in this introduction, Edelman's answer is to force society's confrontation with its Real or the antagonistic lack through the refusal of queers to participate in the fantasy of reproductive futurism. I will turn to

Edelman's argument in more detail in chapter three where I will explore the connections between the figure of the queer and that of the sadomasochist in contemporary society.

All of the authors reviewed in this introduction profess a Lacanian orientation; however, it is important to note that they all put Lacan to uses for which he did not necessarily intend. While I will turn to the texts of Lacan in this dissertation to explicate certain Lacanian concepts, I will also rely heavily on those who have pushed Lacanian concepts toward the service of social change. For example, Seshadri-Crooks writes, "My use of Lacanian psychoanalysis is not a passive 'application of Lacanian concepts to issues of race.' I have tried to work with the richest aspects of the theory, and in the process have found it necessary to wrestle with it, and to exert considerable force in inducing it to address race" (3). Similarly, Newman admits, "This may seem an improbable exercise at the outset. After all, Jacques Lacan was a psychoanalyst, not a political theorist – still less a political activist" (299). I have already mentioned that Žižek combines the concepts of Lacanian theory with others, such as those of Hegel and Marx. Hence, while it might seem that there is a lack of references to the actual Lacan in favor of others' uses of Lacanian insights in this dissertation, this strategic choice serves the purpose of entering into conversations with those who push Lacan toward contemporary understandings of social change.

#### PSYCHOANALYSIS VERSUS RHETORIC

Although the theories of poststructuralism are seemingly more amenable to the rhetorical discipline than those offered by psychoanalysis, psychoanalysis offers a vocabulary of subjectivity, social bonds, and communication that is unavailable elsewhere. Lacanian psychoanalysis also points to the limits of theories of resignification and discursivity on which many poststructuralist accounts are based. In "Bodies That Mutter: Rhetoric and Sexuality," Tim

Dean provides a particularly searing critique of poststructuralism's reliance on "rhetoricalism." He also posits the advantages of a psychoanalytic theoretical model in explaining the relation between bodies, sexuality, signifiers, and persuasion.

Directly confronting rhetoric, Dean writes, "In their failure to consider what in rhetoric or discourse exceeds language...rhetoricalist theories of sexuality effectively evacuate the category of desire from their accounts. Without desire there can be neither rhetoric nor sexuality..." (84). In other words, while Lacan's statement that the unconscious is structured like a language can be taken to signify that the unconscious is purely rhetorical, what is missed in this interpretation is that "although desire is 'in' language, desire is not itself linguistic" (Dean 84). Instead, desire is produced by failures in symbolization. As rhetorical failures are central to my argument, I will quote Lacan at length on this point:

In this interval intersecting the signifiers, which forms part of the very structure of the signifier, is the locus of what, in other registers of my exposition, I have called metonymy. It is there that what we call desire, crawls, slips, escapes, like the ferret. The desire of the Other is apprehended by the subject in that which does not work, in the lacks of the discourse of the Other, and all the child's *whys* reveal not so much an avidity for the reason of things, as a testing of the adult, a *Why are you telling me this?* ever-resuscitated from its base, which is the enigma of the adult's desire. (quoted in Dean 89)

Following from the lack inherent in desire is the subject of desire that emerges precisely when identification fails to be made. Dean argues that because poststructuralist accounts of the body, like Judith Butler's, theorize the subject in strictly imaginary and symbolic terms, these accounts

produce undersubjectivized bodies “so completely rhetoricalized they are devoid of desire” (Dean 90).

The difference Dean points to between “rhetoricalism” and psychoanalysis is that while they both recognize the power of language, psychoanalysis recognizes “the constitutive inability of language to say everything” (Dean 107). Without the limit of the Real, attempts at social change, like Butler’s performativity, conclude that the Real can be overcome. In Butler’s *Bodies That Matter*, she declares, “The rallying force of politics is its implicit promise of the possibility of a livable and speakable psychosis. Politics holds out the promise of the manageability of unspeakable loss” (quoted in Dean 104). In contrast, psychoanalysis asserts that it is precisely the “unspeakable loss” that cannot be overcome. Further Dean adds that “the ‘promise of the manageability of unspeakable loss’ thus perpetuates the common fantasy of a world without desire, perhaps even a world without homosexuals, certainly a world without psychoanalysis” (104). To this list I would add a world without rhetoric as rhetoric is concerned with the ability for speech to produce affect and desire.

In response to Butler’s “bodies that matter,” Dean proposes attention to “bodies that mutter.” Central to understanding Dean’s bodies is an understanding of the status of the body in Lacan’s later works. In “Subject and Body: Lacan’s Struggle with the Real,” Paul Verhaeghe traces Lacan’s shifts in his thinking of the body. Beginning in *Seminar XI*, Lacan shifts from viewing the body as an effect of the signifier to an aspect of the body as Real organism. From *Seminar XI* onward, Lacan differentiates Real *jouissance* from Symbolic *jouissance*. Real *jouissance* is located in the body as organism, and it is characterized by its function through drive. Symbolic *jouissance* is interpreted by the subject in a Symbolic way (87). This sense of a double lack explains Lacan’s definition of trauma “in those instances where the first lack can *not*

[sic] be interpreted in a phallic way, where the Symbolico-Imaginary misses its point and the Real keeps insisting” (Verhaeghe “Subject” 87).

For Dean, this double lack is apparent in Lacan’s definition of desire as “neither the appetite for satisfaction, nor the demand for love, but the difference that results from the subtraction of the first from the second, the phenomenon of their splitting (Lacan quoted in Dean 98). In other words, while organisms have needs, subjects have desires. Dean concludes, “It is because desire is distinct from need that sexuality is cultural rather than biological. Yet cultural insistence on various constituencies’ subjective ‘needs’ effectively eclipses desire” (98). Resisting the confusion of needs with desires, Dean’s “bodies that mutter” exist because the speaking subject, in psychoanalysis, is always a disembodied subject. According to Dean:

Whereas rhetoricalism pays attention merely to egos (bodies that matter through imaginary morphogenesis), psychoanalysis pays attention to bodies that mutter, recognizing in the ego a dangerously aggressive façade (“the projection of a surface”) that obscures the subject of desire and his or her suffering. Thus we might say that while the ego matters, the body mutters. (102)

Dean further clarifies that by muttering, he means “a form of signification that condenses and bears *jouissance* in a way that ordinary language cannot” (102). Further, “muttering comprises the symptom, which represents an unspeakable desire involving *jouissance*” (102). “Bodies that mutter” are central to the form of psychorhetoric I will advocate in this dissertation because they reveal a relationship between the use of language, the body, *jouissance*, and *object a*, the object cause of desire. A Lacanian psychoanalytic model of rhetoric involves more than the effect of

signification through a chain of signifiers, but instead, it elaborates a theory of discourse that contains both signifiers and *objects a*.

Taking seriously Lacan's category of the Real, Ernesto Laclau's notions of social antagonism and hegemony seem to offer a foray into psychoanalytic theory that troubles "rhetoricalism" very little. Hegemony, which Laclau argues is the basis for democracy, relies on the incompatibility between the category of the universal and the particular content that attempts to take its place. For Laclau, unevenness of power is constitutive of democracy. Further the place of power must remain empty. Politics becomes a battle between different "subject positions" over which will become a nodal point grounding all of the other elements in society by referring them back to itself. We can discern here a poststructuralist reading of Laclau's theory of hegemony. Žižek sums well the reception of Laclau's notion of hegemony:

*Hegemony and Socialist Strategy* is usually read as an essay in 'post-structuralist' politics, an essay in translating into a political project the basic 'post-structuralist' ideas: there is no transcendental Signified; so-called 'reality' is a discursive construct; every given identity, including that of a subject, is an effect of contingent differential relations, etc. (*Interrogating* 249)

The poststructuralist reading of Laclau's work is confirmed in his own essay, "Democracy and the Question of Power." In his argument concerning the necessity for the gap between the universal and the particular to remain open, Laclau adds, "One could present this argument in terms of the distinction between metaphor and metonymy ... Democracy is suspended in an undecidable game between metaphor and metonymy" (8). Regarding his argument about the constant renegotiation of the dichotomy universality/particularity involved in the hegemonic

operation, Laclau argues, “If we want to persist in this rhetorical image, we could say that, *sensu stricto*, the hegemonic operation is not only tropological but also of the order of the *cathachresis*, as there is no literal content to name what the *tropoi* refer to” (9). It seems as though the operation of hegemony, then, is purely rhetorical and open to interpretation through a rhetorical vocabulary.

In contrast to the poststructuralist reading of Laclau, Žižek adds that the notion of social antagonism offered by Laclau and Chantal Mouffe in *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy: Towards a Radical Democratic Politics* is often overlooked even though this notion “presents perhaps the most radical breakthrough in modern social theory” (Žižek *Interrogating* 249). Social antagonism is the Real limit of society. It is due to social antagonism that Laclau can say that society is impossible. This impossibility, consistent with Žižek’s own work, is externalized onto a regime that signifies “the obstacle which prevents society from coinciding with itself, from reaching its own fullness” (Laclau “Democracy” 9).

Žižek is dismayed, however, that Laclau’s theory of radical democracy does not also include Lacan’s theory of the subject as “the empty place of the structure which describes the subject in its confrontation with antagonism, the subject which isn’t covering up the traumatic dimension of social antagonism” (Žižek *Interrogating* 251). Instead, Laclau puts forth a theory of the subject as incompletely inhabiting contingent “subject positions.” Again according to Žižek, “as soon as we constitute ourselves as ideological subjects, as soon as we respond to interpellation and assume a certain subject-position, we are *a priori, per definitionem* deluded, we are overlooking the radical dimension of social antagonism” (*Interrogating* 251). The analysis of politics and hegemony for Laclau becomes an analysis of the battle between subjects who misrecognize the social antagonism as an obstacle imposed by the “enemy.”



The consequences of Laclau's approach to the operation of hegemony are apparent in his own resignation:

If hegemony means the representation, by a particular social sector, of an impossible totality with which it is incommensurable, then it is enough that we make the space of topological substitutions fully visible, to enable the hegemonic logic to operate freely. If the fullness of society is unachievable, the attempts at reaching it will necessarily fail, although they will be able, in the search for that impossible object, to solve a variety of partial problems. (quoted in *Contingency* 93)

Hence, political interventions that touch the Real and aim at the structuring principles of society instead of particular hegemonic battles are unlocatable in Laclau. Žižek concludes the “justified rejection of the fullness of post-revolutionary Society does *not* justify the conclusion that we have to renounce any project of a global social transformation, and limit ourselves to partial problems to be solved” (*Interrogating* 101). While Laclau's important concept of social antagonism as Real will be central to the argument for social change in this dissertation, this concept will be combined with the Lacanian definition of the subject that moves possibilities for social change beyond “partial problems to be solved.”

#### PSYCHOANALYSIS IN RHETORIC

In a 1998 book review in the *Quarterly Journal of Speech*, Barbara Biesecker hazards the claim that “Jacques Lacan will have already been the great theorist of rhetoric for the twenty-first century” (222). Reviewing the work of “new” psychoanalysts, such as Žižek, Joan Copjec, Peggy Phalen, and Renata Salecl, Biesecker offers that “this ‘new’ work on subjectivity, speech, and collective life *both* makes visible the limits of a number of contemporary theories of rhetoric

that foreclose, disavow, or devalue the speaking beings' affective attachments and the desire that puts them into play, *and* gestures toward strategies for overcoming them" (222). After reviewing the given works, Biesecker deploys her own "psycho-rhetorical" analysis of the Enola Gay exhibit at the Air and Space museum in Washington, D.C.

Biesecker's reading of the Enola Gay exhibit looks beyond the "positivity of the stated" (236) in preference to "that which refuses speech and hermeneutic assimilation" (236). She discovers that the exhibit serves as a symbolic response that in effect covers over the trauma inaugurated by the anxiety inherent in the move from the modern era to that of postmodernity. As a result of the waning reign of Lacan's big Other in postmodernity (experienced as the lack of a symbolic mandate and erosion of symbolic identities), the Enola Gay exhibit stages a perverse disavowal of lack that simultaneously elides desire. Biesecker's historical application of psychoanalysis is significant in that it replies to those, like Judith Butler, who argue that Lacanian psychoanalysis is grounded in an ahistorical bar of the Real. In fact, the opposite is true. It is the appearance of the Real blockage in the Symbolic that opens the space for contingency and historicity at all. According to Žižek, "Lacan forces us to make thematic the exclusion of some traumatic 'content' that is constitutive of the empty universal form. There is historical space only in so far as this space is sustained by some more radical exclusion" (*Contingency* 111).

Biesecker thus confronts rhetoric with the Lacanian Real. She treats rhetorical exigency as a trauma testifying to a lack that begs to be covered through symbolic intervention. What Biesecker's account does not purport to do, however, is to count as rhetorical an intervention that refuses the narrative symbolic intervention in favor of the magnification of the traumatic lack. The cases in this dissertation will highlight the magnification of lack as rhetorical intervention.

Very few have responded to Biesecker's call to take Lacanian psychoanalysis seriously within the field of rhetoric. Perhaps the first significant response was made by Joshua Gunn in his article, "Refiguring Fantasy: Imagination and Its Decline in U.S. Rhetorical Studies." The strengths of Gunn's article lie in its positing of the "political" implications of using psychoanalytic theory in the discipline of rhetoric. He writes that "if the plight of fantasy theme analysis tells us anything about disciplinarity, it is that there is a general stigma to using psychoanalytic theory for rhetorical criticism" (54). He uses as an example of this stigma the lack of responses to Biesecker's call. The reason for this stigma, according to Gunn, is that "a consideration of the language of the unconscious implies a secondary status for rational, deliberate argument, which is and likely will remain a favored object of rhetorical studies" (55). It is, then, a policing of disciplinary boundaries that necessitates the disavowal of the insights of psychoanalysis for rhetoric.

The weaknesses of Gunn's argument, however, can be situated through its valorization of Lacan's category of the Imaginary order. The Imaginary is ordered through binary relations structured through identification and opposition. According to Tim Dean, "No amount of subtle theorizing will get you outside a binary system if your model of subjectivity remains imaginary" (94). While the "mirror stage" in Lacan marks the subject's first alienation, one should not infer as Gunn does that "the task of psychoanalysis is to 'subvert' identity and to remind the subject that she is 'split'" (43). In fact, in psychoanalysis, the subject is nothing but this split, or in other words the subject emerges where interpellation fails. Gunn's reliance on the Imaginary register leads him to confuse Althusserian alienation with Lacanian separation. He concludes, "In this light, rhetorical criticism becomes a movement to demystify discourses that presume freedom and autonomy" (45).

In contrast, I have shown that the task of psychoanalysis is to prompt the subject toward separation, which is defined by Žižek as the realization that “the big Other is in itself inconsistent, purely virtual, ‘barred’, deprived of the Thing – and fantasy is an attempt to fill out this lack of the Other, not of the subject: to (re)constitute the consistency of the big Other” (*Contingency* 253). While the fantasy cannot be thought without recourse to the order of the Imaginary identification, its cause cannot be thought without consideration of the simultaneous workings of the Symbolic and Real orders as well.

A year later, in “Refitting Fantasy: Psychoanalysis, Subjectivity and Talking to the Dead,” Gunn makes another psychoanalytic intervention into the field of rhetoric. In his reading of television psychic, John Edwards, Gunn reconceives a “psychorhetoric” that involves attention to the Real, fantasy, and desire. In this essay, Gunn again misrecognizes the aim of psychoanalytic treatment. Gunn argues, “The therapeutic effect of psychotherapy depends on the discovery and the naming of the source of a symptom, thereby bringing it out of the order of the Real and into the Symbolic” (8). While Gunn’s “cure” is true of the early Lacan, one must look to the late Lacan to find that the symptom is conceived as a “kernel of the real” that resists dissolution through interpretation (Žižek *Sublime* 73). Instead of interpreting the symptom in Symbolic terms, the psychoanalytic “cure” involves the identification with the Real of the symptom. Lacan’s final definition of the symptom converted the symptom to *sinthome*, which is “a particular, ‘pathological,’ signifying formation, a binding of enjoyment, an inert stain resisting communication and interpretation, a stain which cannot be included in the circuit of discourse, of social bond network, but is at the same time, a positive condition of it” (Žižek 75). The *sinthome* is a symptom in the Real created by the subject as a self-made answer to the Real lack of the sexual relationship.

The *sinthome*, like the *object a*, belongs to the order of the Real. With regard to fantasy, Gunn points out that “scholars have yet to explore their underlying suasive force or magical pull for audiences in terms of psychological need” (11). I noted in the last section the dangers that inhere in confusing the needs of the organism with the desires of subjects. No psyche “needs” anything. In the following sentence, Gunn turns to desire: “Refitting fantasy with a theory of desire allows us to explain persuasion in terms of the ways in which individuals traverse the fundamental fantasy” (11). Invoking Lacan’s “traversal of the fantasy” as the end of psychoanalytic treatment, Gunn describes this process as the “rhetor’s ability to promise and hoard the *a*” (11). Instead, the end of analysis is actually marked by the subject’s realization that the Other does not have the *a*, that the big Other is in itself lacking. In regard to the *object a*, the subject that traverses the fantasy actually rejects the Other-created answer to the Real described by Gunn as the “rhetor’s ability to promise and hoard the *a*.”

In “The Royal Road Not Taken: Joshua Gunn’s ‘Refitting Fantasy: Psychoanalysis, Subjectivity and Talking to the Dead’ and Lacan’s Symbolic Order,” Christian Lundberg responds to Gunn’s version of “psychorhetoric.” In his response, Lundberg criticizes Gunn for his valorization of the Imaginary and Real orders over Lacan’s Symbolic. He writes, “Although Gunn demonstrates a facility in theorizing the relation of the Real to the Imaginary, a fellow Lacanian might ask about the status of the primary category of interest for the later Lacan, the Symbolic” (495). Lundberg rightly offers that Gunn’s account of the subject would benefit from a “fuller” account of the subject’s entry into the Symbolic. According to Lundberg, “This reading of Lacan would have the benefit of eliminating the naïve psychologism of solely intersubjectively mediated accounts of subject formation. This interpretation also has the benefit

of accounting for *jouissance* or enjoyment as a constitutive factor in the formation of and persistence of the ‘fundamental fantasy’” (499).

While I agree with Lundberg that psychoanalytic accounts that fail to give prominence to the position of the subject within the Symbolic order fail to fully mine the depths of Lacan’s insights, I do not agree that the Symbolic has primacy in Lacan’s topology. Where Gunn’s analysis might suffer from a valorization of the Imaginary, Lundberg’s solution to foreground “the role of the symbolic in the constitution of the desiring subject” to “open a path to think of the Symbolic as specifically tropological and, therefore, as a rhetorical phenomenon” (400), also suffers from a lack of attention to the Real. The Symbolic was not actually the “primary category of interest for the later Lacan” (Lundberg 495) as Lundberg argues. Instead, the later Lacan focused his attention on the relation of Real *jouissance* to all three orders.

My analysis will take a “royal road” not chosen by Gunn or Lundberg. My version of psychorhetoric will valorize the relation between Lacan’s orders of the Symbolic, Imaginary, and Real. I will, however, emphasize the roles of *jouissance* and desire in the three orders. Unlike Biesecker’s analysis, I will focus on acts which highlight the ruptures that occur when symbolization fails. While Gunn’s analysis theorizes the body as primarily Imaginary, Lundberg’s privilege of the Symbolic evacuates the Real in desire. In contrast, following Lacan, I will locate the subject’s cause in what does not work rhetorically. Like Dean, my analysis will pay particular homage to “bodies that mutter.”

## PSYCHORHETORIC

To elucidate the psychoanalytic relationship toward the lack in the Other and its implications for rhetoric, I will begin the dissertation with Lacan’s *Seminar VII: The Ethics of Psychoanalysis*,

specifically Lacan's rather novel interpretation of Sophocles's *Antigone*. According to Lacan, Antigone's decision to bury her brother, Polynices, despite the fact that Polynices was a traitor against the laws of Creon and the Greek city-state, is an ethical act *par excellence* based on Antigone's *persistence* in embodying the place of lack. This is a location "between two deaths" in which pure desire (the desire for death) is made visible. In Lacan's words, Antigone occupies a "place of desire inasmuch as it is the desire for nothing, the relationship of man with his lack of being" (quoted in Kowsar 98). Severing her ties with her community by burying her brother, Antigone made an *impossible* choice, a choice that was actually the only *free* choice under the circumstances in which she found herself.

The ethical stance of Antigone has political implications, as well as implications for rhetorical theory. Žižek describes the ethical subjective stance as one that leads its agent toward self-liberation. Through the ethical stance, "we abandon the fantasmatic Otherness which makes life in constrained social reality bearable" (*Fragile* 158). Concerning the psychoanalytic ethical position, Kowsar states that "it is as if the subject located in this space is endowed with a penetration of vision that is supremely tragic, which is also to say that it is tantamount to ethical lucidity" (97). Joan Copjec maintains, "The sacrifice of the only thing that could not be sacrificed, the exception to the list of sacrificable things, is described by Lacan as the ethical gesture *par excellence*, for what it surrenders, finally, is the *pedestal* that allows one to raise oneself above the battleground of decision and action" (*Imagine* 78).

Perhaps no figure in the political arena in United States history exemplifies Lacan's reading of *Antigone* more than anarchist Emma Goldman. In *Seminar VII*, Lacan says of Antigone:

We know very well that over and beyond the dialogue, over and beyond the question of family and country, over and beyond the moralizing arguments, it is Antigone herself who fascinates us, Antigone in her unbearable splendor. She has a quality that both attracts us and startles us, in the sense of intimidates us; this terrible, self-willed victim disturbs us. (247)

Similarly, Emma Goldman is just such a fascinating, dangerous, and intimidating figure.

Through fully identifying herself with *das Ding* (the Real Thing), Goldman reveals the impotency of the Symbolic order itself. Because of the relationship Goldman maintained toward the structuring void of society, attempts to make use of Goldman for contemporary political or rhetorical purposes fail to recognize that her ethical stance is not one that can or *should* be integrated into change within the structure of symbolic discourse. On the contrary, the lesson to take from Goldman today is the very resistance to Symbolic interpretation that plagues those who try to appropriate her radical activism for social ends. For example, Oz Frankel describes Emma Goldman as one who is appropriated today as “a fighter for free speech, a communitarian, a libertarian, an anticommunist, an extreme individualist, a precursor of modern feminism, a true subversive, a harmless visionary expelled for voicing innocent ideas, a suffering victim, a cheerful, life-affirming woman, or an amusing, sharp-tongued, Jewish grandmother” (903). As Goldman’s grave now protrudes like a wound on the landscape of Chicago in the country she still calls home, Goldman’s legacy is to forever insist on the political valence of the void of Antigone’s tomb.

The case of Emma Goldman raises questions regarding how subjects can be led to recognize the function of the lack in the Other and reorder their relationship to their own



alienation. In chapter two, I will turn to Lacan's discourse of the analyst and its relation to lack. I will turn to Vernon Johns as an example of the discourse of the analyst in the service of social change. Vernon Johns was predecessor to Martin Luther King, Jr. as minister of Dexter Avenue Baptist Church in Montgomery, Alabama in 1948. Though he was a legend in his own time, Johns is barely remembered today. Scholars of Johns insist that he is the actual father of the civil rights movement; however, I will argue that he was much more radical. Johns's activism, disavowed by those who celebrate him, did not aim at changes in laws or policies, but instead Johns aimed at changing the very terrain (ideals, desires, and *jouissance*) of the struggle for civil rights. I will argue that in keeping with Lacan's discourse of the analyst, Johns was able to position himself as the *object a* of the parishioners. Separating the master signifiers (S1) from their endless rationalizations (S2) by serving as the stumbling block (*object a*) against which his audience (\$) fell on their way to fulfill their unconscious desires, Johns played the role of analyst at Dexter. Johns's role as analyst helps to explain both why he was consistently fired from his preaching jobs in his own time, as well as why he is absent from most narratives of the civil rights movement today.

The discourse of the analyst leads one to the end of the psychoanalytic process, what Lacan calls the traversal of the fantasy and the identification with the *sinthome*. According to Lacan, fantasy structures the barred subject's relationship to the object cause of his/her desire. Extrapolating the fundamental fantasy to the level of the social (through recourse to the individual subject's relationship to the big Other), Žižek explains the social fantasy as the attempt to fill the lack within the Symbolic. In the words of Žižek, the lack in the Symbolic "opens the space for desire and makes the Other (the symbolic order) inconsistent, with fantasy as an attempt to overcome, to conceal this inconsistency, this gap in the Other" (*Sublime* 124).

In *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive*, Lee Edelman asserts that the queer cannot achieve full social equality or citizenship in the political order because the socio-political order in the West is based on a fantasy he calls reproductive futurism. Because queer practices necessarily threaten the order of reproduction through their constitutive lack of (re)productive value, the queer must necessarily inhabit the negative space that simultaneously offers “society” its positive identity. Hence, attempts made by gay populations to achieve a sense of benign sexual difference in the current society are in vain. Edelman instead suggests that queers should accept the structural position afforded them by society. Acceding to this position threatens society and allows access to *jouissance* (pleasure that cannot be tolerated by consciousness). Edelman calls the acceptance of this negative structural position *sinthomosexuality*. The figural position of the *sinthomosexual* is correlative to the identification with the *sinthome* that occurs at the end of analytic treatment.

In chapter three, I will propose the performance art of controversial, sadomasochistic performance artist, Ron Athey, as a non-fictional example of one who accedes to the *sinthomosexual* position within his performances. Through the case of Ron Athey, I will explore the notion of temporality in activism, as well as the importance of performance art as a medium of agency that aids the rejection of futurity so central to Edelman’s analysis. Athey’s performances highlight not only the identification with the *sinthome*, but also how one can survive this rejection through recourse to a type of agency that insists only on the *impossible* present moment.

In the conclusion, I will use the controversial case of comedian Katt Williams to demonstrate that all three cases analyzed in the dissertation are actually three different ways of confronting the same phenomenon. Katt Williams’s decision to attend the BET Hip-Hop Awards

with a noose around his neck as a fashion accessory in response to the Jena Six caused an outcry among a large number of his audience. I will use Williams's action to highlight a condensation of the ethical act exemplified by Antigone, the discourse of the analyst, and the identification with the *sinthome* within one figure. Williams makes productive use of the impossibility of communication and confronts rhetoric with the abyss of desire. While simple to view as a rhetorical failure, Williams's case shows us that rhetorical failure is tantamount to psychoanalytic heroism. In all, the dissertation argues that allowing psychoanalysis into the purview of rhetoric illuminates the fundamental antagonism of the Real and gestures toward its confrontation in the service of social change.

## Chapter One

### Beautiful Radiant Things: Emma Goldman and Lacan's Antigone

*Morality has no terror for her who has risen beyond good and evil. And though morality may continue to devour its victims, it is utterly powerless in the face of the modern spirit that shines in all its glory upon the brow of man and woman, liberated and unafraid. – Emma Goldman*

In a 1989 book review in the *Quarterly Journal of Speech*, Karlyn Kohrs Campbell issued an indictment of traditional rhetorical theory for being either unwilling or unable to adapt to the rhetoric of women, specifically women engaged in protest. Campbell urged rhetoricians to abandon the project of simply applying traditional theories of rhetoric to women and instead advocated a rethinking of the assumptions underlying rhetorical theory and criticism (214). One example Campbell uses to ground her argument is none other than anarchist Emma Goldman. She states, “Emma Goldman persuaded few to embrace anarchism, but her rhetorical skills frightened those in power because she captured popular attention and vividly showed audiences the full implications of individualism while identifying many points at which the American creed was hypocritical if not self-contradictory” (213). Campbell follows her statement about Goldman with an endnote referring to an article published a year earlier by Martha Solomon. In this article, “Ideology as Rhetorical Constraint: The Anarchist Agitation of ‘Red Emma’ Goldman,” Solomon finds Goldman’s rhetoric to be inherently confounded by her anarchist ideology creating for Goldman an “unattractive rhetorical persona” (184). Campbell retorts, “The recently published analysis of Goldman’s rhetoric provides no explanation of why anyone should have perceived Goldman as a threat” (220).

While a great deal of rhetorical scholarship since 1989 works to better incorporate women rhetors and the rhetoric of protest into the rhetorical canon, it is only Martha Solomon who has published extensively on the rhetoric of Emma Goldman. In the article by Solomon cited above, a rhetorical biography of Emma Goldman, and a book that analyzes the autobiographies of women, including Goldman's, as rhetorical strategy, Solomon always reaches the same final conclusion: Emma Goldman was a rhetorical failure. Interestingly, however, Solomon begins her article, "Probably no female rhetor in the early twentieth century enjoyed more visibility or gained as much notoriety as Emma Goldman, whose anarchist agitation gained her the epithet 'Red Emma' in the popular press" ("Ideology" 184). She ends the opening paragraph admitting that J. Edgar Hoover called Emma Goldman a danger to the community, and the *New York Times* called one of Goldman's convictions "a public service" (184).

Evidence abounds that Goldman was in fact perceived as a threat in her own time. It is difficult to find any description of Goldman in print that does not consider Goldman's perceived danger to society before setting out on a mission to weave her into the American quilt of history. This chapter seeks to understand the antagonism perceived by Solomon and many others between Goldman's "rhetorical ineffectiveness" and the danger she presented in her own time and continues to present in her posthumous career today. While not everyone agrees with Solomon's conclusions concerning Goldman's rhetorical failure, most find the attempt to explain the trauma Goldman incited in her publics perplexing. Not arguing against Solomon's assessment of Goldman's rhetoric, I argue instead that a different theoretical lens is required to understand how one could fail so miserably as a rhetor while remaining a traumatic threat to the society one seeks to alter.

While Emma Goldman never came close to convincing an early twentieth-century society that was desperate for order to accept her “beautiful ideal” of anarchism, many of her contemporaries found her extremely threatening. However, an analysis of the content of Goldman’s published essays and lectures reveals that Goldman was too far left for most members of her audiences. She would accept nothing less than anarchism, and she was not above haranguing her audiences for their lack of commitment and intellectual clarity. Goldman demonstrated disdain for the masses, and she could not find common ground with many of the other progressive reformers of her time. I will argue that an explanation of Goldman’s threat to society cannot be directly located in the content of her texts. Instead, one must look to the figural location to which Goldman acceded in relation to the structure of early twentieth-century society to understand her perceived danger. Although many scholars from a number of disciplines continue to search endlessly for the “true meaning” of Emma Goldman through proliferating interpretations of her texts, I will argue that Goldman’s true sense can only be found by considering her resistance to sense itself.

In this chapter, I will analyze Goldman through the lens of Jacques Lacan’s reading of Sophocles’s *Antigone* in his *Seminar VII: The Ethics of Psychoanalysis*. Lacan turns from the content of Antigone’s act to the place her act occupies within the structure of Greek society. Through an act that threatened Greek society from within its own logic, Lacan argues that Antigone’s act serves as a model for the ethics of psychoanalysis, which also stands for the end of the psychoanalytic process. Applying Lacan’s novel reading of *Antigone* to Emma Goldman, a truly tragic heroine, not only illuminates the political consequences of a psychoanalytic ethics, but it also serves as a response to the chasm, perceived twenty years ago by Campbell, between the trauma of a proven persuasive act and the insufficiency of its rhetorical explanation. I will

argue that the lesson activists and scholars can take from Goldman is her *persistence* in forever insisting on the void of Antigone's tomb.

First, I will provide the necessary background information required to understand Goldman's version of anarchism. Next, I will discuss reactions to Emma Goldman both in her own time and today. I will provide evidence of Emma Goldman's perceived danger to society. I will then explain Lacan's interpretation of Antigone and her ultimate ethical act. I will also consider how Lacan's reading differs from two other interpretations of *Antigone*, one by Hegel and another by Judith Butler. This difference will highlight a similar incongruence between the interpretation I offer of Emma Goldman and that offered by Martha Solomon and other scholars of Goldman's rhetoric and activism. I will conclude by exploring the similarities between Lacan's Antigone and Emma Goldman and what these similarities contribute to rhetorical understanding.

#### EMMA GOLDMAN'S ANARCHISM

Emma Goldman, an immigrant from Russia, arrived in the United States in 1885 full of hope. Her hopes were soon dashed, however, as she was immediately exposed to the realities of working-class life. Goldman considered herself to be born with a striving toward freedom. She wrote to a friend, "If I had not been born with the love of freedom and the intense hatred of injustice, I do not believe that I would have become what I am" (quoted in Wexler 3). Her political activism, however, was born with the wrongful conviction and execution of five anarchists for the deaths of several policemen at a labor demonstration at Haymarket Square in Chicago in 1886. The "Haymarket martyrs," as they are now known, seemed to light a fire in Emma Goldman. She recalls, "The next morning I woke as from a long illness...I had a distinct

sensation that something new and wonderful had been born in my soul... a great ideal, a burning faith, a determination to dedicate myself to the memory of my martyred comrades, to make their cause my own, to make known to the world their beautiful lives and heroic deaths” (quoted in Solomon *Emma* 1).

From that moment until her death in 1940, Emma Goldman dedicated her life and career to the cause of anarchism. In her essay, “Anarchism: What It Really Stands For,” Goldman explains, “Anarchism, then, really stands for the liberation of the human mind from the dominion of religion; the liberation of the human body from the dominion of property; liberation from the shackles of government” (*Anarchism* 62). In addition to these commonly held enemies of anarchism, Goldman’s focus on sexual issues, including birth control, prostitution, and the institution of marriage, distinguished her from many of the other anarchists of her day (Solomon *Emma* 65). In her version of anarchism, Goldman was primarily concerned with the liberation of the individual. According to Solomon, “Central to Goldman’s analysis of all issues was a concern for the autonomy of the individual and the desirability of nurturing personal growth. Whether she castigated the institution of marriage, the public schools, prisons, or militarism, her focus was always on how social pressures and institutions thwart individual development and victimize human beings” (*Emma* 65).

Emma Goldman was dedicated to living out her ideal in practice, as well as through her speeches and essays. She practiced the “free love” she preached, and she never had children. She stood up against injustice whenever and wherever she encountered it, and she refused to follow societal prescriptions for woman’s behavior in public. In the words of Goldman, “From the time I entered our movement I had no personal life which did not also reflect the movement, or my activities in it” (quoted in Solomon *Emma* 122). According to Solomon, “Goldman’s persona



was more striking because she was a woman rhetor who violated many of the social constraints for females of the day particularly by enacting her philosophy in ways other than her rhetoric. She practiced the free love she advocated and flaunted her disregard for other societal standards” (“Ideology” 191).

While there were a number of other women reformers in the early twentieth-century, Goldman was unable to find common ground with many of them. Those involved in the suffrage movement especially angered Goldman. According to Janet E. Day, “Goldman’s approach was more philosophical and less pragmatic [than those of progressive women reformers], eschewing incremental change in favor of fundamental reform” (113). Goldman confronted suffragists of her day, “True emancipation begins neither at the polls nor in courts. It begins in a woman’s soul” (*Anarchism* 224). Goldman adds democracy to her attack when she says, “Democracy and suffrage merely help to quell the masses even more easily because such gains provide them with the important illusion of freedom while they still toil away for scraps at the table” (quoted in McKenzie et al. 210). Emma Goldman’s view of anarchism and women’s liberation is consistent with Irving L. Horowitz’s assessment of anarchism in general. Horowitz argues, “The anarchist was less intent on future political victories than he was on present psychological overhauling...Anarchism is not so much a doctrine as a mood; and not a social and economic credo, but an elaborate form of psychological therapy for the politically alienated and the intellectually disaffiliated” (quoted in Solomon “Ideology” 196).

It was not, however, only the “politically alienated” and “intellectually disaffiliated” who turned out to hear Goldman speak. According to Solomon, “Every social stratum heard Goldman. Anarchists, trade unionists, and workers were attracted to some topics, while artists, doctors, lawyers, and even matrons belonging to women’s clubs heard others” (*Emma* 25).

Combined with the public's knowledge of her personal life and her "beautiful ideal," Emma Goldman became an extremely popular lecturer for anarchism. Solomon argues, "In her public discourse, she assumed the role of an unrelenting opponent of American institutions, eager to point out their limitations and to garner evidence of their corrupt oppressiveness" ("Ideology" 190). She publicly agitated against the "most traditionally cherished aspects of American life" (190). Goldman's "flamboyance" drew large numbers of people to her lectures. Candace Falk predicted that "her voice emerging from the outer fringes of respectability allowed her the freedom to be outrageous" ("Emma Goldman" 14). During the years from 1906 to 1916 Goldman reportedly lectured from 120 to 320 times a year. She estimated that she spoke to as many as 75,000 people every year (Adrian 218).

#### GOLDMAN'S DANGER

It was primarily Goldman's public performances that endowed her with an air of danger. To the press and the government, Goldman was the most dangerous woman in America. Incarcerated three times, accused of provoking the assassination of President William McKinley, and eventually stripped of her citizenship and deported for campaigning against the World War I draft, Goldman was considered a "clear and present danger to the security of the nation" (Falk 19). According to an article in *Nation* in 1934, Goldman signified the "ultimate social cleavage, of differences that cannot be bridged" (quoted in Frankel 918). Candace Falk recounts the government's reaction to the perceived threat of Emma Goldman, "Government authorities feared Goldman's eloquence and barred her when they could, viewing her speeches as defiant actions, dangerously persuasive weapons employed in turbulent times against the social and political order" ("Let Icons" 62). She continues, "It was not uncommon for local police to lock

the door of a hall slated for a Goldman lecture, or to carry her off the stage the moment she began to speak” (62).

Goldman never let police harassment get in the way of giving her audience the opportunity to hear her many social critiques. Candace Falk writes about an “apocryphal story” that circulated “about a time when Goldman acquired a strong, heavy lock and chain, wound it around her and the podium, and then threw it out the window to have it attached to a pole outside. She anticipated that it would take the police so long to release her that they couldn’t possibly interrupt her lecture” (“Emma Goldman” 13). Oz Frankel explains that Goldman was sometimes arrested just for appearing in some towns. At least once the police told her she was being arrested, “just because you are Emma Goldman” (quoted in Frankel 901). It has been said that Goldman was so used to being arrested that she always carried a book to her lectures in case she had to spend a night in jail (Falk “Emma Goldman” 12).

Perhaps the clearest example of Goldman’s persistence in delivering her anarchist ideals comes from her actions during her trial for campaigning against the draft during World War I. Goldman and long-time friend Alexander Berkman realized their chances of acquittal were slight, so they used the trial as an opportunity to deliver their anarchist views. According to Candace Falk, “...it was then that Goldman delivered the most moving performance of her life, one that prompted the US Attorney General to comment that Emma Goldman’s ‘persuasive powers’ were ‘so strong as to render her dangerous’” (“Emma Goldman” 19).

There are numerous other examples of Emma Goldman’s perceived danger by her contemporaries. President Teddy Roosevelt called her a “madwoman...a mental as well as moral pervert” (quoted in Wehling 21). According to the *New York Times*, Goldman was a

“mischievous foreigner...apart from the mass of humanity” (21). *San Francisco Call* reported that she was “a despicable creature... [a] snake...unfit to live in a civilized country” (21). Not only for the government and the press, Goldman was also an object of fear for many American citizens. In his 1969 introduction to Goldman’s *Anarchism and Other Essays*, Richard Drinnon includes a childhood memory of S.N Behrman who says, “parents cited her to us constantly, using her name somewhat as English parents used Napoleon’s in the first decades of the nineteenth century, to frighten and admonish” (vi). Jason Wehling describes the reaction of “mainstream Americans” when he says, “Emma was known as a demonic, dynamite-eating anarchist” (21).

Not all of Goldman’s audience members shuddered in fear. Goldman had many supporters. Even her supporters, however, were confronted by Emma Goldman’s threatening presence. William Marion Ready, editor of the *St. Louis Mirror*, calls Goldman “the daughter of the dream,” and continues that “she threatens all society that is slavery, all society that is a mask of greed and lust” (quoted in Solomon *Emma* 152). Hence, he perceived her threat even though he agreed with her assessment of society. An article in the *Los Angeles Herald* describes, “With her little hammer she knocks upon our rock-ribbed prejudices and with her scalpel she neatly and cleverly lays bare some of our social sores” (quoted in Solomon *Emma* 86). Floyd Dell explains the acceptance of Goldman’s supporters thus, “She has a legitimate social function – that of holding before our eyes the ideals of freedom. She is licensed to taunt us with our moral cowardice, to plant in our souls the nettles of remorse at having acquiesced so tamely in the brutal artifice of present-day society” (quoted in Solomon *Emma* 152). .

It is striking how many accounts of Goldman’s effects on her supporters include references to the existence of “fire” or some kind of extra-human electrical power. Fellow

anarchist, Voltarine de Cleyre says, “I have not a tongue of *fire* as Emma Goldmann [sic] has; I cannot ‘stir the people’; I must speak in my own cold, calculated way (Perhaps that is the reason I am let to speak at all)” (307 my emphasis). Lynne M. Adrian reports that one observer at one of Goldman’s lectures said that as Goldman spoke “she *burned* with the *flaming* ardor of an apocalyptic vision” (218 my emphasis). In a review of Goldman’s autobiography, *Living My Life*, John Haynes Holmes remarks that some of her book is “screaming with feeling, sobbing uncontrolled temperament, *explosives, eruptions*, like from a volcano” (quoted in Frankel 908 my emphasis). Roger Baldwin, founder of the American Civil Liberties Union, says, “It was the eye-opener of my life. Never before had I heard such social passion, such courageous exposure of basic evils, such *electric power* behind words, such a sweeping challenge to all the values I had been taught to hold highest. From that day forth, I was her admirer” (quoted in Solomon *Emma* 150 my emphasis).

While they perceived her danger, neither her enemies nor her supporters were able to explain its origin. This is perhaps put best by de Cleyre who recounts one of Goldman’s arrests:

The dangerous thing was ‘the voice crying in the wilderness’ foretelling the power which was to come after it. You should have seen how they feared it in Phila. They got out a whole platoon of police and detectives, and executed a military maneuver to catch the little woman who had been running around under their noses for three days. And when she walked up to them, why then, they surrounded and captured her, and guarded the city hall where they kept her over night, and put a detective in the next cell to make notes. Why so much fear? Did they shrink from the stab of the dressmaker’s needle? Or did they dread some stronger weapon? (309)

Voltaireine de Cleyre emphasized that the police were mysteriously afraid of Goldman, who was merely a “little woman” who simply “walked up to them.” de Cleyre did not understand how they could possibly justify their fear.

Goldman was deported from the United States in 1919, but she was allowed to return for a lecture tour in 1934. While the war and other events within the years Goldman was living in exile made anarchism seem almost old-fashioned, Goldman got off the train after arriving back in New York saying, “I was always considered bad, my friends, but now I am worse” (quoted in Frankel 914). Oz Frankel remarks, however, that “if Goldman was still dangerous, it had exceptionally little to do with igniting an anarchist revolution” (925). The *Rochester Journal* told its readers, “Anyone who would construe this brief visit as anything resembling a menace to the country would be likely to be frightened by the pursuit of his own timid shadow” (quoted in Frankel 911). Goldman’s last lecture tour in the United States was ultimately unsuccessful, and she left without being granted permission to ever return to America. George Woodcock declared anarchism dead in 1939 just one year before Goldman died (Woodcock 443).

#### OVERDETERMINED EMMA

Goldman remained in obscurity for the next twenty years until she was revived by the radical feminists of the 1960s. Quoting Frankel:

Radical feminists, the first in the women’s movement to adopt her as an icon, sought to emulate her self-assertive political militancy no less than to embrace her gender critique. In later decades, the impassioned spirit of the 1960s perhaps waned, but the process of canonizing Goldman only accelerated. (903)

Within popular movements since the sixties, Goldman's ideas have been simplified into slogans and bumper stickers. In a book review of books about Emma Goldman, Karen Rosenberg even says, "One would be hard-pressed to find another woman of the past who enjoys her privileged status in contemporary America, who is emblazoned on as many tee-shirts and postcards" (8). In fact, Frankel recalls that members of the feminist movement "called their daughters, health collectives, and even pets Emma" (920). Alix Kates Shulman attempts to explain radical feminists' appropriation of Emma Goldman beginning in the 1960s, "The fight itself was central to her politics; she was ever militant. Indeed, it may be as much for her own militancy as for her views that she is admired by radical feminists today" (252).

While Goldman was certainly embraced by feminists for her unrestrained militancy, feminists also welcomed Goldman as an icon for their movement in part for her gender critique. The feminist catchphrase, "the personal is political," fit nicely with Goldman, who is known for living out her anarchist ideology. The radical feminist realization that their oppression was internalized also fit well with Goldman's statement that women's liberation must begin in a woman's soul. Some aspects of Goldman's ideology, however, did not fit well with the radical feminists' goals. Oz Frankel finds that "in the effort to win [Goldman] a place in the national pantheon, there has been little discussion of the more controversial elements of her legacy – especially her flirtation with political violence, her ambivalence toward the 'masses,' her vision of anarchism, and her basic disagreement with the ideologies and practices of Western liberal democracies" (941). The coherent image of Goldman used by the radical feminists of the 1960s required them to select and privilege certain characteristics of Goldman's legacy over others (922).

It was not only activists, but also academics who sought to revive Goldman as an object of study. Since the 1960s, there have been more than fifteen books and over fifty magazine and academic articles published about Emma Goldman (Frankel 904). Not all rehabilitations of Goldman have been positive. In the introduction to their edited volume, *Feminist Interpretations of Emma Goldman*, Penny A. Weiss and Loretta Kensinger note, “Most other literature on Goldman primarily emphasizes a litany of weaknesses, tensions, contradictions, omissions, biases, or unresolved problems in her work” (16). Included in their critique is Richard Drinnon, one of the first to publish a biography of Goldman, who admits that he began his research on Goldman regarding her anarchism as “a particularly bizarre form of political lunacy” (quoted in Wehling 27). Drinnon finds that “Goldman had a theory, one with imaginative possibilities that still remain to be explored,” but he concludes that “she was not a theoretician” (quoted in Weiss et al. 5).

Other prominent Emma Goldman scholars come to similar conclusions to that of Drinnon. Alice Wexler argues that “from the start, [Goldman] was an unorthodox figure,” but she concludes, “She was never an original thinker” (quoted in Weiss et al. 4). Solomon writes, “In reading Goldman’s philosophical and political essays, we are struck above all by her fervor and commitment. But her ideological sincerity does not obscure the weaknesses in her presentation of her ideas” (*Emma* 59). In contrast, *Feminist Interpretations of Emma Goldman* seeks to return Goldman to her “proper” place as an original political theorist of her time. In the introduction, Weiss and Kensinger state, “The Emma Goldman that emerges from these essays is, first, a more theoretically unified one” (7). Attempting to resolve all contradictions to truly understand and appreciate the ideology and activism of Emma Goldman, this edited volume “re-reads the canon by reading her back into it” (16).



In his examination of Goldman's reception today, Frankel discovers, "Goldman may be presented as a fighter for free speech, a communitarian, a libertarian, an anticommunist, an extreme individualist, a precursor of modern feminism, a true subversive, a harmless visionary expelled for voicing innocent ideas, a suffering victim, a cheerful, life-affirming woman, or an amusing, sharp-tongued, Jewish grandmother" (903). He concludes that the overdetermination of Goldman we see today is no different from that of a number of different "enemies" from our past. Frankel adds, "Packaging and repackaging historical figures for various purposes, ideological and even commercial, is a well-documented phenomenon. Exonerating old enemies is also not rare in United States history; indeed it may be a feature of the American way of forgetting and remembering" (939).

All of the differing appropriations and the overdetermination (or in Frankel's words "packaging and repackaging") of Emma Goldman put together with the *danger* she effected in her own time should lead us to question those reports that claim to provide a "more theoretically unified" Goldman. Is it possible, instead, that the terrifying impact of Goldman, or her ultimate lesson for us today, is actually covered up by all of these endless interpretations of her life and works? I will argue that the answer to the above question can be understood by turning to Lacan's novel reading of Sophocles's *Antigone*. In *Seminar VII: The Ethics of Psychoanalysis*, Lacan prizes Antigone as a tragic heroine who exemplifies a psychoanalytic ethics.

#### LACAN'S ANTIGONE

In *Imagine There's No Woman*, Joan Copjec begins her chapter on Antigone's act commenting on the curious resurgence of interest in Sophocles's *Antigone* beginning with German Idealism. Hegel, for instance, declares *Antigone* "one of the most sublime, and in every respect most

consummate works of human effort ever brought forth” (quoted in Copjec 14). Copjec finds that *Antigone* is a particularly salient text for thinking ethics in the modern context. For many, including Hegel, *Antigone* is a text about the public/private dialectic. In *The Phenomenology of Spirit*, Hegel interprets the Greek city-state as one in which “the opposition between the universal and the particular, the state and the family, human and divine law, man and woman could not be practically overcome” (Copjec 15). He finds Creon and Antigone both guilty of holding too tightly to one law over another. Creon is guilty for choosing the law of the State (human law) while Antigone chooses the law of the family (divine law).

Lacan’s reading of *Antigone* departs from all of those offered before. He argues that the tragedy is not after all about the dialectical relationship between the law of the State and that of the family. Instead, Lacan proposes that Antigone actually accedes to a third realm, the order of *Até*. Lacan’s Antigone moves beyond the order of the good that contains the laws of the State and the family to the order of the drive that is indifferent to community mores and standards. Antigone stands for the deadlock of the Real within the Symbolic, and she produces herself as an image of the fundamental lack in the big Other. Her image represents a break with the order of representation.

Lacan finds that readings of *Antigone* that remain bound to a public/private dialectic founder over the unrepresentable kernel of *jouissance* at the heart of signification. I will similarly show that contemporary interpretations of Emma Goldman fail for much the same reason. Following Lacan’s interpretation of *Antigone*, many view Antigone’s act as one that cannot be explained through recourse to rhetorical methods. For example, Ellie Ragland gestures toward the order of the Real uncovered by Lacan as one that “disrupts the smooth surface of rhetorical skill and stylistic harmony” (117). In “Lacan’s Antigone: The Sublime Object and the Ethics of

Interpretation,” Paul Allen Miller follows Lacan’s interpretation of Antigone and argues, “To meet our obligation to the sublime text we must go beyond the dictates of the pleasure and reality principles, beyond good and evil to encounter pure desire: the moment in which the canons of meaning shudder before their own beyond” (2). Not only does Lacan’s reading of *Antigone* point to the limits of rhetorical explanations that do not account for the lack within the Symbolic, but Lacan’s Antigone also stands as a model for a psychoanalytic ethics that enriches contemporary possibilities for radical social change.

Lacan’s psychoanalytic reading of Antigone has influenced a number of projects for contemporary social change. For Slavoj Žižek, Antigone stands as a model for the psychoanalytic “Act” that he argues is the only *real* way to think social change today. Žižek defines the “Act” of Antigone as one that “does not simply occur *within* the given horizon of what appears to be ‘possible’ – it redefines the very contours of what is possible (an act accomplishes what, within the given symbolic universe appears to be ‘impossible,’ yet it changes its conditions so that it creates retroactively the conditions of its own possibility)” (*Contingency* 121). In *Imagine There’s No Woman*, Joan Copjec undertakes a project to reconceive Lacan’s ethics seminar from the point of his later works, particularly his theory of sexuation in *Seminar XX: Encore*. Antigone is central in Copjec’s analysis as a model of the ethical subject that allows Lacan to ultimately sexualize the act and “debiologize” death “in an effort ... to corporealize the ethical subject” (19).

Both Žižek’s and Copjec’s projects push Lacan’s interpretation of *Antigone* toward the service of contemporary social change. In addition, there are many other psychoanalytic thinkers who pursue deeper explanations of the meaning of Lacan’s interpretation. I find it necessary in creating an equation between figure of Antigone and Emma Goldman to rely heavily on those

who highlight specific aspects of Lacan's interpretation. The difficulty of Lacan's own writing notwithstanding, a straightforward application of Lacan's writing to the figure of Emma Goldman is not sufficient. The present analysis is enhanced through the use of the interpretations of *Antigone* by those psychoanalytic thinkers who came after Lacan.

Lacan's reading of *Antigone* in *The Ethics of Psychoanalysis* challenges Hegel's interpretation. Whereas Hegel discovers undecidability, Lacan sides clearly with the character of Antigone as the only ethical figure in the tragedy. Lacan locates Antigone's ethical act in her perseverance in the decision to bury Polynices. This act, according to Lacan, was an impossible act. It was not impossible because it was forbidden by the community in which she found herself, but rather, it was impossible in the sense that it was an act that could not even be thought within the community of Thebes. When Antigone tells her sister, Ismene, of her intentions, Ismene responds, "If you can do it. But you are in love with the impossible" (quoted in Copjec 41). Ismene continues, "It is better not to hunt the impossible at all" (41). Ismene, thus, marks what is currently conceivable and that which is impossible to think in Thebes society. According to Lacan, Antigone's impossible act and what it says about the ethics of psychoanalysis can only be understood by considering the subjective position Antigone occupies in relation to the society of Thebes.

In order to understand Lacan's objection to Hegel's reading of *Antigone*, it is important to first understand Lacan's theory of the subject and his definitions of desire and drive. In Lacanian terms, the subject is born when the bond with the mother is broken and the infant becomes subject to the Symbolic order. William J. Richardson explains, "The rupture of this bond is at once the irruption of desire. For when the bond is broken, there is a loss of union, a felt lack of 'being' (*manqué à être*); and this lack/want, i.e., want(ing)-to-be, is precisely what is meant by

‘desire’ – desire of the Other embodied initially in the mother (or mothering one)” (27). Forever attempting to repeat the original mythical experience of satisfaction and wholeness (absolute *jouissance*) with the mother, the subject pursues objects that promise to fill its lack. The subject sets out on a lifelong journey to recover the part that was mythically lost. Lacan calls this “lost object” *das Ding*, “the Thing.”

Once one accedes to the Symbolic, he or she is only able to relate to the world of others and *das Ding* through signifiers. Further, these signifiers are endowed with meaning only in relation to other signifiers. According to Marc De Kesel, “We live in a world where ‘alienation’ is the normal state of things, a world categorically ‘other’ than the real world. This is not as tragic as it seems, for it is after all what desire needs most” (300). Desire must find its path through signifying chains that are intent on nothing but keeping desire unsatisfied. For the Symbolic subject, satisfied desire is equal to death. One can never return to the mythological “Real” from whence he came. Hence, it is impossible for desire and the signifiers used to give voice to this desire to coincide.

The paradox of Lacan’s theory of the subject in relation to the signifier is that while we can only relate to the world and to others through signifiers, we do not ever completely coincide with those signifiers. In De Kesel’s words, “The subject of a story is not one of the signifiers *in* the story; it is not a signifier at all, but something which falls outside the signifier’s scope, and which only exists insofar as it is *represented* by that story, never being *present* in it (301). Thus, the subject is nothing but a lack in the signifying chain. Society is similarly structured around such a fundamental lack. Again according to De Kesel, “As Lacanian theory claims, reality *always* consists of signifiers that are *as such* completely empty, senseless, and without any truth. Every truth-claim is built on a kind of primordial lie (a ‘*proton pseudos*’) that keeps unsaid that

truth rests upon the signifier's meaningless materiality" (304). What differs, then, is not the truth of a given society, but rather, how each society relates to the "lie" that exists within every truth claim.

Returning to *Antigone*, it becomes clear that "he [Lacan] does not read the *behavior* of each of the protagonists, he defines the *structure* through which their acts must be read" (Copjec 16). In other words, Lacan turns from the direct content of the acts of Creon and Antigone to the specific way each of the characters relates to the lack both at the heart of the subject and also at the heart of the structure of Greek society. Creon's act of denying burial to Polynices is his way of denying that Greek society is structurally incomplete. According to Ellie Ragland, "In Lacan's estimation, Creon is an ordinary man, weak in thinking of his good as nothing more than an empty representation of laws made by others. He does not know what *he* wants, but serves as a mere figurehead who refuses to think beyond the requisites of state law" (106). In other words, in order to maintain that the society of Thebes was not lacking, Creon was forced to project that essential lack onto the body of Polynices. By denying Polynices burial rights in his community, Creon also denies the lack (which is correlative to the desiring subject) of that community.

According to Lacan, Creon's act represents the order of the good, a barrier on the path of desire. This order is marked by the power to possess goods and also to deprive others of those goods (Lacan 229). This is the realm of traditional ethics. The ethics of psychoanalysis differs from traditional ethics, Lacan argues, because "we know better than our predecessors how to recognize the nature of desire, which is at the heart of this experience" (314). Lacan argues that traditional ethics, like the ethics of Aristotle, is "wholly founded on an order [of goods]...But is nevertheless one that corresponds to the politics of his time, to the organization of the city. His morality is the morality of the master, created for the virtues of the master and linked to the order

of powers” (314-15). Creon takes his place as master of the community of Thebes when he says, “Sirs, the vessel of our State, after being tossed on wild waves, hath once more been safely steadied by the gods...I now possess the throne and all its powers, by nearness of kinship to the dead. No man can be fully known in soul and spirit, until he hath been seen versed in rule and law-giving... [And now I guard] this city’s greatness” (quoted in Richardson 27-8).

Lacan opposes Creon’s position to the position occupied by Antigone. While Creon embodies the place of the master, Antigone places herself in the location of lack. By burying Polynices and promising herself a sure death, Antigone places herself in the position of the excluded. Also, by refusing to give reasons for her actions or appeal to any recognized qualities of Polynices, Antigone follows her desire to a place that leaves all imaginary and symbolic identifications behind. Antigone, in effect, materializes the empty place of the subject in the signifying chain. She incarnates pure desire, which Lacan defines as a “place of desire inasmuch as it is the desire for nothing, the relationship of man with his lack of being” (quoted in Kowsar 98). Antigone’s refusal to give way on her desire is perhaps made clearest in her lamentation upon entering her burial tomb:

[F]or never, had children of whom I was the mother or had my husband perished and been mouldering there, would I have taken on myself this task, in defiance of the citizens. In virtue of what law do I say this. If my husband had died, I could have another, and a child by another man, if I had lost the first, but with my mother and father in Hades below, I could never have another brother. Such was the law for whose sake I did you special honour, but to Creon I seemed to do wrong and to show shocking recklessness, O my own brother. And how he leads me thus by the hands, without marriage, without

bridal, having no share in wedlock or in the rearing of children, but thus deserted by my friends I come living, poor creature, to the caverns of the dead. (quoted in Kaufman 142)

Antigone says in effect that she would not have persevered in her act leading to sure death for a husband or a child. She clearly valorizes the role of sister over that of wife or mother. Her reasons take her out of the Other realm of metaphor where goods are substitutable and replaceable and instead accedes to the order of metonymy. By demanding the burial of her brother and nothing else, Antigone, from the point of death, in effect freezes desire and its never-ending slippage from one object to the next.

The structural location occupied by Antigone is not only the place of *das Ding*, but Lacan also equates it with the aesthetic quality of the beautiful. For Lacan, “the beautiful is that which appears beyond the limit set by the good” (Kowsar 102). As desire aims at a place beyond human laws, “Lacan reevaluates tragedy by identifying the central conflict of tragic action as ‘the effect of beauty on desire’” (102). The subject in the position of the beautiful, according to Mohammad Kowsar, “is illuminated but cannot be gazed upon for too long, for the radiance, the very truth that the subject evokes, even though it emanates from a place of beauty, is so overpowering that it causes the beholder to blink, to turn away, registering, paradoxically enough beauty’s other effect – pain” (97). The audience is moved by the image of Antigone because her image confronts them with the lack that lies at the heart of being, language, and society.

Further explaining the function of the beautiful, Lacan gestures toward de Sade by calling the position to which Antigone accedes the place “between two deaths.” It is important to note that for Lacan, there are two different types of death. The first type of death is actual physical death. This is not correlative to Symbolic death, however, as the name continues to persist in



language and in the fantasy scenarios of others. The second type of death is the impossible Symbolic death, in which the subject is completely erased from presence in the Symbolic order. This impossible Symbolic death is correlative to the impossible communion with absolute *jouissance*. As Antigone is escorted into her tomb, completely removed from her place in the community, she *temporarily* inhabits the place Lacan calls “between two deaths.” This is a space where life encroaches upon death and death upon life. Lacan also refers to the barrier between the two deaths as that of *Até*, translated by Lacan to mean “the limit that human life can only briefly cross” (262).

The place “between two deaths” is also equated with Lacan’s notion of the death drive. Joan Copjec defines the Lacanian notion of the death drive as that which “pushes away from or against the stabilization of unities or the dumb progress of developments” (Copjec 32). The aim of the drive is to return to the mythical unity with the mother. It corresponds to the drive to recover *das Ding* and the *jouissance* that was lost when the child separated from the mother and acceded to the Symbolic order. Although the drive aims toward an inanimate state (the Real), it can never actually reach such a state. Because the drive was created by the Symbolic *ex nihilo*, returning to a pre-Symbolic state is impossible. Instead, the drive is broken into partial drives by various objects that are “simulacra of the (lost) maternal object” (Copjec 34). These objects (*objects a*) provide the drives with satisfaction. The drives circle their objects with endless repetition. The *objects a* are pieces of Lacan’s Real that are paradoxically produced by the Symbolic while they resist any attempt at symbolization.

Slavoj Žižek defines the death drive as the opposite of the symbolic order. He characterizes the death drive as “the possibility of the ‘second death,’ the radical annihilation of the symbolic texture through which so-called reality is constituted” (*Sublime Object* 133). It is

important to note, however, that the drive “marks the excess embedded within the Symbolic through the loss, the Real loss that the advent of the signifier effects” (Edelman 9). In other words, says Edelman, the drive can be thought of as similar to the letter within the signifier: “The drive holds the place of what meaning misses in much the same way that the signifier preserves at the heart of the signifying order the empty and arbitrary letter, the meaningless substrate of signification that meaning intends to conceal” (10). The drive, then, is that within the signifying network that resists meaning. What this means concerning Antigone, is that in identifying herself with the void of *das Ding*, she has acceded to the place of the death drive of the Symbolic. Antigone *momentarily* inhabits the place of the death drive of Thebes. Copjec adds, “That she is ‘required’ to do so testifies to the *Zwang* or compulsion of the drive, which is indifferent to external criteria, such as the good opinion of others” (40-41).

To summarize, I will quote at length Ellie Ragland’s exceptional explanation of Antigone’s position:

Antigone’s beauty arises, Lacan argues, from the *image* of her destitution, as underlined by the Chorus’s pity. Her brother’s corpse tells the story of the refusal of the symbolic order to constitute him as a being in language. His body is an excess in language that must be destroyed so the state can continue viewing its laws and beliefs as a whole, a consistency. And Antigone responds to this insult to her brother by sacrificing her own body, thus refusing the lies of the language of law. She refuses language at its limits, showing that at the limits of the Other, there is a hole. So she takes the spectators right up to the point where the real appears as an impasse, on the side of the gods. By covering her brother with dirt and herself with a stone, she shows the excess *hors sens* that opens onto

the knowledge that is *jouissance*. The body, covered in death, unveils the lies that language hides, revealing that language hides emptiness as a void place. (114)

It is exactly the uncovering of the “lies that language hides” (114), that is at the center of psychoanalytic practice. Antigone stands as a model for the ethics of psychoanalysis in her refusal to give up on her desire. According to Lacan, “I propose then that, from an analytical point of view, the only thing of which one can be guilty is of having given ground relative to one’s desire” (319).

Antigone’s stance provokes the catharsis associated with the genre of tragedy. Lacan locates catharsis in the feelings of pity and fear that are aroused within the Chorus and the audience of the tragedy. Again, according to Ragland, this catharsis consists of “pity for the poor creature that is man and fear of the loss that lies at the heart of being” (117). Antigone serves as a model of Symbolic death (the second death) that reveals the incompleteness of language and society, and the effect of Antigone’s stance is to arouse anxiety in her spectators who momentarily consciously experience the desire of the Other within them. This anxiety, according to Lorenzo Chiesa, “emerges precisely when the subject acquires a ‘positive’ image of lack...” (166). Ragland notes that “the genre of tragedy in all its guises stands as a monument to the subversive and private power of human desire, to the Antigone that lives in each of us” (117).

Like Lacan, Judith Butler, in *Antigone’s Claim*, also provides a reading of Sophocles’s *Antigone* that redeems Antigone from guilt. Where the two readings converge, according to Eleanor Kaufman, is the way they both view Antigone as “posing a radical critique of the category of the human” (138). Where the two readings differ, however, is in the way they utilize Antigone as a model. Lacan’s Antigone hangs herself unable to “represent the moment of

symbolic reinscription instead of an irrevocable disappearance into the unrepresentable lack itself” (Chiesa 177). However, Lacan makes clear that “Antigone hanging in her tomb evokes something very different from an act of suicide” (286). It is the moment before her hanging that is pivotal for Lacan.

In contrast to Lacan, Butler’s Antigone emerges from her tomb in the end and “becomes one for whom the speech act is a fatal crime, but this fatality exceeds her own life and enters the discourse of intelligibility as its own promising fatality, the social form of an aberrant, unprecedented future” (82). In other words, Butler envisions a future symbolic without exclusion. She credits Antigone with speaking from the location of the inhuman in hopes that she will create “a new field of the human, achieved through political catachresis, the one that happens when the less than human speaks as human, when gender is displaced, and kinship founders on its own foundering laws” (82). In his particularly searing critique of Butler’s Antigone, Lee Edelman concludes, “So Antigone may well depart from her tomb at the end of Butler’s argument, returning to life in the political sphere from which she was excluded, but she does so while preserving the tomb itself as the burial place for whatever *continues* to insist outside of meaning, immune to intelligibility now or in any future yet to come” (105). Hence, Butler’s account of Antigone’s promise denies the kernel of the Real (*das Ding*) that resists Symbolic integration and instead envisions a future Symbolic order that can continually expand to include all in a future forever postponed.

Antigone, as a model for psychoanalytic ethics, casts a new light on the danger perceived by Emma Goldman’s many audiences. In the readings of *Antigone* by Hegel and Butler, one finds parallels with the renderings of Emma Goldman by those who count her faults, as well as by those who offer her redemption. In the next section, I will consider Goldman’s actions and

rhetoric through comparison with Lacan's Antigone. Next, I will argue that like Hegel's and Butler's readings of *Antigone*, a number of contemporary treatments of Emma Goldman miss her radical potential through either attempting to rescue her or by dismissing her. Finally, I will conclude by offering a rereading of Emma Goldman that offers psychoanalytic theory as a method that enables us to reconcile her perceived rhetorical ineffectiveness with her clear persuasive danger.

#### EMMA GOLDMAN AND ANTIGONE

The time period during which Emma Goldman lived in the United States is characterized by Robert Wiebe as a search for order. Conventionally read as the period in which America was transitioning from a kin-based, rural nation, to an urban, industrial nation, the *fin de siècle* gave birth to a country that looked very different from early nineteenth-century America. According to Gayle Rubin, the late nineteenth- and early twentieth-centuries witnessed such changes as the dawn of the new working class, reorganized family relations, new roles of the state, new gender roles, new forms of identity, new varieties of social inequality, and new forms for political and ideological conflict (16). More specifically, the rise of industrial capitalism and the shift from rural towns to large cities culminated in oppositions of class, questions of ethnicity and race, and new forms of gender and sex behavior. According to Wiebe, "By contrast to the personal, informal ways of the community, the new scheme was derived from the regulative, hierarchical needs of urban-industrial life. Through rules with impersonal sanctions, it sought continuity and predictability in a world of endless change" (xiv). While this was a time of great flux with an uncertain end, the one theme that emerged in this period was a search for order. No one certainly knew what kind of order would dominate, but the one tenet that remained unquestioned was the aim for some type of order.

In contrast to the search for order that comprised the horizon of understanding in the early twentieth-century, the anarchists of the period were opposed to the idea of order itself. As the rising middle class was turning more and more to a centralized government to maintain a sense of order, the State remained one of the main enemies of anarchism. The anarchists took advantage of changing conditions to argue in favor of their ideas, and they became easy targets for those charged with maintaining order. The need for society to eliminate those who opposed order in the early twentieth-century helps to explain the hangings of the “Haymarket martyrs.” The position of anarchists at the time could not be viewed as anything other than a sign of madness and criminality.

In particular, Emma Goldman recognized that social order offered a false sense of wholeness that only covered over the reality of division. In the many fantasy scenarios that animated the masses of her day, Goldman found her own versions of Polynices. Like Antigone, Goldman identified herself with the beings that were excluded from the social order and made to figure its impossibility. For example, within the fantasies of the white slave trade and the “fallen woman” that dominated in her time, Goldman recognized that the prostitute was an overdetermined figure used to represent the cause of the impossibility of social coherence. In her essay (also delivered publicly as a speech), “The Traffic in Women,” Goldman links the vilified figure of the prostitute to fears about rapid industrialization, immigration, a decline in religious and moral values, and the incidence of women entering the public sphere. Goldman says, “Those who sit in a glass house do wrong to throw stones about them; besides the American glass house is rather thin, it will break easily, and the interior is anything but a gainly sight” (198). In other words, in order for the reformers to protect their house (society) they must attack an external source and blame that source for the perceived impossibility of social order. Goldman

recognizes that the reformers are sitting in a glass house, and her essay functions to break that house. Goldman's audience is left with the truth about the figure of the prostitute and the truth about the impossibility of social order in the Progressive Era. This leftover, according to Goldman, is "anything but a gainly sight."

Similar to Antigone, Goldman, animated by a desire that she recognized was not her own, threw herself into the void that early twentieth-century America worked very hard to cover over. As stated earlier, Goldman began her life of activism by dedicating her life to the cause of the Haymarket martyrs. She made their cause her own. This was a gesture she repeated many times throughout her life. For example, although many criticize Goldman for the unresolved antagonism between her anti-violent vision of anarchism and her defense of other violent anarchists, her defense of others points to the coincidence between the object of her desire and its cause (a cause that is not her own). Goldman says, "I am on the side of every rebel, whether his has been beneficial or detrimental to our cause, for I do not judge an act by its result, but by its cause" (*Anarchism* 53). Antigone related to her brother as a being that once occupied a place within a structure. She could not offer any rational arguments for why her brother's place in the Symbolic should be spared. Antigone acted on behalf of the value of her brother's being without reference to any content. Similarly, Goldman defended several anarchists that turned to violence, such as Leon Czolgosz, without reference to the content of their particular acts.

In "Melancholy and the Act," Slavoj Žižek argues, "What gives Antigone such unshakeable, uncompromising fortitude to persist in her decision is precisely the *direct* identification of her particular/determinate decision with the Other's (Thing's) injunction or call" (669). In other words, Antigone's persistence comes from the coincidence of free choice with a sense of duty. Antigone chose to bury her brother as if it was a matter of unconditional necessity.

Emma Goldman's many acts share a similar structure to that of Antigone's. The similarity can clearly be seen in Goldman's statement to the New York City District Court in her trial for conspiring against the World War I draft. Goldman told the court, "For even if we were convicted and found guilty and the penalty were that we be placed against a wall and shot dead, I should nevertheless cry out with the great Luther, 'Here I am and here I stand and I cannot do otherwise'" (65). Goldman's actions were all by choice, but she always made it very clear that even though she often faced death or at the very least exile, she could not do otherwise.

Goldman is often criticized for refusing to offer her audiences any viable solutions to society's problems. Solomon argues, "she offered no direction for creating a new social order which might foster such individualism" (192). Solomon further notes, "Goldman's judgments of institutions, attitudes, and practices are so absolute that they brook no alternative perspective" (133). Goldman, however, was uninterested in replacing the current order with any new order that could be grasped within the current structure. She was much more interested in confronting her audiences with the "truth" about social order in general. In her essays and speeches, she repeated the theme that social order depends upon an anti-social element to figure its own impossibility. Simultaneously, Goldman voluntarily places herself in the void, and displays it for all to see.

While some might argue that Goldman did err in aiming for an anarchist society in which the individual would fully coincide with himself/herself, she refused to explain the contours of such a future anarchist society. What remains important about Goldman's aim from the perspective of a psychoanalytic ethics is that Goldman's acts aimed beyond the order of the good. She gestured toward a space that could not be thought within her society. According to McKenzie, "Goldman frames practicality as a method of the old – obviously something can only



be practical if it fits in the existing system, which is also in her eyes, what renders it illegitimate” (207). Goldman was uninterested even in creating a point of identification with her audience members. Solomon argues, “In reading Goldman’s essays, we are struck by how seldom she attempts to mollify her listeners and establish common ground with them” (“Ideology” 137). Goldman aligned herself with that which resisted meaning in the social edifice of the *fin de siècle*. Goldman served as the death drive of her own particular symbolic universe.

Like the death drive, which is forever foreclosed from reaching its aim, Goldman realized the impossibility of her aim. She placed herself in the anxiety-provoking place of the void. Speaking of Mary Wollstonecraft and herself, Goldman says:

In conflict with every institution of their time since they will not compromise, it is inevitable that the advance guards should become aliens to the very ones they wish to serve; that they should be isolated, shunned, and repudiated by the nearest and dearest of kin. Yet the tragedy every pioneer must experience is not the lack of understanding – it arises from the fact that having seen new possibilities for human advancement, the pioneers cannot take root in the old, and with the new still so far off they become outcast roamers of the earth, restless seekers for the things they will never find. (quoted in Wehling 37)

Goldman recognizes that the annihilation of social order is an impossibility and that she is seeking something, like the death drive seeks the impossible, that she will never find. She does not, however, give up on her desire. Chiesa simplifies this position by explaining that we reach the state I equate with Goldman when “instead of always demanding ‘something else,’ we contingently demand something specific in an inflexible way, at any price” (156). Goldman’s beautiful Ideal was the one thing she inflexibly insisted upon throughout her entire life.

Just as Antigone embarked on the impossible task of burying Polynices, Goldman continuously sacrificed herself for those that were excluded from the Symbolic order of the early twentieth-century. Also like Antigone, rational arguments were not on Goldman's side. As she staked her claim for that which resisted meaning in her own time, it is not surprising that Goldman was not a highly effective rhetor. Solomon criticizes Goldman: "Even when one attempts to criticize the structure, one must leave parts of it intact in order to have a point of reference for his criticism. Goldman's ideology did not permit such tolerance toward any element in the structure. Thus, she was led into broad and caustic attacks that left her audience with little psychological refuge" ("Ideology" 192). In response to Lacan's Antigone, Žižek argues that the arguments are certainly on Creon's side. He goes as far as to call Antigone the "anti-Habermas par excellence" ("Melancholy" 667). Similarly, Goldman's actions refused rational communication. As quoted above, she was in conflict with every institution of her time, and she certainly refused to compromise. Goldman conceded that she would live as one of the "outcast roamers of the earth," or in Lacan's terms she would live in a state "between two deaths."

Returning to the danger Goldman effected in her time, I argue that regarding Goldman as a model, like Antigone, of a psychoanalytic ethics, leaves us with a very different assessment of her acts than that offered by most others. It becomes clear that those, like Solomon, who judge Goldman's acts as ineffective or unoriginal align most closely with Hegel's interpretation of Antigone. According to Copjec, Hegel ultimately finds Antigone as guilty as Creon because her act "results in the sacrifice of universality for the sake of particularity" (31). Many who criticize Goldman do so based upon her lack of interest in identifying with her audiences or offering them concrete solutions that they might enact to arrive at her Ideal. Solomon writes, "her [Goldman's]

vitriol draws into question not only her fairness but her commitment to rational analysis of the issues involved” (“Ideology” 63). As criticisms remain concerned only with the irrational content of Goldman’s texts and the flamboyance displayed in her delivery, they will continue to miss, in Campbell’s words, an “explanation of why anyone should have perceived Goldman as a threat” (220).

Interestingly, Solomon begins her article about Goldman’s rhetoric with the following from Act 1, Scene 1 of Sophocles’s *Antigone*, “Never may the anarchic man find rest at my hearth, Never be it said that my thoughts are his thoughts” (quoted in Solomon “Ideology” 184). Although Solomon implicitly makes a connection between Goldman and Antigone, she, like Hegel, takes the position as a moderator for the Chorus. Solomon judges Antigone as one who held too strongly to the particularity of her Ideal in opposition to the universality of community mores and standards.

In contrast, those who attempt to rescue Goldman from a grave of obscurity and give her a redemptive place within the history of America are close to Butler’s reading of Antigone. Butler envisions an Antigone that emerges from her grave to give future voice to those excluded through political catachresis. The Goldman that is championed by many feminists today resembles Butler’s Antigone. Embarking on a rescue of Goldman beginning in the sixties, some activists and academics cling to those aspects of Goldman that now “make sense.” The sixties was a decade of protest. According to James Miller’s *Democracy in the Streets*, “Thrilled by the prospect of change, young people plunged across the frontiers of experience, boldly exploring altered states of consciousness, new types of bodily pleasure, nonhierarchical forms of community” (3). It was a time in which people lived by the mantra to “resist authority.” Unfortunately, these redemptive readings of Goldman miss what was the most radical in her

actions. They serve, like Butler's reading of Antigone, to bury her a second time. For according to Edelman, the redemptive reading of Antigone (and I argue of Goldman as well) renders an Antigone who "comes out ...only by coming *back* to the intelligibility that she...renounced, confirming, in the process, the legitimacy of the institutions of legitimation..." (105). These are "institutions of legitimation" that Goldman repudiated at every opportunity. Hence her inability to foresee the end of her Ideal that could not "take root in the old" (Goldman quoted in Wehling 37).

Viewing Emma Goldman through Lacan's Antigone, however, leaves us with a Goldman who serves as a resistance to the mechanism of sense itself. This Goldman figured the death drive of the social. Her repudiation of the social mores of her day aimed at a place beyond the good. Her monstrosity and danger resulted from her persistence in a demand for one thing only, her beautiful Ideal, in the face of exile and death. Goldman confronted her publics with knowledge in the Real, that the big Other itself is barred: there is no external guarantee of meaning. Like Antigone, in Copjec's words, Goldman "gives herself her own law and does not seek validation from any other authority" (42). Also like Lacan's Antigone, Goldman was illuminated. She caused her audiences to "blink." The truth she evoked confronted her audiences with the impossibility of social order and the reality that those who were excluded from the social order served no other purpose than to mask the lack in the heart of being and sociality. All the many descriptions of Goldman cited earlier that add to Goldman elements of fire, explosion, and electricity prove the existence of Goldman's "strange" illumination.

When applied to Goldman, Lacan's version of psychoanalytic theory gives us immense explanatory power concerning the dangerous persuasiveness of a figure that resists rational argument and direct identification with an audience. As Campbell noted more than two decades

ago, a strictly rhetorical analysis of Emma Goldman cannot explain her danger. Instead, we need access to terms that allow us to discuss that which disrupts every signification within the social. The concepts of the Real, desire, *das Ding* and the death drive give us a Goldman who will forever insist on keeping open the void of Antigone's tomb. In her autobiography, *Living My Life*, Goldman avers that she dedicates her life to "her beautiful ideal" in part to secure "everybody's right to beautiful, radiant things" (56). To that I would only add that we remember Goldman as one who *momentarily* became such a "beautiful, radiant, thing" in itself many times throughout her life in America.

## Chapter Two

### “If You See a Good Fight, Get In It”: Vernon Johns and the Analytic Ethos

*Because knowledge has lengthened the cords by which we are tethered to ignorance and weakness, do we forget the worlds beyond our knowledge on which our peace depends. – Vernon Johns*

When Vernon Johns, predecessor to Martin Luther King, Jr. as minister of Dexter Avenue Baptist Church in Montgomery, Alabama, was asked if he had any last words for the congregation that just voted to accept his fifth resignation, he rose from his seat, faced the congregation, and said, “Kiss my ass” (Cooney “Chapter 25” ¶ 16). Johns’s tenure at the church, like the rest of his career, was certainly tumultuous. He was known by African-Americans at the time, however, as among the “foremost triumvirate of their preachers, along with Mordecai Johnson and Howard Thurman” (Branch 6). Although Johns has since faded into near obscurity, there are still some, such as Johns’s unpublished biographer, Patrick L. Cooney, who claim that Johns was a prophet and the actual father of the movement for civil rights. Even civil rights leader, Ralph David Abernathy, admits that Johns had long been “preparing the way,” and he was a “forerunner of the whole civil rights movement” (quoted in Luker 203). Wyatt Walker, former CEO of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC), said that Johns was “the greatest preacher I’ve known, living, dead, or unborn” (quoted in Luker 203).

Johns is not well-known in academia. In fact, no one in the discipline of rhetoric has ever mentioned Vernon Johns in print. Cooney argues that Johns’s legacy is entirely too antiracist for the likes of the ivory tower. He claims that “both whites and blacks are still scared of the thought of Vernon Johns” (“Chapter 1” ¶ 2). For Cooney, it is Johns’s prophetic ethos that continues to threaten all of society. Cooney insists that “there are many people writing about Johns who do not really understand him. They do not understand him because they have never had the feeling

of prophesy run through them. To them he was abrasive, aggressive, socially clumsy, and insulting” (“Chapter 1” ¶ 6). Charles Emerson Boddie points to a tragic fire to explain Johns’s obscurity. Reporting the fire, Johns writes, “A purifying fire came through here the other day and burnt up everything from the grand piano to the baby’s pot” (quoted in Boddie 65). Hence, the fire destroyed all of Johns’s notes and sermons. Taylor Branch, historian of the civil rights movement, lends Johns’s refusal to write his sermons down as the cause of his absence from scholarly work. According to Branch, “Johns was a maverick who seldom wrote anything down and who thought nothing of walking into distinguished assemblies wearing mismatched socks, with farm mud on his shoes” (10). Johns’s own daughter, Jeanne Johns Adkins, remembers, “He was the world’s most disorganized person. He would just print these, pitch them into the trunk of his car and if he just happened to have one left when he got back home, we would see it. So, in terms of keeping things, we have very few sermons on paper” (quoted in Cooney “Chapter 1” ¶ 7).

Despite the many explanations for Johns’s obscurity, the fact remains, in the words of Cooney:

The three great pushes for civil rights in the United States were the Adam Clayton Powell, Jr. campaign against Jim Crow in the North, the 1954 Supreme Court decision *Brown vs. the Board of Education of Topeka, Kansas*, and the Martin Luther King, Jr. attack on segregation in the South. Few people realize this, but the one man who influenced all three events was Vernon Johns. (“Chapter 1” ¶ 5)

In this chapter, I will turn to Lacan’s theory of the four discourses in his *Seminar XVII: The Other Side of Psychoanalysis* to offer my own explanation for why such an apparently central

figure in the history of civil rights is mostly forgotten today. The use of Lacanian psychoanalysis is particularly instructive in explaining why the historical narrative of the civil rights movement cannot allow Johns a place. In a somewhat similar study concerning *The Confessions of Nat Turner*, Merrill Cole explains, “Psychoanalysis insists on what conscious reason cannot surmise – on what resists the most trenchant efforts of interpretive recuperation” (262). He continues that psychoanalysis allows us to provide “the inexpressible a voice” in contrast to “doctoring it for rational explanation” (266).

Lacan’s theory of the four discourses is his attempt at a theory of communication. His theory, unlike all of the others, presupposes that communication must always fail. In Lacan’s own words, “Since we have signifiers, we must understand one another, and this is precisely why we don’t understand one another” (*Seminar XVII* 33). Taking seriously the failure of the communicative act, Lacan offers four different social links or ways of dealing with the impossibility that lies at the heart of any attempt at communication. The four positions one can take in relation to the lack in the Other are the discourse of the master (to govern), the discourse of the university (to educate), the discourse of the hysteric (to protest), and the discourse of the analyst (to revolutionize). Allowing that Johns inhabited the ethos of the analytic discourse in certain pivotal moments of his campaigns illuminates the contours of his antiracist stance. In effect, Johns worked to separate his congregation from the master signifier “whiteness” that ordered its knowledge. Johns made of himself an excremental remainder. Viewing Johns as serving the role of analyst helps to explain why he was constantly fired from his preaching jobs in his time, as well as why many have not heard of him today.

After explaining Lacan’s theory of the four discourses, it becomes necessary to interrogate the claim that Johns served as a prophet. In his seminal work, *The Prophetic*



*Tradition and Radical Rhetoric in America*, James Darsey makes a case for a radical rhetoric that aligns with the tradition of the Old Testament prophets. Breaking from the classical rhetorical tradition, Darsey explains the rhetoric of those who do not seek identification with their audiences, but instead valorize the message above all else. Many have referred to Johns as a prophet, and at first sight, it might seem that he quite easily falls into rank with the American Revolutionists, Wendell Phillips, and Eugene Debs. Taking the prophetic tradition together with Lacan's four discourses, however, reveals that Vernon Johns was in fact not a prophet, and while his rhetoric might at times appear to be influenced by Yahweh's covenant, Johns's most controversial elements do not fit squarely within Darsey's paradigm. Further, if Johns is not a prophet, he also cannot be called the father of the civil rights movement. In fact, Johns resisted embodying the various "names of the father" throughout his career. The rupture created by Johns in Montgomery might have psychologically prepared his audience for the coming of Martin Luther King, Jr. and the master signifier, "civil rights," but Johns aimed at something much more fundamental and certainly more traumatic than a struggle for rights. It is through psychoanalysis that Johns's rhetorical failure can be viewed as something much more radical.

#### LACAN AND THE FOUR DISCOURSES

In Lacan's *Seminar XVII: The Other Side of Psychoanalysis*, Lacan defines discourse as a "necessary structure that goes well beyond speech, which is always more or less occasional" (12). He continues that "discourse can clearly subsist without words. It subsists in certain fundamental relations which would literally not be able to be maintained without language" (13). Hence, Lacan's discourse is a formal structure enabled by language, yet "preceding" any specific speech content. For Lacan, each discourse refers to a different fundamental relationship in

language that results in a particular social bond (Verhaeghe “From Impossibility” 4). Further, the formal structure of discourse determines the particular speech that can exist within it.

The four discourses result from four different positions that occur in the structure, as well as four terms that can occupy the different positions. The upper left position of the structure belongs to the agent of the discourse. According to Lacan, the position of agent is the dominant position, but dominant “does not imply dominance, in the sense in which this dominance is supposed to be...” (Lacan 43). Lacan continues, “Let’s say that one can give, for example, different substances to this dominant according to the discourse” (43). The position that exhibits dominance over the agent is actually the position on the bottom left of the structure. The bottom left position reflects the truth of the discourse, which according to Mark Bracher is always a hidden truth: “The bottom left position is the place of (hidden) truth – that is, of the factor that supports, grounds, underwrites, and gives rise to the dominant factor, or constitutes the condition of its possibility, but is repressed by it” (54). In other words, the position of truth can be viewed as that which motivates the agent in the dominant position. Taken together, the top and bottom of the left side of the structure reflect the speaker of the discourse.

The right side of the structure belongs to the receiver of the discourse. On the top right side is the position of the Other. This position, in Bracher’s words, “is occupied by the factor in the receiving subject that is called into action by the dominant factor in the message” (54). This is the position of interpellation, which is a precondition for the understanding of a message. The bottom right (and final) position is constituted by what is produced by a particular discourse. Again, in the words of Bracher, “What receivers are thus compelled to produce (implicitly and even unconsciously) as a result of their allowing themselves to be thus interpellated is represented by the position of production, the bottom right” (54).

The formal structure, however, does not stop with the positions. There are two important disjunctions that speak to the failure that Lacan argues is internal to communication. At the top level of the structure, between speaker and receiver, there is a fundamental impossibility. This impossibility is defined by Lacan as resulting from the fact “that in every formalized field of truth there are truths that one can never demonstrate” (*Seminar XVII* 163). Hence, because the agent can never fully verbalize the truth of his/her desire found in the bottom left position, it is impossible for him/her to transmit that desire to the other found in the top right position of the structure. The elimination of this impossibility would result in a Habermasian ideal speech situation, but according to Verhaeghe, “The agent is only apparently the agent. The ego does not speak, it is spoken” (“From Impossibility” 5).

The second disjunction is found on the bottom level of the structure. This disjunction is marked by impotence, or in other words, the inability of the product of the discourse to match the truth of the agent. Lacan says, “Whatever the signs, whatever the master signifiers that come to be inscribed in the place of the agent, under no circumstances will production have a relationship to truth” (174). Hence, while most communication theories aim at eradicating noise in order to arrive at a perfect communication situation, Lacan’s communication theory is marked by the two disjunctions of impossibility and impotence.

Lacan’s four positions in discourse can be filled by four different terms. These terms, however, only make sense when maintained in a certain order. The four terms are: S1 (master signifier), S2 (knowledge), *a* (surplus *jouissance* and object cause of desire), and \$ (the split or divided subject). Lacan defines the four terms of the structure of discourse in the following way:

...at the very instant at which S1 intervenes in the already constituted field of the other signifiers [S2 or knowledge], insofar as they are already articulated with one another as such, that, by intervening in another system, this \$, which I have called the subject as divided, emerges...Finally, we have stressed that something defined as a loss emerges from this trajectory. This is what the letter to be read as object *a* designates. (15)

Master signifiers (S1) are what offer a sense of unity and identity to the subject. Paraphrasing Lacan, Mark Bracher defines the master signifiers as resulting from “the urge to master (*maître*) myself by ‘being myself’ (*m’être*) to myself – to have an identity in which I can recognize myself and be encountered and recognized by others” (24). Master signifiers are the “god terms” that bear our identity, and like “god terms,” master signifiers do not correspond to a stable signified. In other words, “whereas other terms and the values and assumptions they bear may be challenged by one who receives a message, master signifiers are simply accepted as having a value or validity that goes without saying” (Bracher 25). Because master signifiers can be repeated and communicated, they give one the sense of “temporal continuity and coherence” (Bracher 24).

S2 or knowledge in Lacan’s theory of discourse stands for the network of all other signifiers. These signifiers come to be ordered by the master signifier. Lacan provides an instructive example of the way that master signifiers come to intervene in knowledge, otherwise referred to as S2, when he talks about the academic process of citation: “Suppose that ... someone cites a sentence indicating where it comes from – the author’s name, Mr. Ricoeur, for instance. Suppose that someone cites the same sentence, and that they put it in my name. This can definitely not have the same sense in the two cases” (*Seminar XVII* 37). In other words,

master signifiers, such as the citation of an author's name, give meaning and order the other signifiers in the discourse by referring them back to the master signifier.

The third term in the four discourses is the *object a*. Lacan's use of the term *object a* is fairly ambiguous in his writings. The *object a*, which corresponds to Lacan's order of the Real, has a dual nature. According to Slavoj Žižek:

[First,] we have the Real as the starting point, the basis, the foundation of the process of symbolization..., the Real which in a sense *precedes* the symbolic order and is subsequently structured by it when it gets caught in its network: this is the great Lacanian motif of symbolization as a process which mortifies, drains off...the fullness of the Real of the living body. But the Real is at the same time the product, remainder, leftover,...the excess which escapes symbolization and is as such produced by the symbolization itself...In so far as the kernel of the Real is *jouissance*, this duality takes the form of a difference between *jouissance*, enjoyment, and *plus-de-jouir*, the surplus of enjoying.  
(quoted in Bracher 40)

The *object a* designates what is necessarily left out of speech, because it cannot be communicated through language, even though language is its precondition. The *object a* can be thought of as the loss of the *jouissance* that occurs when one assumes identity with his/her master signifiers. Žižek calls the *object a* the excess that resists and rejects a particular message (*Object a* 107). He also refers to it as “the ultimate inconsistency and failure of the big Other, that is, for the symbolic order's inability to guarantee the subject's symbolic identity” (*Object a* 116). It is because we never fully coincide with our master signifiers that an excess of *jouissance* erupts.

The fourth and final term in the discourses is the divided or split subject, represented by the matheme,  $\$$ . For Lacan, every symbolic subject is divided between the signifiers that represent him/her and that which resists symbolization, the *object a*. The split subject ( $\$$ ) is the castrated subject, the subject marked by the loss of *jouissance* by virtue that he/she must enter the symbolic order as a sexed subject. Paul Verhaeghe explains the divided subject succinctly:

The element lost in the process of becoming a human being is being itself, the pure being, the real, the thing without a name, leaving us with a basic lack as a condition for our becoming ... Thus, right from the start, the subject is divided between the necessary loss of its being on the one hand and the ever alienating meaning in the Other on the other hand. ("Causation" 177)

Hence, the divided subject is divided within by language.

The four discourses result from the circulation of the four terms around the four positions in a fixed order. As a theory of discourse, Lacan begins with his famous formula that the signifier represents the subject for another signifier (*Seminar XVII* 89). The master signifier, S1, is the signifier that represents the subject for the other signifier (S2). The first two terms of the discourse theory are not different from most other communication theories. The sender (S1) sends a message to a receiver (S2). For Lacan, however, what lies beneath this standard formula is the fantasy ( $\$ \diamond a$ ), and the fantasy is repressed. The formula for fantasy represents the divided subject's relationship to *object a*. While the terms only make sense in the order given by Lacan, each quarter turn of the terms around the positions gives rise to a different discourse, or social bond.

The first discourse is the discourse of the master. In the master's discourse, the master signifier (S1) is in the dominant position on the top left of the structure. The speaker in the discourse of the master excludes the unconscious, or in Saul Newman's words "the knowledge that is *not known* – as this would jeopardize the ego's sense of certainty" (304). The master signifier addresses itself to the battery of other signifiers that constitute knowledge (S2). The receiver of the message, by allying S2 with the master signifiers, produces *a*, or that which cannot be symbolized by the message. At the position of truth in the master's discourse, one finds the divided subject (\$). In repressing his/her division, the master valorizes and attempts "to enact an autonomous, self-identical ego" (Bracher 59).

For Lacan, the discourse of the master is the dominant discourse. No matter how many times one turns the terms across the four positions, he/she always ends up in the master's discourse. This is why, in his article, "Interrogating the Master: Lacan and Radical Politics," Saul Newman attests that Lacan's four discourses "show that the link between revolution and authority is constituted by a structural, and indeed inevitable, relation between discursive positions" (304). In the master's discourse, the master in the top left position attempts to dominate knowledge.

It is important to note that Lacan's *Seminar XVII* occurred in response to the student strikes in France in May 1968. In *Seminar XVII*, Lacan writes, "What I mean by [the master's discourse] is that it embraces everything, even what thinks of itself as revolutionary or more exactly as what is romantically called Revolution with a capital R. The master's discourse accomplishes its own revolution in the other sense of doing a complete circle" (87). This explains why Lacan famously told students after May 1968 that what they were ultimately

looking for was a new master, and that they would certainly find one. In what follows, I will show how the discourses of the university and the hysteric remain indebted to that of the master.

The discourse that Lacan argues dominated in the late twentieth-century is the discourse of the university. In the discourse of the university, S2, or knowledge, stands in the dominant position. S2 addresses itself to *a*, representing in this discourse the raw subject of *jouissance* emptied of any preconstituted knowledge. The product of the discourse is \$, the subject divided between the signifier and *jouissance*. In the position of truth in the university discourse one finds the master signifiers on which the S2 is covertly based. In other words, while knowledge in the position of agent might appear whole and complete, it only gains meaning through implicit reference to the master signifier, which grounds the discourse of knowledge.

For example, locating the discourse of the university in the discipline of psychology, Ian Parker writes, “Psychological knowledge requires a guarantee that it is correct, a *master signifier* that will function in such a way that those new to the discipline . . . will see that it rests upon something” (71). Parker isolates the master signifiers grounding psychological knowledge in the names of “past masters,” such as Skinner or Chomsky and in certain terms, such as “reliability” and “validity” (71). In rhetoric, the master signifiers that underlie rhetorical knowledge are names, such as Burke, and concepts, such as “identification,” “rationality,” and “persuasion.” The covert relationship between the S2’s reliance on S1 becomes especially clear when one raises criticisms of the master signifiers. For example, in a criticism of Kenneth Burke, his name as master signifier functions to ground the knowledge despite a renunciation of his ideas. Lacan equates the discourse of science with that of the university. In the position of the covert master signifier, he finds the commandment, “Continue. March on. Keep on knowing more and more” (*Seminar XVII* 105).



In *Lacan, Discourse, and Social Change: A Psychoanalytic Cultural Criticism*, Mark Bracher's project is to liberate cultural criticism from the grips of university discourse. He writes, "We begin our academic careers as students, in the position of *a*, receivers of the system of knowledge (S2). Subjected in this position to a dominating totalized system of knowledge/belief (S2), we are made to produce ourselves as (alienated) subjects (\$) of this system" (55). The university discourse can be detected wherever we encounter the "mill of knowledge-for-its-own-sake" (Bracher 57). The university discourse is not exclusive to the institution of the university, however. Lacan finds this discourse in the rise of capitalism, science, and bureaucracy. Lacan says, "...what happens between the classical master's discourse and that of the modern master, whom we call capitalist, is a modification in the place of knowledge" (31). Elsewhere, Lacan says, "Understand this as what is affirmed as being nothing other than knowledge, which in ordinary language is called bureaucracy" (31).

The third discourse, and a necessary step on the road to analytic discourse, is the discourse of the hysteric. Lacan says, "What the analyst establishes as analytic experience can be put simply – it's the hysterization of discourse. In other words, it is the structural introduction, under artificial conditions, of the hysteric's discourse" (33). In the discourse of the hysteric, the divided subject (\$) is placed in the dominant position. The divided subject addresses the master for an answer regarding the enigma of his/her desire. The hysterical position is defined by Bracher as "...the subject's refusal to embody – literally, to give his or her body over to – the master signifiers that constitute the subject positions that society, through language, makes available to individuals" (66). In provoking the master signifier from the Other, the hysteric still remains bound to the master. According to Bracher, "The problem with the discourse of the Hysteric lies in its demanding the master signifier from the other rather than producing it

oneself" (67). Hence in the discourse of the hysteric, the divided subject (\$) addresses the Other for a master signifier (S1). The Other produces knowledge (S2), which only takes the hysterical subject further from an answer to the enigma of his/her desire. In other words, when the hysteric receives a response from the Other, the hysteric maintains, "That is not it." The discourse of the hysteric puts the abyss of desire to the forefront. According to Verhaeghe, "The answer, given by the master [S2] will always be beside the point, because the true answer concerns object a, the forever-lost object, which cannot be put into words" ("From Impossibility" 98). What is repressed in the discourse of the hysteric, then, is *object a*. The division (alienation in language) of the subject is repressed in the discourses of the master and the university, but it finds full expression in the discourse of the hysteric.

The final of the four discourses, and the only discourse that Lacan argues can break from the hold of the master, is the discourse of the analyst. In the discourse of the analyst, it is *object a*, taken as the object cause of desire, that occupies the dominant position. Lacan says, "The analyst himself here has to represent, in some way, the discourse's reject-producing effect [*effet de rejet*], that is, the *object a*" (44). The analyst, as *object a*, addresses the divided (hysterical) subject (\$). In Lacan's words:

... let me point out that in the structure of what's called the analyst's discourse, the analyst, you see, says to the subject, "Off you go, say everything that comes into your head, however divided it might be, no matter how clearly it demonstrates that either you are not thinking or else you are nothing at all, it may work, what you produce will always be admissible [*receivable*]. (107)

What the analysand produces in the discourse of the analyst (located in the bottom right position) is the master signifier. It is a master signifier, however, produced by the subject in relation to the *object a* offered by the analyst. In other words, the master signifier produced by the subject in the analytic discourse is a master signifier provoked by the subject's confrontation with the abyss of desire and lack of being instead of the master signifier that promises the subject a timeless coherence.

At the position of truth, or the bottom left position, in the analyst's discourse, one finds knowledge (S2). Lacan says, "It's on his side [the analyst's side] that there is S2, that there is knowledge – whether he acquires this knowledge through listening to his analysand, or whether it is already acquired, locatable knowledge, which at a certain level can be limited to analytic know-how" (35). The analyst's knowledge lies underneath the message of the analysand's *object a*. Bracher provides a clear explanation of the discourse of the analyst:

The discourse of the Analyst promotes psychological change by placing in the dominant position of the sender's message the *a* belonging to the receiver of the message or analysand – precisely what has been excluded from symbolization and suppressed by the discourse of the Master. In this way, the discourse of the analyst interpellates the analysand to recognize, acknowledge, and deal with this excluded portion of being, to the extent of producing a new master signifier (S1) in response to it. (68)

Through the discourse of the analyst, the receiver comes to identify with the *object a* that has been excluded from his/her being.

It is the discourse of the analyst that I will attribute to Vernon Johns. Viewing Johns as an analyst in terms of the analyst's discourse not only offers an explanation for why Johns's career

was marked by failure and rejection, but also why he does not fit comfortably within the narrative of the civil rights movement. In addition, considering Johns as an analyst helps to give voice to the part of Johns's campaigns that is disavowed by all of his interlocutors simply because it does not seem to make sense within the prophetic paradigm they employ. Before turning to Johns, I will examine Darsey's definition of the prophetic rhetor in terms of Lacan's theory of the four discourses.

#### DARSEY'S PROPHET AND LACAN'S FOUR DISCOURSES

In *The Prophetic Tradition and Radical Rhetoric in America*, James Darsey traces a rhetorical tradition that cannot be explained through recourse to the classical rhetorical model. Darsey writes, "From the time of Aristotle forward, the tradition of public discourse in the West has been one of civility, diplomacy, compromise, and negotiation" (4). In contrast, Darsey unveils a tradition of radical rhetoric that follows from the prophets of the Old Testament. This opposed tradition is "characterized by a steadfast refusal to adapt itself to the perspectives of its audience, a rhetoric *in extremis*, indicates something more complex than the breakdown of order; it indicates an alternative order; a rationality not accounted for in the Graeco-Roman model" (5-6).

In accord with the Old Testament prophets, the prophetic rhetor throws into doubt the common practice of judging the success of a text in terms of the rhetor's ability to create identification with his/her audience. The prophetic rhetor speaks in response to a call that he/she cannot avoid. He/She becomes nothing more than a vessel that transmits a transcendent message to a people. According to Darsey, "Prophetic speech is incomprehensible except as the speech of a divine messenger; the prophet, properly understood, speaks for another" (16). The prophetic *ethos*, then, belongs not with the speaker, but rather with the transcendent "other" who issued the

call. “The prophet succeeds in making his *ethos*, the authenticity of his call, the paramount question” (Darsey 31). The prophetic *logos* is self-evident. Darsey writes, “It is impossible to adduce evidence for God’s law, for it contains its own evidence; it is self-evident, clear upon viewing” (19). Prophecy, therefore, “shatters the unity of rhetoric. *Inventio* and *actio* are not products of the same agent” (16).

Interestingly, the model for Darsey’s prophetic rhetor is located in Lacan in the instantiation of the master’s discourse. In *Seminar XVII*, Lacan locates the emergence of the discourse of the master in the anathemas pronounced by Yahweh. In “Enjoy Your Stay: Structural Change in *Seminar XVII*,” Oliver Feltham, paraphrasing Lacan, writes, “In the beginning, there was Yahweh, the Old Testament God, pronouncing anathemas through the prophets. Yahweh’s condemnations – the S1as command or imperative – instituted the master discourse” (183). In addition to allying the prophet’s command with the master signifier (S1), Lacan argues, “What is certain is that what the prophets are about does not have anything to do, this time around, with *jouissance*” (115). Lacan places the message of the prophet in the dominant position of the master’s discourse, a discourse that completely represses *jouissance*.

Lacan’s estimation of prophetic speech as lodging itself within the discourse of the master is consistent with Darsey’s definition of prophetic rhetoric. First, the prophetic rhetor’s truth lies in his division. Darsey writes that the prophets “were called to deliver a message that was not their own, often against their will” (16). Hence, the prophet was divided between a transcendent, unquestionable message (S1) and a *jouissance* that could not be fully assumed. The prophet is positioned as servant to the “truth” of the message. Second, the aim of the prophetic rhetor is to confront an audience that has veered from the word of the covenant, often in a time of crisis. The prophetic speech act seeks to dominate the knowledge on the side of the other with

the master signifier of the sacred covenant. According to Darsey, “Rhetorics of radical reform and the discursive tradition of Old Testament prophets share... a desire to bring the practice of the people into accord with a sacred principle, and an uncompromising, often excoriating stance toward a reluctant audience” (16).

Darsey maps the prophetic form of discourse operating in American radical rhetoric from the American Revolutionists, to the rhetoric of Wendell Phillips, and finally to the speeches of Eugene Debs. Consistent with Lacan’s claim that the discourse of the master gave way to the discourse of the university as the dominant discursive structure in the twentieth-century, Darsey argues that “the career of Eugene Debs... marked the end of an era” (112). In the twentieth-century, society lost its “vital center” (113). Darsey continues, “In such an environment, the prophet is not possible” (113). While the need for “authority, judgment, and meaning are tenacious” (Darsey 113), or in terms of psychoanalysis, we can never live without master signifiers, radical rhetoric in America was forced to change form.

The university discourse features knowledge (S2) as agent that is covertly based on master signifiers. Darsey locates the transition from the period of the prophet to the period in which the prophet is no longer possible in the erosion of community and the general death of God as a uniting principle. Yahweh’s commandment could no longer stand in the position of agent, but instead it was (repressed) driven below the bar. That the form of discourse changed to that of the university discourse is evidenced by Darsey’s “A Vision of the Apocalypse: Joe McCarthy’s Rhetoric of the Fantastic,” in which McCarthy’s knowledge (“I have in my hand,” “The file shows,”...) (Darsey 136)) lodges itself in the dominant position of his discourse. Viewed together with Lacan’s theory of the four discourses, it becomes apparent that in order to be counted as a prophet, not only would Vernon Johns’s rhetoric have to acquiesce to Darsey’s

prophetic rhetor, but his rhetoric would also have to be consistent with Lacan's discourse of the master. In the following section, I will explore Johns's campaigns for social change in terms of Lacan's four discourses and Darsey's prophetic tradition. It will become clear that Johns cannot be counted as a prophet. Instead, Johns embodied the revolutionary discourse of the analyst.

#### VERNON JOHNS THE PROPHET?

Dr. Vernon Johns was born in 1892 in Farmville, Prince Edward County, Virginia" (Boddie 62). He went on to graduate from Oberlin Seminary and the graduate school of theology at the University of Chicago (Branch 9). In the 1920s, Johns's fame as a scholar and preacher won him some of the best pulpits and teaching jobs in the country. Throughout his career, Johns held the pulpit at a number of churches, maintained a demanding lecture schedule, served as president of Virginia Seminary, and was the first African-American to publish his work in *Best Sermons* (Branch 9-10). In addition, Johns was the predecessor to Martin Luther King, Jr. at Dexter Avenue Baptist Church only a couple years before the Montgomery bus boycotts.

Johns was a legend in his own time. Ralph Luker comments that in the eighteen months between becoming pastor of Dexter Avenue Baptist Church and the beginning of the bus boycott, King identified himself as Johns's successor because Johns's name was much more recognizable than his own (201). While there are only a few who write about and study Johns, they all agree that he served as a prophet. There are several points at which Johns seems to support the definition of the prophetic rhetor offered by Darsey. Patrick L. Cooney locates Johns's prophetic *ethos* in his ability to understand the system of racist apartheid, especially in the South and his courage in speaking the truth about racism to audiences who were largely content with their place in the Jim Crow South. Cooney writes, "He was a man who said what

others were afraid to say. While inspiring the few, his words made most of his listeners uncomfortable, and this in turn would anger them” (“Chapter One” ¶ 12). Consistent with the call of Darsey’s prophet, Cooney notes that the prophet, particularly Johns, “judges the people not by contemporary norms, but from the point of view of God” (“Chapter Two” ¶25). Charles Emerson Boddie, who actually knew Johns, agrees that Johns “needled the power structure unmercifully” (68).

It was not only the power structure, however, that became the victim of Johns’s wrath. According to Taylor Branch, “His most consistent pulpit campaign concerned the image and economic status of Montgomery Negroes” (15- 16). It was Johns’s own congregation that was at the receiving end of much of his judgment. Boddie remembers, “As he forged ahead, one could feel the powerful surge of passion oozing from his every pore as the six-foot bulk of roaring exhortation, stoked by the terrible need felt by this square-jawed prophet to shake his race loose from the indolence and lethargy that strangled it, lashed out with withering tongue to correct the condition” (69).

Like a prophetic rhetor, Johns separated himself from his many audiences. Darsey argues that the prophet “does not speak as a member of the group he is addressing, he does not speak in the inclusive ‘we’” (26). Johns sat in judgment over his mostly black middle-class audience. He “excoriated Dexter members for their attachment to status and prestige above work. Under these oppressive conditions, Johns thundered from the pulpit, it was almost criminally shortsighted for educated Negroes to cling to titles and symbolic niches...” (Branch 16). Johns was uncompromising and persisted in the delivery of his sermons even under the threat of death and legal troubles. Of prophetic rhetoric Darsey writes, “What prophesy is not is reasonable. As a manifestation of God’s will, the word is absolute and immutable; it is beyond the reach and



power of humankind; it is sacred in the critical sense of being separate, untouchable, pure, and it exercises its claim on its auditors because it is; it cannot be compromised” (21). When Johns posted the title of a sermon, “It’s Safe to Murder Negroes in Montgomery,” on the outdoor bulletin board at Dexter, he was arrested. He was eventually let go, but Johns still committed himself to deliver his planned sermon. The Saturday night before the sermon, the Ku Klux Klan burned a cross on the church lawn. Johns ended his sermon the next day that violence against African-Americans would continue “as long as Negroes let it happen” (quoted in Branch 23). While this is only one example of many, it is clear that Johns certainly did not compromise.

Evidence of Johns’s prophetic *ethos* is often taken from his published sermon, “Transfigured Moments.” In this sermon, Johns says, “It is good to be the possessor of some mountain-top experience” (§ 6). Johns’s sermon is packed with references to the prophets of the Old Testament speaking from higher places. He even adds Abraham Lincoln to the likes of Elijah and Luther. Consistent with Darsey’s prophetic rhetor, Johns does not put himself into his sermons. Echoes of Darsey’s argument are mirrored in Johns’s statement, “And there is a power on the Mount of Transfiguration which kindles tongues and sends forth in evil times for the service of justice” (§23). Johns ends his sermon:

But on the mountain-top, perspective is possible; above the confusion of the plains [S2], the visitant beholds Moses [\$] in one age, Elijah [\$] in another, Jesus, Luther and Lincoln [\$], each in another; all joining hands across the Ages and moving humanity [S2] in the direction of that “one far off, divine event to which the whole creation moves [S1]”. It is good for us to be here. (§ 38)

Johns certainly seems to praise and embody the role of prophet in his sermon “Transfigured Moments.”

Johns’s interlocutors claim that Johns’s role as prophet helps to explain why Johns was continuously rejected throughout his career. By looking at the few sermons Johns left behind, it might seem clear that Johns fit perfectly into Darsey’s paradigm of the prophetic rhetor. Cooney argues that “everyone likes the King story because it is an American success story. Everyone was brave with King. But, the Johns’s story is the story of blacks and whites accommodating to terrible evils to which Johns was not willing to accommodate” (§56). What is left out by those who call him a prophet, however, is another side to Johns’s campaign that does not make sense within the prophetic model. It is actually this disavowed aspect of Johns’s career that I will argue places him squarely within the structure of the discourse of the analyst.

#### VERNON JOHNS AND THE DISCOURSE OF THE ANALYST

Speaking of the “other side” of Vernon Johns, Cooney writes, “He was a prophet because he rejected the entire system of apartheid, but he was mistaken in his choice of methods to destroy that system” (“Chapter 9” §34). Johns’s “choice of methods” to destroy racism throughout his career was found in his love for farm work and agrarian production. While Johns’s work in his farm was a source of embarrassment to his many congregations, it also seems to be a source of embarrassment for those who study him. Johns’s “other” campaign contradicts his prophetic ethos, as well as his place in the narrative of the movement for civil rights.

To those who study and write about Johns, his refusal to separate his farming from his role in the church was nothing more than an error that undercut his effectiveness as a prophet.

Charles Emerson Boddie claims, “His attempts, noble but abortive, failed largely because of his love for the farm” (68). Branch recounts:

Vernon Johns would preach and scold and cajole about the importance of practical work, and then he would go right outside the church and sell farm produce on the street there, under the brow of the state capitol, with Dexter men milling about in their best suits and the women in their best hats, and with the white Methodists spilling out of the church down the street. Johns peddled hams and onions, potatoes and watermelons, cabbages and sausage. Many Dexter members were mortified by the sight of their learned pastor wearing his suit on the back of a pickup. Among the milder reactions was that it “cheapened” the church. (17)

Similarly, Cooney writes, “Frankly, Johns should have concentrated more on politics and less on economic. He should have farmed less and published more. He wasted much of his talent by not concentrating on his intellectual side in deference to his business side (which he was terrible at anyway)” (“Chapter 9” ¶34).

It was Johns’s “business side” that Darsey would argue disqualified him as a prophet. Darsey writes, “I have tried to demonstrate in radical rhetoric a consistent denigration of the idea that political and economic power is necessarily connected to righteousness” (123). Darsey finds arguments based on economic power in the rhetoric of King and the Civil rights Act of 1964, which “originated in the Senate Commerce Committee...” and was “upheld by the Supreme Court under the power of Congress to regulate interstate commerce, not on the power of Congress, under the Fourteenth Amendment, to promote equality in the private sector” (126). Such economic arguments become lodged within the discourse of the university that Lacan

argues was characteristic of the day. Johns, however, resisted the structure of the discourse of the university as well.

Vernon Johns was consistently critical of institutionalized education and the form of the discourse of the university. Cooney counts Johns's refusal to publish as "the single worst part of the Vernon Johns philosophy" ("Chapter 9 ¶ 31). Johns, in contrast, repeated a Harvard professor saying that "the A.B. Degree should be conferred upon every American at birth so that he could devote his whole life to something useful instead of spending the first years of his manhood in college" (quoted in Cooney "Chapter 9" ¶ 37). Johns's friend, Henry Powell said that "Johns had that country speech. He sounded like one of the worst crackers you ever heard with 'you all' and 'what not.' Since he was an educated man, it makes one suspicious that possibly Johns cultivated this speech pattern to further set himself off from what he regarded as the pomposity of the black middle class" (quoted in Cooney "Chapter 9" ¶56).

It was not only through a refusal to publish and "act like a scholar" that Johns refused the discourse of the university. In an article published in the *West Virginia Digest* in 1940, Johns displays rage at the imposition of a supposedly complete knowledge (S2) onto the "little brutes" (*object a*):

Then one glorious day when Mr. Charlie Big Brute was laying down the law and the "truth" and the little brutes crouched around, hats in paws, braying their sycophant approval; Old Charlie observed one little fellow with posture erect, hat on and a quizzical look. Mr. Charlie Big Brute was simply furious. With blood-shot eyes, distended nostrils and veins swollen like whip cords, he fastened his gaze upon the rebel in the ranks and laying down the law again, he shouted, "Do you hear?" "Hear!" "Hear!" screeched the

groveling apes. “And you, little upstart?” lumbered Big Charlie... Answered the little rebel, disdainfully: “I hear! So what?” With the first impulse in the direction of magnanimity which a brute ever felt, a face-saving impulse in this case, Old Charlie went on in a tone approaching mildness: “I said such and such is what we will and ought to do.” And the little rebel, God bless him, snickered, “Oh, yeah!” (quoted in Cooney “Chapter 11” ¶30)

Johns’s “Charlie Big Brute” represents a supposedly all-encompassing knowledge underwritten by master signifiers that is imposed on the “little brutes.” It was the “little rebel,” applauded by Johns, that refused to become an alienated subject (\$) of knowledge.

One final example of Johns’s rejection of the discourse of the university is found in his ejection from the position of President of Virginia Seminary in 1933. The students at Virginia Seminary vowed to strike until Johns was dismissed. The student demands included: “We want a president who will not convert classrooms into coal bins and chicken houses;” “We want a president who will so standardize the work done that it will be approved by the state board of education;” “We want a president whose remarks to students in chapel services will be advisory and not adverse criticism or lambaste;” “We want a president who will not stoop to the use of profanity and vulgarity in addressing the students in chapel services and in the presence of young women on the campus;” and finally, “We want a president who will not force students by the use of unreasonable means to work or comply with his inconsistent demands” (quoted in Cooney “Chapter 15” ¶5). One student, W.B. Crocker reported to the board, “Even Dr. Johns does not know what courses are being offered at Virginia Seminary” (quoted in Cooney “Chapter 15” ¶13). Vernon Johns did not fulfill the student’s or the board’s expectations of how the president of a college should act. He thoroughly rejected the form of the discourse of the university. In fact,

in comments addressing the students, faculty, and administration of Virginia Seminary after his ejection, Johns says of the “big Negroes” that they should create “their own models in preference to being the cheap imitations of others who hold them in contempt. Then some energy will be left to go into solid foundation and sound building” (quoted in Cooney “Chapter 15” ¶40).

Finally, Johns’s economic argument rejected the rise of urbanization, bureaucratization, and capitalization that accompanied the rise of the discourse of the university. Boddie proffers:

He overlooked the black migration from agrarian to urban centers. Were his attention but centered upon more sophisticated avenues of work, such as sales, business, and other white- and blue collar, cash yielding enterprises, more people might have paid attention to his expounding of economic theories. Too few could understand the strange alliance between the preaching of the Word of God and the “derogatory” tilling of the recalcitrant sod. (68)

Johns’s rejection of the role of prophet and the discourse of the master, as well as his rejection of the discourse of the university are not aspects of Johns’s career that can be easily disavowed or attributed simply to error. In fact, Johns viewed his two campaigns as part of a larger truth. Instead, finding a place for the most controversial elements of Johns’s campaigns necessitates analysis through the discourse of the analyst.

In *Desiring Whiteness: A Lacanian Analysis of Race*, Kalpana Seshadri-Crooks criticizes most scholarship on race that leaves unquestioned the subjective investment in race. For Seshadri-Crooks, it is the “unconscious resiliency of race that invites psychoanalytic exploration” (14). In other words, that the concept of race as supposedly neutral difference based on visual cues (such as skin color, hair texture, and bone structure) exists despite the fact that it is

now common knowledge that race is socially constructed speaks to the fact that racial difference has a hold on our very being as symbolic subjects. She raises the question of how a socially constructed, hence symbolic, phenomenon can be misrecognized as an extra-symbolic, or Real, category.

Seshadri-Crooks locates the master signifier “whiteness” installed in the position of truth of the university discourse. She argues that “whiteness” installs itself in the hole occasioned by the lack of a signifier of sexual difference. While “whiteness” is a wholly symbolic phenomenon, it pretends to promise subjects a sense of wholeness and coherence. The S2, or knowledge, in the realm of race orders differences based on the signifier “whiteness,” a signifier to which we are all equally subjected. Seshadri-Crooks writes, “Insofar as race is perpetuated as a meaningful category in our language, science will continue to furnish explanations of it” (14). The S2 of race in the university discourse addresses itself to the arbitrary visual cues we use to guarantee its status as “Real.” All subjects in the system of race are then produced as alienated subjects of race (\$). In her analysis, Seshadri-Crooks proposes “an adversarial aesthetics that will destabilize racial looking so that racial identity will always be uncertain and unstable” (159). The activist then, or I argue the analyst, should work to bring to the fore the unconscious fantasy structured through a desire for “whiteness” (wholeness) that determines our subjectivity.

It was precisely to separate his audiences from the unconscious master signifier (S1) “whiteness” and its endless rationalizations (S2) that Johns offered himself as object cause of desire (*object a*) through his “strange” farming campaign. Johns relentlessly chided the “Spinksterinkdum Negroes,” his senseless neologism for those middle-class African-Americans who did not realize their unconscious attachment to the master signifier, “whiteness” (Branch 12). In his published sermon, “Tranfigured Moments,” the sermon most often cited as proof of

his prophetic *ethos*, Johns speaks directly to the need to separate from the master signifier, as well as the price such a separation requires:

We need power for renunciation. In the service of social progress, justice and brotherhood there are views and possessions of which one must have power to let go. Nothing short of power will work the transformation. But we are apt to hang on to our self-love, our vantage points, our place with the strong, our purpose of self-advancement. And we get no strength for the demands laid upon us from the weaklings on our level. But here on the mountain-top is personality in which the power of renunciation rises to white heat! (¶ 20)

Hence, Johns calls on his audience to recognize their alienation in the “views and possessions of which one must have the power to let go” and to separate from given master signifiers that provide “our self-love, our vantage points, our place with the strong, our purpose of self-advancement.”

Recognizing alienation is a necessary step toward the end of the psychoanalytic process. In fact, for Lacan, every subject is a hysterical subject. The agent in the discourse of the hysteric realizes the lack and demands to know what his/her desire is. By demanding an answer from the Other, however, the hysteric makes a master out of the other. Much of Johns’s discourse follows the form of the hysterization of discourse. He brings his audience to a position in which they wonder: “Why are we what you say we are?” While Johns’s audience desires an answer to the enigma of its desire, it is structurally impossible for the answer to satisfy the hysteric, evidenced by the “impotence” between *object a* and S2 on the bottom level of the discourse of the hysteric. The hysteric needs the master in order to sustain his/her desire, and at the same time, the hysteric



needs the master to remain lacking. In order to break the bind with the master, the hysteric must be confronted with the discourse of the analyst, which encounters the divided subject with its *object a*.

Johns confronted his audience with the excluded portion of being partly through parading himself in public in such a way as to produce shame in the congregation. In his response to Seminar XVII, Jacques Alain-Miller comments on the status of shame in the practice of psychoanalysis. He says, “It is no doubt a question, in *The Other Side of Psychoanalysis*, of separating the subject from its master signifier in the analytic operation. But this assumes that he knows he has one, and that he respects it” (21). In an effort to bring the unconscious master signifier to the forefront, Miller advocates, “Making ashamed is an effort to reinstate the agency of the master signifier” (23). Johns’s congregation experienced shame at the image of their pastor dressed in sharecropper’s clothes selling produce. They experienced shame on the occasions when Johns obliged the church organist to lead the congregation in the “negro spiritual.” Johns produced “shame” in his audience through a refusal to assimilate to the dictates of “whiteness.” Viewed as a threat to their “dignity,” Johns’s acts “reinstat[e] the agency of the master signifier” in his audience in order for the audience members to separate from it.

In “Symptom and Discourse,” Éric Laurent argues, “The paradox of the ethics of analysis is that on the side of the analyst there is a ‘make oneself into the being of abjection,’ while on the side of the analysand the dignity of the signifier is set to work” (251). Johns’s public farming campaign can be viewed as his attempt to “make oneself into the being of abjection.” The shame inaugurated through his acts evidences the primacy of the master signifier “whiteness” in the minds of the audience.

An example of Johns's attempt to confront his audience with their desire for "whiteness," while serving as a stumbling block between the master signifier "whiteness" and the S2 with which they ordered their knowledge and sense of self-identity, is what some count as "the last straw" of Johns's tenure at Dexter Avenue Baptist Church. According to Branch:

The second, decisive incident occurred when Johns and Rufus Lewis actually drove onto the campus of Alabama State College with a truckload of watermelons. In so doing, they violated the home territory of leading church members, opening them and their church to ridicule from colleagues who were riveted by the sight of the learned Vernon Johns selling watermelons on a campus that was the spearhead of Negro advancement and prestige in the area. (24)

Incidents like the one recounted above created a problem for the congregation of Dexter and the Montgomery community. Again according to Branch, "Johns was both the highest and the lowest, the most learned and the most common, the most glorious reflection of their intellectual tastes and most obnoxious challenge to their dignity" (19). Johns provoked his congregation with the shame of their *jouissance*. He challenged their allegiance to the master signifier of whiteness. Finally, he embodied an abject remainder that was finally abjected when Johns's fifth resignation was accepted by the church membership after his "watermelon incident." Like Emma Goldman before him, Johns's paraded the non-existence of the Other. He compelled his audience to separate from the Other. He elevated "nothing" (derogatory tilling of the land) to the dignity of the Thing, and most important, he enjoyed it.

## CONCLUSION: GET IN THE FIGHT

In this chapter, I have argued that Vernon Johns embodied the agent of the discourse of the analyst. While he might have separated his audience enough from their “dignity” to accept the program of civil rights, Vernon Johns can clearly not be called the “father of the civil rights movement.” The movement for civil rights and its rhetoric falls squarely within the discourse of the university that Johns so vehemently resisted. While the importance of the movement cannot be denied, Lacan shows us that the discourse of the university ultimately remains bound to the master. In other words, any program based on rights can only reify the same system it purports to overthrow.

I have argued that Johns made of himself an abject remainder of the structure of race. He lived life as a vagabond. In his later years, according to Branch, Martin Luther King, Jr. asked Chauncey Eskridge to undertake a mission to find Johns for advice. Eskridge found Johns in Virginia in a vacant lot of a gas station. “Inside, tending a squatter’s vegetable stand, was a silver-stubbed old relic in brogans without socks or shoelaces. Eskridge suspected that a prankster had directed him to one of the local winos” (Branch 902). When Eskridge asked Johns for some of the texts of his sermons, Johns began rattling off titles and sections of sermons. Branch concludes “always his sermons returned to the air from which they had come” (902). As an analyst, it is only appropriate that Johns did not leave behind his texts. Also appropriate is that Johns does not occupy a position in the standard narrative of the movement for civil rights.

Johns’s interlocutors offer a version of Johns who was *almost* a hero in the battle for equal rights, if not for the inability of his audience to realize that he was actually a prophet. They disavow or apologize for the aspects of Johns that I argue were his most radical. They view

Johns as an antiracist historical figure, but I offer that Johns's project aimed at the structure of race itself. The Lacanian theory of the four discourses, especially the discourse of the analyst, gives voice to the most controversial elements of Johns's campaigns. The theory allows us to surmise that abject rejection does not always represent failure. The message of Johns's self-imposed abjection and his resistance to the possibility of becoming a master signifier underlying the university discourse is still relevant today. It is vital that we also resist the university discourse's imperative to render figures, like Johns, always rational and coherent. Johns's is remembered by his family for the motto, "If you see a good fight, get it in." Psychoanalysis allows us to remember Johns as one who got in the fight as an analyst.

## Chapter Three

“Why the Fucking Bloodbath?” Ron Athey and the Identification with the *Sinthome*

*If the inside of your head gets pummeled with enough emotional blunt force trauma to splinter the psyche, you develop ways to punish the body, that fleshy prison which houses the pain. – Ron Athey*

In a scene from his performance art piece, titled *Four Scenes in a Harsh Life*, sadomasochistic performance artist, Ron Athey, makes twelve small incisions in the shape of an African tribal symbol and a queer triangle in the back of performer, Darryl Carlton. Carlton becomes a “human printing press” as prints are made with his blood on individual pieces of paper. The pieces of paper are then clipped to a washing-line pulley rigged above the heads of the audience members by Athey’s assistants (Gund).

Although the scene described above might appear unethical and immorally apolitical, there is much at stake in Athey’s version of performance art. Athey is best known for a controversial performance of *Four Scenes* at the Walker Art Center in Minneapolis in 1994. A writer for the *Minneapolis Star Tribune* erroneously reported that “spectators were stampeding out of the theater to avoid being contaminated by HIV-positive blood dripping from bloody towels that were sent winging above the audience on revolving clotheslines” (Hart 130). Not only was the reporter not in attendance at the Walker Art Center performance, but the events reported never actually happened. Furthermore, Carlton’s blood was not infected with HIV. However, the invalidity of the report did not prevent it from being picked up by media outlets all over the country.

When it was discovered that the National Endowment for the Arts contributed money to Athey’s performance, Athey became the poster child for freedom of expression on one side and the moral limits to publicity and citizenship on the other. Athey was banned from performing at

any publicly funded event in the United States. Dawn Perlmutter finds that it is no surprise that artworks incorporating blood, urine, excrement, semen, and violence do not receive public funding because to do so would be equivalent “to financing the demise of the current American political and religious structure” (8). Performance that involves “real” bodily functions or processes certainly seems to reverse one of the basic principles of theater – that it is illusionary. In fact, the “realness” of performances like Athey’s seems to be what is most threatening about them, as well as what differentiates this type of performance art from other media, such as film or literature.

It is Athey’s threat to the American socio-political structure that is the central concern of this chapter. Athey answered his critics stating, “Why the fucking bloodbath? The shit? The vomit? All performed on a well-lit stage so that, hopefully, no details will be missed. To take a stab at it, using these bodily functions, assisted by the voice, words and sound, I’m testifying. I’m wanting people to endure these real experiences, and grasp the ideas behind them” (Athey 432). Just as Athey strategically employs the use of pain in his performances to subversively “communicate” his ideas, I use Athey in this chapter, not to shock the reader, but instead to suggest that Athey’s work exemplifies the possibilities of queer resistance to the socio-political order, possibilities also envisioned, in a different way perhaps, by Lee Edelman in his highly controversial, antisocial polemic, *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive*.

In *No Future*, Edelman asserts that the queer (exemplified by the gay male in his text) cannot achieve full social equality or citizenship in the political order because the socio-political order in the West is based on a fantasy he calls reproductive futurism. Because queer practices necessarily threaten the order of reproduction through their constitutive lack of (re)productive value, the queer must necessarily inhabit the negative space that simultaneously offers “society”

its positive identity. Hence, attempts made by gay populations to achieve a sense of benign sexual difference in the current society are in vain. Edelman instead suggests that queers should accept the structural position afforded them by society. Acceding to this negative position threatens the (heteronormative) society and allows access to *jouissance*. Edelman calls the acceptance of this negative structural position *sinthomosexuality*, a position directly related to Lacan's dictum that the end of psychoanalysis is effected by the identification with the *sinthome*.

While Edelman's text abounds with fictional examples of *sinthomosexuality* from Ebenezer Scrooge to Leonard from Hitchcock's *North by Northwest*, he does not offer the reader or potential *sinthomosexual* any non-fictional examples that could give material reality to his ethical vision. As acceding to the *sinthomosexual* position shatters the subject prior to any political possibilities, the gap left by Edelman between theory and practice seems impossibly unbridgeable. A number of responses to the text, including Leo Bersani's quotation on the back of *No Future*, even wonder how queers could "survive our necessary assent to his argument" (quoted in Edelman). Despite Edelman's apparent refusal to offer the reader a plan for action, his text is groundbreaking in that it gestures toward a possible alternative to the violence of identity-based politics, a politics that ultimately reifies the same structures it purports to undermine.

In this chapter, I propose that the performance art of Ron Athey provides the example that Edelman's polemic lacks. Highlighting not only what is at stake for queer politics by occupying the *sinthomosexual* position, an analysis of Athey's performances as *sinthomosexual* performances also exemplifies why these performances must be banned in the United States, as well as how the publicity of these performances points to the collision of queer theory and practice. In other words, Athey's failure as a rhetorical figure in the United States serves as evidence of his success as a *sinthomosexual*. I will begin by explaining in further detail

Edelman's notion of *sinthomosexuality*. Next, I will address why it is important to consider the subversive effects of the sadomasochist as *sinthomosexual* in particular. Finally, I will discuss Athey's performance art. I will look specifically at the medium of performance art in general as a medium not only with the potential to disrupt the usual boundary between performer and spectator, but also a medium that temporally emphasizes the present and resists the economy of reproduction. Next, I will address Athey's use of a perverse narrative structure, the specific fantasies staged by Athey's performances, and finally, Athey's sadistic orientation toward his audience.

It is the temporary explosion of the boundaries that we understand to determine our individual subjectivities that is at stake in Athey's performances: a temporary explosion that illuminates the limits of language and the possibilities that exist beyond our identities as they are defined by society. These possibilities cannot be adequately communicated through language. They must, instead, be experienced through the flesh.

#### LEE EDELMAN AND THE IMPOSSIBLE PRESENT

In Britain in 1990 a group of sadomasochists were found guilty of assault for consensual sadomasochistic (SM) practices. In 1992, the House of Lords denied appeal to the men. In his decision denying appeal, Lord Templeman states, "Society is entitled and bound to protect itself against a cult of violence. Pleasure derived from the infliction of pain is an evil thing. Cruelty is uncivilized" (*R. v. Brown*). Thus, the sadomasochist is uncivilized, and the practice of sadomasochism poses a threat to society. Templeman's statement is actually consistent with the appraisal of different sex acts in all Western societies. In "Thinking Sex: Notes for a Radical Theory of the Politics of Sexuality," Gayle Rubin attempts to map the hierarchy of sexual value



in Western societies. She finds that most of the discourses on sex delimit only a very small portion of human sexual acts as “sanctifiable, safe, healthy, mature, legal, or politically correct” (12). This “good” sex should be “heterosexual, marital, monogamous, reproductive, and non-commercial. It should be coupled, relational, within the same generation, and occur at home. It should not involve pornography, fetish objects, sex toys of any sort, or roles other than male or female” (14).

Rubin finds that the most despised sexual castes include transsexuals, transvestites, fetishists, sadomasochists, sex workers, and those whose eroticism transgresses generational boundaries. The sex acts that correspond to these “identities” fall on the wrong side of the line and are “understood to be the work of the devil, dangerous, psychopathological, infantile, or politically reprehensible” (14). Taken seriously, Lord Templeman’s statement, along with the entire hierarchy of sexual value, provide clues as to why those who engage in sadomasochistic activities are “subjected to a presumption of mental illness, disreputability, criminality, restricted social and physical mobility, loss of institutional support, and economic sanctions” (Rubin 12).

Sadomasochists in Britain responded to the House of Lords denial by appealing to the European Court of Human Rights, but what they failed to recognize was that Templeman’s statement is actually quite accurate. The practice of sadomasochism threatens the fundamental fantasy through which society is organized. In *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive*, Lee Edelman names this fantasy reproductive futurism.

Reproductive futurism is the name for a social fantasy that imagines that the basis of politics is the survival of society which is invested in the figure of the Child, or more specifically:

For politics, however radical the means by which specific constituencies attempt to produce a more desirable social order, remains, at its core, conservative insofar as it works to *affirm* a structure, to *authenticate* social order, which it then intends to transmit to the future in the form of its inner Child. That Child remains the perpetual horizon of every acknowledged politics, the fantasmatic beneficiary of every political intervention. (Edelman 3)

The Child is a “fantasmatic beneficiary” because the Child does not exist. In other words, investing politics with the burden of securing the future for a Child involves projecting the present into the future. But that present is always only known through nostalgia for a past that never existed. Like in Lacan’s Symbolic, meaning is conferred retroactively. In other words, we will never know that future Child. The only Child that has meaning is the Child of the past, the Child that is no longer a Child in the present, and will not be in the future.

Reproductive futurism is the fantasy that gives structure to the enjoyment that is located in the empty space inhabited by the evil, sadomasochist. It is the incomplete and inconsistent Symbolic, holed by the Real, which the fantasy of reproductive futurism (with its queer villains) serves to mask. In this space, the innocent face of the Child appears. This fantasy, according to Edelman, is “intended to screen out the emptiness that the signifier embeds at the core of the Symbolic” (8). The attempted filling of this lack through symbolization produces a leftover, which according to Slavoj Žižek in his reading of Lacan’s graph of desire, “opens the space for desire and makes the Other (the symbolic order) inconsistent, with fantasy as an attempt to overcome, to conceal this inconsistency, this gap in the Other” (*Sublime* 124).

It is the leftover that defies symbolization with which the queer is in the position to identify. The refusal to accede to the logic of reproductive futurism connotes also the refusal of the entire socio-political structure and the identities that it defines. Simultaneously, this refusal connotes identification with the death drive that the social fantasy attempts to deny. The death drive, according to Žižek, “cannot be reduced to an expression of alienated social conditions, [...] there is no solution, no escape from it; the thing to do is not to ‘overcome’, to ‘abolish’ it, but to come to terms with it, to learn to recognize it in its terrifying dimension and then, in the basis of this fundamental recognition, to try to articulate a *modus vivendi* with it” (*Sublime* 5). For Edelman, the death drive “marks the excess embedded within the Symbolic through the loss, the Real loss, that the advent of the signifier effects” (9). It is marked by the “will to undo what is thereby instituted, to begin again *ex nihilo*” (9). Edelman insists that the promise of the queer is located in its figural location in relation to the fantasy of reproductive futurism that lends the queer special access to the “fundamental recognition” of the inescapable nature of the lack that grounds the symbolic and the identities the symbolic offers.

Attempts made by the queer, then, to envision a cohesive society that could maintain a sense of benign sexual difference are made in error. The agency of the queer, instead, lies in the recognition of its necessary position in relation to society and its ability to figure an oppositional stance in relation to society, or to become what Edelman calls a *sinthomosexual*. Reading Lacan, Žižek, defines the *sinthome* as a “particular signifying formation which is immediately permeated with enjoyment – that is the impossible junction of enjoyment with the signifier” (*Sublime* 123). Like the letter, the *sinthome* is the “sign” that gives stability to the subject but does not itself bear any meaning. Edelman describes the *sinthome* as the “necessary condition for the subject’s engagement of Symbolic reality” (35). The *sinthome* is the Thing around which the

drive pulsates. It is the non-sensical enjoyment that is structured by the fantasy of reproductive futurism. To believe in the *sinthome* is to believe in a final signifier. It is correlative to the belief that a letter carries meaning. If there were meaning in a letter, the symbolic would be a closed system. The belief in the *sinthome* implies a belief in the existence of the Other. Identifying with the *sinthome*, in contrast, not only provides the subject with consistency, but also with *jouissance*.

*Sinthomosexuality* is exemplified by the acceptance of the negative structural position of the queer and the rejection of the social field as it is structured by the fantasy of reproductive futurism. Once identified with the death drive, the queer embodies “that order’s [the symbolic order’s] traumatic encounter with its own inescapable failure, its encounter with the illusion of the future as suture to bind the constitutive wound of the subject’s subjection to the signifier, which divides it, paradoxically, both from and into itself” (26). In other words, the queer, who figures society’s death drive, confronts society with the inescapable fact that we are all alienated in the signifier and divided by an incomplete order of language.

The possibility of the queer to figure the undoing of the social order is one that has been traversed by a number of queer theorists. For example, Guy Hocquenghem questions the possibility of benign sexual difference. He writes, “It would be interesting to try and describe what ‘social’ relations not based on homosexual sublimation might be like, or alternatively, to envisage what effects the desublimation of homosexuality would have on social organization” (110). Similarly, Frank Browning argues:

The pursuit and recovery of the sacred and the ecstatic in contemporary life is a journey separate from the path to equity, democracy, and justice. It promises only a quality of knowing unavailable to the Rousseauistic mind of social contracts. The impulse toward the ecstatic speaks of neither good nor evil, neither protection nor redemption. It speaks only to remind us that the permanent human condition is exposure, and it reveals that the new activist demand for a sexual ‘safe space’ is little more than a silly oxymoron. (104)

Again, by acceding to the place of “the ecstatic” the queer chooses a road separate from the road to equity and justice promised through reproductive futurism. Instead, the queer figures the destruction of social organization as we know it.

Making true the threat of the queer means giving up the fantasy of a future for the queer. It means recognizing that there can be no justice in the social or political realms for the queer. There can be no benign sexual difference. Edelman states that queers must respond to the social by saying, in effect, “Fuck the social order and the Child in whose name we’re collectively terrorized; fuck Annie; fuck the waif from *Les Mis*; fuck the poor, innocent kid on the Net; fuck Laws both with capital Ls and with small; fuck the whole network of Symbolic relations and the future that serves as its prop” (29). By choosing to utter words like those offered by Edelman, the *sinthomosexual* takes seriously its place as a threat to the social order.

While many seem to be persuaded by Edelman’s argument, not all are willing to endorse a turning away from politics and futurity. In “Cruising the Toilet: LeRoi Jones/Amiri Baraka, Radical Black Traditions, and Queer Futurity,” José Esteban Muñoz respects but ultimately rejects Edelman’s call to renounce politics, relationality, and hope. To Muñoz, Edelman’s argument works to reproduce a white, male, middle-class subject. He writes, “...*The Toilet* shows

us that relationality is not pretty, but the option of simply opting out of it, or describing it as something that has never been available to us, is imaginable only if one can frame queerness as a singular abstraction that can be subtracted and isolated from a larger social matrix” (363). Muñoz concludes, “That dominant mode of futurity [normative white reproductive futurity] is indeed ‘winning,’ but that is all the more reason to call on a utopian political imagination that will enable us to glimpse another time and place: a ‘not-yet’ where queer youths of color actually get to grow up” (365).

What is missed by Muñoz in his reading of Edelman is that we are all *sinthomosexuals*. Edelman points to the figure of the queer specifically because in their status as abject in the fantasy, queers are specially positioned to recognize their dividedness. A clue to Muñoz’s error lies in his use of Judith Butler’s reading of Hegel’s master/slave narrative. According to Muñoz, the life and death battle for recognition between the master and the slave results in a “wounded recognition” (363), but a recognition all the same. Lacan ultimately rejects Hegel’s synthesis arguing that every recognition is actually a misrecognition. In other words, the slave in effect invents the master as an external impediment to the realization of his desire. We are all subjects divided between the signifier and an unfathomable *jouissance*. The fantasy of reproductive futurism tethers us all to the promise that we will find completeness in a future forever deferred.

Edelman argues that the queer is positioned, through its abject status in the social fantasy, to recognize its division. He offers the gay male as the epitome of queerness in his text. What is not offered by Edelman is a non-fictional example of how one would effectively identify with the *sinthome*. The task seems daunting. Consider all of the seemingly mundane daily activities that signal complicity with futurism. It is no wonder that critics of Edelman cannot help but to cite the sheer impossibility of his call. I argue, however, that a refusal of futurism is already built

into the structure of reality for sadomasochists. Considering sadomasochists as *sinthomosexuals* moves Edelman's insightful analysis beyond theory into praxis.

#### THE SADMASOCHIST AS *SINTHOMOSEXUAL*

The practice of sadomasochism situates one against the social order through the following: 1) its denial of an ontological framework; 2) self-consciousness about the ways that fantasy structures the Real, including the refusal of belief in traditional roles defined by the social; 3) the denigration of the libidinal zoning of the body; 4) a denial of sexual teleology; and 5) the experience of pain that fragments one's sense of a fixed and stable identity. Just as the sexual acts of the homosexual necessarily threaten the undoing of the social order structured through the fantasy of reproductive futurism, so do the acts of sadomasochists. It is, however, necessary to look at the disruptive forces of sadomasochists in addition to homosexuals for a number of reasons. Unlike homosexuality, sadomasochism always refuses any possibility of assimilation. The fantasies of sadomasochism derive their intensity from their ability to go through the social fantasy. While homosexuals must decide to recognize their necessary status as *sinthomosexuals*, the sadomasochist's pleasure depends on it. In addition, the acts of sadomasochists in particular illuminate the temporal aspects of the figural location of *sinthomosexuality*.

According to Linda Hart, sadomasochism is constructed as an impossible construct. In other words, it lacks an ontological framework, which reproductive futurism views as essential to normality (148). Monique Wittig argues that rejecting [normative] heterosexuality and its institutions is impossible to the straight mind because to do so would be to reject the symbolic order and the constitution of meaning on which our identities depend (26). Hart points out, however, that the social order requires the other to have a negative ontology (102). To promise

the survival of the social order, sadomasochism is required to be simultaneously real and impossible. This is perhaps why sadomasochism's denial of such ontology is so threatening to the survival of the social order. Sadomasochists' denial of an ontological framework is perhaps made clearest when approached through the performative and theatrical nature of SM acts. Even the terms used by sadomasochists to describe their encounters allude to its performative aspects. SM encounters are referred to as "scenes," and the "actors" in the scenes take on highly "scripted" or negotiated "roles" (Hart 148). SM scenes begin as negotiated fantasies that are given material reality through their performance (Chinn 183). Hence, SM sex does not exist prior to its performance. While normative sex is about "having sex," SM sex is about "making sex" or "doing sex."

Unlike heterosexual, normative sex that is presumed to be the "real" thing, sadomasochists recognize that sexual acts are mediated through culture and ideology. Given the recognition that sexual acts are culturally mediated constructions, sadomasochists are self-conscious about the ways that social fantasies construct the Real. The self-consciousness is evidenced by the myriad ways that sadomasochists take pleasure in rupturing the boundaries that social fantasies construct. The pleasure in sadomasochism arises, in part, from the performance of fantasies that blur the boundaries we understand to determine our individual subjectivities. These fantasies raise questions about both the nature and location of the "self" and the relation of that "self" to society.

Writing about "counterpleasures," which include SM, Karmen MacKendrick comments, "They share a love of boundary-play. They delight in the existence of boundaries, that they may be broken and overleapt, in the establishment of limits, that they may be surpassed" (17). She continues that these pleasures are transgressive because they render "the center (the safe,



harmless, assimilationist center) nowhere at all” (17). Consider the play and parody with gender, sex identifications, and normative desire that are described by Jezi Strong in the following description of an SM relationship:

She calls me sweet everything names. She is a bottom perv who needs to top sometimes. I am mostly a top, but once I go down as the femme slut, I love to bottom to sex pain; Sex Magic. Our scenes go from “baby girl wants Papa’s big cock” to “suck Mistress’s cunt, *now*, boy!” We are living and loving in a pornographic relationship, and it’s fucking intense. She’s my butch. I am her femme, no apologies – never again. I might wear a dick with my silk slip, and she definitely has a fine way of wearing a lace bra, but I am 100 percent femme fatale and she is 100 percent butch. We live our polarization. We feast on our differences. (196)

While these two women as “lesbian” are already in a socially impossible relationship, their play with boundaries signals not only their recognition of their own impossibility as social subjects, but also their status as *sinthomosexuals*.

First, one of the “actors” identifies as “femme” but sometimes performs the role of “top” to the “butch.” This act transgresses the social mandate that the masculine identity should necessarily be in control and the feminized position is necessarily passive. Further, she signals that they are also able to switch roles while maintaining the same identifications. At this point, the quilting of social meaning begins to unravel. Perhaps most threatening, the women’s scenes directly engage the Child of the social fantasy of reproductive futurism. Confronting incest, the essential taboo of all societies, the couple plays out a scene in which one performs the role of “Papa” while the other performs as his “baby girl” who wants his “cock.” The “fantasmatic

Child” of reproductive futurism is certainly not safe in this relationship. Finally, the couple transgresses the boundary constituted by the gender binary. There is nothing unusual in the above relationship for the “femme” to perform femininity while wearing a “dick” or for the “butch” to perform masculinity while wearing a “lace bra.” The pleasures experienced by the above couple are possible through the recognition of the non-sensical void at the center of the social order. The women assume their castration in the symbolic and gain pleasure through making their own answer to the acknowledgement that “there is no sexual relationship.”

The self-conscious play with social fantasies characteristic of the practice of sadomasochism as a chosen form of sexual gratification is integral in differentiating the practice of sadomasochism from instances of “real” torture and even the more mundane “real” sadomasochistic scenarios that structure social relationships of power. For example, what differentiates the sadomasochist from the “respectable middle-class *petit bourgeois* who, as a guard in a concentration camp, tortured Jews ...” (Žižek *Contingency* 124)? The answer concerns the social fantasy. For the sadomasochist, the fantasy is disturbed through an intervention into the impossibility of the social as undivided. For the Nazi, on the other hand, “with its disavowal/displacement of the fundamental social antagonism ... with its projection/externalization of the cause of social antagonisms into the figure of the Jew, and the consequent reassertion of the corporatist notion of society as an organic Whole – [the Nazi] clearly *avoids* confrontation with social antagonism ...” (Žižek *Contingency* 124). Hence, SM should be differentiated from acts that do not disturb the symbolic fields into which they intervene.

Another aspect of SM acts that turns away from the social order is the denigration of the libidinal zoning of the body. In the words of Thomas King, “The libidinal body is an enunciative

field that allows certain statements and disallows others. This prohibition-production which territorializes the body and directs the trajectory of its pleasures initiates the subject into its melancholic economy of loss and desire [...]” (11). Reproductive futurism reduces the zones of pleasure on the body to the genitals. *Sinthomosexual* sadomasochists, on the other hand, thrive outside of the limits of genital-oriented pleasure. Pleasure, instead, becomes the tactile sensations of the entire surface of the skin, as well as the invisible sensations of the senses of smell, taste, and sound.

SM play involves, among other things, the denigration of the libidinal zoning of the body that enables reproductive futurism through acts such as cock, ball, or nipple “torture;” humiliation of various body parts; and the plugging of orifices that are required, in reproductive futurism, to be left open. Through bondage, mummification, and suspension, the entire “normal” orientations of the body are disrupted (King 11). In addition, the body is remapped through pleasure that is achieved through pressure applied to the surface of the skin (flogging, clamping, constricting) and radical changes to the flesh (piercing, cutting, and vacuum pumping). The above-listed pleasures necessarily subvert the libidinal body that is required to function in reproductive futurism. These pleasures produce an erotic body that does not exist within the current social order defined by reproductive futurism: the *sinthomosexual* body.

It is possible for an SM “scene” to progress and end with no genital attention whatsoever. It is in this sense that SM denies the teleological nature of reproductive sex. Thomas King, following Freud, defines fetish play as that which “begins when what would otherwise be foreplay is made to ‘linger there,’ and either an equilibrium is not restored, or an act is not allowed to progress to its finish (the end-of-pleasure)” (11). The teleology of sex ceases when the goal is no longer the end of pleasure found through orgasm. The end of the SM scene is usually

only productive in that it leads to another scene. The following example of an SM performance further indicates the erasure through SM of the Child of the future:

You beg to know what in my stride and grin betrays the secret of my hands and their black craft, and what other drug or sport will take you down the same tunneled road when I bind you to the wall and hide your eyes and leave you wondering whether my next touch will be a braided leather band, warm oil, noisy steel, my hand? You would give what there was to give plus more to have me take you, flowing with sweat and life and pain, blocking away the useless wordplay and pride leaving you still soft under my gloved hands, stretched to making promises you might be able to keep if only I let you feel this heat and you pant and hiss and cry, arch to me whimpering I won't you can't and beg me to stop when you know and I know all you need is me to play you, beat you, kiss you, and not stop until you scream my name. And you will. (Bear 229)

This scene never indicates an end to pleasure through orgasm. Instead, it speaks to the intensification and repetition of pleasure. The pleasure created in this scene is not tied to any “productive” ends. Instead, pleasure is created through suspense (“leave you wondering”), restraint (“I tie you to the wall”), and sensory deprivation (“and hide your eyes”). Pleasure is the only product of this experience. This performance lends credence to the identification with the death drive through repetition (“what other drug or sport will take you down the same tunneled road”) and resistance to any determinants of meaning (“blocking away the useless wordplay”) that defines the position of the *sinthomosexual*.

This example also illustrates the temporal nature of the *sinthomosexual* position. The submissive “actor” is allowed to journey down the “tunneled road” but only momentarily.

Eventually, the subject must be brought back to its position in the symbolic. The dominant “actor” promises the return of the subject with the screaming of the dominant’s name. The screaming of the name is correlative in psychoanalysis with returning to the “Law of the Father.” We cannot exist in social reality without allegiance to master signifiers. The dominant promises the return of the submissive (“and you will”). It is the function of the name to bring the subject back to itself. This is also correlative to the function of the “safe word” in SM. The “safe word” can be any signifier, and its only meaning is that it promises an end to the suffering of the masochist. The “safe word” is a signifier that returns the subject to the world of signifiers.

The experience of pain that is a part of most SM acts fragments one’s sense of a fixed and stable identity. According to MacKendrick, pain provides the aesthetic subversion of a subject that exists prior to political possibilities (116). In *The Body in Pain: The Making and Unmaking of the World*, Elaine Scarry views the use of pain as not “an act of denying the body, [...] but a way of so emphasizing the body that the contents of the world are cancelled and the path is clear for the entry of an unworldly, contentless force” (5). Through the use of pain, the sadomasochist is able to inhabit and momentarily transgress the limit forever separating the Real of *jouissance* from our place as subjects of the signifier. This limit is termed by Hart the space between the socially constructed body and the flesh (149). It is reminiscent of Emma Goldman’s position “between two deaths.”

A scene from Pat Califia’s short story, “The Calyx of Isis,” exemplifies the movement between the body and the flesh and the momentary subjective destitution that can be an effect of pain in SM:

[...] she began to erase herself. She began to give up the idea that she had anything to hide or any right to demand pleasure instead of pain. She began to crumble herself at the edges, fade into air, render herself will-less and invisible [...] Liar, screamed the first lash of the whip, and she was suddenly unable to be anywhere but here, bound to this wooden cross. (152-3)

In other words, progressing through the SM scene, she began to separate from the knowledge of herself as a symbolic subject. Of course, this subjective destitution, or moment of lingering between the body and the flesh, only persists until she reaches her limit. Once her libidinal limit is reached, she is promised the return to her “self.” Again, one must notice the temporality of the scene that makes it possible for the subject to undergo a “second death,” recognize this “death,” and then return with the ability to still function as a social subject.

A number of sadomasochists cite this journey away from the self as the most moving aspect of sadomasochism. It is not the delayed gratification of the pleasure principle, but instead, it is the communion with an impossible *jouissance* that stirs the sadomasochist. King cites the sadomasochist with the ability to enact practices “in which the self’s ability to map space as outside itself is suspended; the performer’s occupation of spaces and techniques projects him as different from himself, that is, from what he would be in another space” (12). Thus, the SM performer loses for a moment the social body that is constructed by society.

In sum, the following SM encounter described by King further elucidates the unique positionality of one who participates in SM:

I am unaware of the duration: three hours that evening in Cambridge without ejaculation has induced a near trance state. All the surfaces of my body have served as both receptive

and propelling agents. The space between my shoulder blades has received hands, forearms, and knees; but my shoulders have also massaged chests, thighs, and asses. This multiplicity has dispersed my usual orientations of front-back, up-down, and in-out across the field of possible encounters. At the same time, the randomness of our movements has disrupted my sense of being situated in the room along the axes of time and space; and the effect has been enhanced by wearing a blindfold or simply keeping my eyes shut. I become more familiar with the new technique of breathing just before my host instructs me to hold my breath and clench all the muscles of my body. I feel lightheaded and see white light; I realize I have been laying on a massage table for now I float above it. (10)

In the above scene, the acts described resist the reproductive value of heterosexual sex (“three hours in Cambridge that evening without ejaculation”). In addition, the acts speak to the libidinal rezoning of the body (“this multiplicity has dispersed my usual orientations”). Finally, the scene gestures toward the use of pain and restraint to achieve a momentary subjective destitution (“I realize I have been laying on a massage table for now I float above it”). Reproductive futurism depends on technology, science, and industry to provide complex ways of cushioning the body from experiences of pain (Turner 209-10). The willful determination to seek it out signals a turning away from society and any belief in the “stable” identities that society defines.

In Edelman’s polemic against reproductive futurism, he gives to the queer the choice to accept or deny the position of the *sinthomosexual*. He writes:

By choosing to accept that position, however, by assuming the “truth” of our queer capacity to figure the undoing of the Symbolic, and of the Symbolic subject as well, we

might undertake the impossible project of imagining an oppositional political stance exempt from the imperative to reproduce the politics of signification (the politics aimed at closing the gap opened up by the signifier itself), which can only return us to the politics of reproduction. (27)

So far, I have argued that sadomasochists embody an oppositional political stance, in only for a moment, likened to Edelman's *sinthomosexual* that is "exempt from the imperative to reproduce the politics of signification." MacKendrick notes the politically dangerous nature of this stance when she writes:

Under restraint, and further, in pain the subject itself is undone – and thereby acquires an aesthetically subversive power of resistance. This is a statement that will seem at once immorally apolitical and politically appealing. Immorally apolitical, because it lacks the political value of giving power to the disenfranchised subject – by it, in fact, the subject is subverted, becoming subversive only in the most indirect fashion. (116)

The *sinthomosexual* recognition at the heart of sadomasochism is already built into the structure of reality for sadomasochists. I have argued that one who chooses SM already always chooses *sinthomosexuality*.

Returning to Rubin's hierarchy of sexual value, she finds that stable, long-term lesbian and gay male couples are verging on respectability (12). Through arguments that are constantly conducted over "where to draw the line," some homosexual populations have been permitted to cross over into acceptability. The "acceptable" populations are those that accede to the logic of reproductive futurism. For the sadomasochist, evidenced by the criminalization of SM in Britain, access to acceptability is not an option. Furthermore, the very existence of sadomasochism



precludes even the wish of enjoyment in the “stable center” that is society. SM practices refuse the sturdy, subjective center.

While those who engage in homosexual acts can choose to accept a fictional ontological identity, SM refuses an ontological framework. Fighting for the rights to marry, adopt children, and receive state benefits, some “homosexual people” view their position as that of a positive identity in society. The queer and the sadomasochist refute the plausibility of such an identity, for queerness, according to Edelman, “can never define an identity; it can only ever disturb one” (17). The sadomasochist’s experience of pain illuminates that the subject is always a split subject. Inhabiting the space between the constructed body and the Real of the flesh insures the sadomasochist a momentary access to *jouissance*, while she/he proceeds toward the limits of language and the resulting “second death” of the subject.

Sadomasochists are thus already experiencing Edelman’s vision of *sinthomosexuality* through a full rejection of the “truth” of the fantasy of reproductive futurism *every time they enact a scene*. That this is a *momentary* realization is important. One need not and cannot survive in society in this state all the time, but because our identities are temporally and spatially discontinuous, a wholesale lifelong rejection of the social fantasy is unnecessary. To wish for such an existence only returns us to an investment in futurity. It is only each present moment that is at issue here. Indeed for Žižek, the first step toward the liberation of the present is masochistic and performative. He states that “when we are subjected to a power mechanism, this subjection is always and by definition sustained by some libidinal investment: the subjection itself generates a surplus enjoyment of its own” (*Object a* 118). Because this subjection insists itself upon the body and produces a surplus enjoyment, Žižek concludes that liberation “has to be staged in some kind of bodily performance, and furthermore, this performance *has* to be of an apparently

‘masochistic’ nature” (118). Like Vernon Johns’s identification with *object a* as object cause of desire through the discourse of the analyst, the sadomasochist identifies with the *object a* produced through his/her subjection. Hence, both acts imply a masochistic orientation. This is the pleasure achieved by the sadomasochist.

While queer is defined only as a collection of those subjects who accede to their necessary oppositional position in relation to socio-political systems, I have argued, thus far, that it is important to consider the role of sadomasochists as *sinthomosexuals* in particular. The “oppositional political stance” imagined by Edelman is one that can be found in most leather bars and contemporary live art masochistic performances. The question of “agency,” then, in this new political (dis)order is one that might very well be answered by SM performance artist Ron Athey.

#### RON ATHEY AND THE PUBLICITY OF *SINTHOMOSEXUALITY*

Ron Athey’s complex combination of sadomasochistic practices within the medium of performance art extends the preceding discussion of the subversiveness of sadomasochism to a conception of queer agency that remains consistent with Edelman’s *sinthomosexuality*. Louis Keidan says of performance art that it is “widely acknowledged as one of the most vital and influential of creative spaces; it is the research engine of our culture where borders are disrupted and rules are broken, where new possibilities are imagined and new discourses are formed” (*Exposures*). One might notice already the similarity between a medium that is invested in “disrupting borders” and a “sexual” practice that accomplishes the same.

The most important aspect of performance art for the rejection of futurity, however, is the medium’s resistance to reproduction. Even Athey says about his art that it is only “about right

now” (*Hallelujah!*). These performances, according to Athey, would probably seem ridiculous years from now. Instead they are about the present and presence. Lois Keidan and a number of other performers and theorists maintain that performance art’s very nature “resists commodification and defies ‘a market’” it can’t be appropriated, packaged or redistributed for mass consumption. It’s a free agent; unbranded and unbrandable” (*Exposures*). To attempt to reproduce a performance art piece through either repetition or even video always reproduces it as different from the original (Phelan 121). In order to be a *sinthomosexual* act of agency, the medium must resist the economy of reproduction. Performance art does this.

Another aspect of Athey’s performances that resists the logic of reproductive futurism in conjunction with *sinthomosexuality* is his use of a “perverse” narrative structure. Any performance that aids the teleological demands of futurity (or that progresses from beginning to climax to resolution or end) can only return us to the politics of reproduction. A perverse narrative follows the repetitive intensification of the death drive. Athey’s performances exist as a conglomeration of tableaux that are only connected through their refusal of finality and their aim only for the intensification of suspense and the defiance of gratification.

An example of a perverse narrative is Athey’s performance piece titled *Four Scenes in a Harsh Life*. In “Introduction: The Holy Woman,” Athey is dressed as the evangelist Aimee Semple McPherson. Standing beside him is a naked, sometimes quivering woman pierced with arrow-like needles reminiscent of Saint Sebastian. In this scene, Athey speaks about his upbringing and his associations with religious fanaticism and pain. The second scene, “Working Class Hell,” is set in a strip club with two nude dancers and a balloon-covered drag queen who, after being stripped by two “customers,” proceeds to a chair becoming the “human printing press.” This is the controversial scene described in the opening to this paper.

In the next, scene, “Suicide/Tattoo Salvation,” Athey describes his past heroin addiction and suicide attempts as he calmly inserts numerous hypodermic needles into his arm, removes them, and then repeatedly jabs a spinal needle through his scalp. Finally, in “Dagger Wedding,” Athey, as a sort of minister, presides over the far-from-traditional “wedding” of three women. The brides wear bells on fish hooks that pierce their flesh. Athey inserts a long, thin needle into one cheek and out through the other for all three “brides.” The wedding party is joined by men, also wearing fish-hooks piercing through their skin. The “brides” and guests proceed to dance feverishly across the stage. The hooks pull and tear their skin and their blood covers the stage floor. At the conclusion of each of the scenes, the stage lights fade to black as the performers stand bleeding and almost frozen on the stage.

In this performance, there is no chronological or teleological progression within or between each scene. Thomas King, following Freud, defines fetish play as that which “begins when what would otherwise be foreplay is made to ‘linger there,’ and either an equilibrium is not restored, or an act is not allowed to progress to its finish (the end-of-pleasure)” (11). Athey’s narrative assumes the role of the fetish. The end of each scene, like the end of a SM scene, is usually only productive in that it leads to another scene that is just as intense and repetitious as the scene preceding it.

Athey’s perverse narrative structure exists on the edge between the expressible and the unrepresentable. Athey’s narration is always fragmented by actions of self-mutilation and inflictions of pain and restraint. The intensity of these acts, disfiguring the narrative, cannot be expressed through language. This is consistent with E.L. McCallum’s characterization of perverse narrative that it “brings us to the edge between language and subject, and of all the things that cannot be said, all the moments in each text that break down into particles of

language” (206). The importance of Athey’s perverse narrative structure for *sinthomosexuality*, as we will see further developed below, is that it “presents an opportunity to stage the threat to cohesive individual subjectivity within a context that does not threaten human life” (206).

To make this threat to human subjectivity specifically a *sinthomosexual* threat, however, Athey stages fantasies within his tableaux that directly engage the fantasy of reproductive futurism and self-consciously transgress the limits installed through those fantasies. Returning to my description of *Four Scenes*, one might notice a different act of defiance against reproduction and futurism in each scene. In fact, each of Athey’s performances stages the “being for death” that Lacan attributed to the figure of Antigone. In “Working Class Hell,” for example, it is the overweight, ridiculous-looking drag queen, not the attractive, blonde bimbo who is accosted at the strip club. Stripped of “his” clothes (which are actually balloons), the performer, Carlton, becomes a living machine: an object. Explicitly criticizing modes of production and objectification, Carlton makes of himself a machine. His products, the prints of African and queer symbolism, are of his body, made through his own deliberate subjection to a law of his own making.

Similarly, the “Dagger Wedding” scene critiques traditional conceptions of marriage and the nuclear heterosexual family. It is important in this scene that the privileged version of marriage is not the couple, but the triad. The “brides” are not connected in the scene by vow or language, but rather through an exercise of pain. Through the experience of pain created by the hypodermic needles placed through their cheeks and the fishhooks attached through their skin, the women are connected to each other only through their loss. They are able to abandon their “selves” in a strange communion with each other. Even more simply, a marriage between three

women could never be productive of future generations. This marriage is, through the lens of reproductive futurism, utterly meaningless.

Each scene in all of Athey's performances exhibits fantasies that consciously disrupt the borders and limits imposed upon us by the fantasy of reproductive futurism. Exposing the boundaries we understand to determine our individual subjectivities as fictions by blurring the limits between male and female, pleasure and pain, gay and straight, subject and object, and I will argue audience and performer, Athey is able to temporarily threaten the fantasy of reproductive futurism. Athey's performances exhibit the turn away from reproductive futurism characterized by the *sinthomosexual* and exemplified by the sadomasochist, but it is his orientation toward his audience in particular that merits attention for the uses of *sinthomosexuality* as a queer form of agency. In an article in the *Village Voice*, C. Carr reported that an audience member behind her at one of Athey's performances screamed, "It's not entertainment. It's something more" (16). It is to this "something more" for the audience that I will turn my attention.

Athey was born into a Pentecostal family who raised him to believe he was ordained by God to become the new Christ. Athey states that he always took seriously that he was born to act as a conduit. In his performances, Athey sacrifices his identity and his fellow cast member's identities for the audience through inflictions of pain and restraint. Athey simultaneously seizes the sadistic gaze from the audience members as they are forced to endure everything that happens to the cast members right along with them. The audience members become willing masochists at the control of Athey and his cast.

Rachel Rosenthal, a performance artist, supports the claim that the audience of performance art is deprived of its sadistic gaze when she writes, “In performance art, the audience, from its role as sadist, subtly becomes the victim. It is forced to endure the artist’s plight empathetically, or examine its own responses of voyeurism and pleasure, or smugness and superiority. [...] The audience also usually ‘gives up’ before the artist” (24). In his performances, Athey’s plight is a self-shattering experience of loss. The audience endures this loss with Athey, and in effect, its members are placed into the *sinthomosexual* position and are able to vicariously experience the *jouissance* that exists there. The self-torture and staging of sadomasochistic scenes in Athey’s performances begin by depriving the audience of their power over the performers. What begins as frustration for the audience usually ends in abandon.

That audience members experience a subjective destitution and the corresponding access to pleasure is evidenced by the fact that some members of Athey’s cast are former audience members. Athey says that the members of his cast identify with different experiences of pain to deal with different types of oppression, such as sexism, homophobia, size, histories of drug abuse, and HIV/AIDS (*Hallelujah!*). Mark Russell, director of New York’s P.S. 122 (a performance space where Athey has performed) describes the audience’s experience of Athey’s work as “a rite of passage, a cleansing trial in which artifice would not be appropriate” (quoted in Hart 134). In this “rite of passage,” according to Kaja Silverman, “The spectator’s attention is focused on the suffering position because he or she experiences the subjugation of the victim as a pleasurable repetition of his/her own history of subjectification” (5).

The performances of Athey and his cast make clear that the pleasures of the body in sadomasochism cannot be separated from histories of subjectification. In “Turn the Beat Around: Sadomasochism, Temporality, History,” Elizabeth Freeman makes clear the relationship

between historical trauma, bodily affect, and temporality in the practice of sadomasochism. While Freeman focuses on the sadomasochistic staging of the transatlantic slave trade, she considers “sadomasochism as a kind of erotic time machine that offers a fleshy metacommentary on the dual emergence of modernity and its others, on the entangled histories of race, labor, nationhood, and imperialism as well as sexuality” (138). In Athey’s use of Nazi attire, as well as his play with histories of drug abuse and all kinds of oppression, he performs “physical sensation to break apart the present into fragments of times that may not be one’s “own” or to feel one’s present world as both conditioned and contingent” (Freeman 141). Through his performances, Athey and his cast remake their identities and those of the audience members in an ultimate triumph over their personal histories. According to Freeman, this triumph is accomplished through “a certain visceral fusion, a point of somatic contact between a single erotic body in the present tense and an experience coded as both public and past” (143).

The reaction of Athey’s audience to his performances is recounted by Amelia Jones in her article, “Holy Body: Erotic Ethics in Ron Athey and Juliana Snapper’s *Judas Cradle*.” Jones was actually in attendance at several performances of *Judas Cradle*. This piece is a comment on the genre of opera, however, “Snapper sings the voice as limit. The voice as that which escapes the body to enunciate the self is rendered unbearably raw, a flayed shred of human need, desire, pain” (Jones 161). Athey’s characteristic “perverse narrative” style is noticed by Jones. She writes, “The performers bodies are choreographed to approach, collide, engage (often through melodramatically feigned or partial violence), and miss each other over and over again” (162).

Also characteristic of Athey’s performances, he turns the audience members into masochists who vicariously experience his pain and fragmentation. In the performance, Athey impales himself on a large wooden pyramid. Jones recounts, “The searing agony of wood



penetrating anus prostrates me (figuratively). He grimaces. I grimace. I hold my orifices tight. I am, inadvertently, determined to close myself after all. I am his pain, his fracture” (162).

Supporting my earlier argument that Edelman’s *sinthomosexuality* is better approached through sadomasochism, Jones offers, “The holy body offered (no, violently enacted and forced on us) by Athey and Snapper is a queer body, not (remotely) a gay body. It is in this way that this queer body speaks to me, for my body is not “gay” either” (164). Athey’s performances, then, have the ability to interpellate subjects who are not “gay” and subjects who do not practice SM to the recognition of their own status as *sinthomosexuals*.

Consistent with Athey’s stated purpose to leave his “mark” and to testify, Athey’s audience members become participant witnesses to his testimony. His subversive mark confirms Athey as more than, in his words, “Some stupid fag who dies of AIDS [a] damaged boy who was never a minister, who rebelled and lashed out. A self-serving queen driven to promiscuous sex who contracted a disease and died” (*Hallelujah!*). The mark (bruise, piercing, cuts, welts, etc.) serves as proof to the masochist that it is able to retain *in the body* the memory of its subject-shattering experience. According to MacKendrick, “This is the knowledge, impossible without a subject, of a possibility beyond subjectivity” (119). This knowledge, Athey’s “mark,” exemplifies an act of queer *sinthomosexual* agency: an enjoyment achieved through the body’s willful submission to subjection that paradoxically frees *for a moment* the witness from his/her own individuation in the symbolic through the excess of pain embodied by Athey and his cast.

CONCLUSION: WARNING... YOU DON’T HAVE TO TRY THIS AT HOME

The performance art of Ron Athey serves as an example of queer agency consistent with Edelman’s *sinthomosexual*. While I argued that the sadomasochist is perfectly positioned to

recognize the void at the center of all identities, the publicity inherent in performance art, with its own logic of the resistance of reproductive futurism, subversively communicates this recognition to all who witness the performance. Amelia Jones made a similar conclusion after witnessing several of Athey's performances:

Exposing the hole(s) in the body is exposing the hole(s) in the self is pointing to the ultimate source of human aggression on both personal and political (global) levels. By dehabituating the body and by narrating the impossibility of the hetero-body and the hetero-matrix, Athey and Snapper's *JC [Judas Cradle]* open us to these holes. Acknowledging them in all of their hymenal (glottal) uncertainty, wetness, and permeability is in itself the most important beginning of a politics of action in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Or so my hurting holy body (echoing back to Snapper's throat and Athey's anus and forward to the body of an old black woman, dead in a wheelchair of dehydration from the holocaustal wet of a hurricane) tells me. (168)

In constructing his audience as participant witnesses to his queer activism, Athey makes of his audience queer theorists. Through losing his "self," he allows the audience to experience the lack that the fantasy of reproductive futurism serves to mask. Athey embodies a negation of the future so that his audience members do not have to. They can return to their journey as interpellated social subjects with knowledge of other possibilities that might exist beyond interpellation. The society of the United States preserves itself by banning performances, such as Athey's, and although his performances cannot argue for rights, justice, equality, or citizenship, they can testify to our collective and individual division. In Athey's case, the ultimate failure in American public art also stands for the ultimate success of a radical queer agent.

### Conclusion: We Ain't Afraid of Rope

In response to the noose hangings in Jena, Louisiana with which I began this dissertation, comedian Katt Williams, who was the host of the 2007 Black Entertainment Television (BET) Hip-Hop Awards, decided to walk the red carpet to the event wearing a noose around his neck as a fashion-accessory. In addition to the noose, Williams was wearing a bright pink suit. He wore his hair long and permed but not styled. While Williams's entrance to the awards was not televised, the image of Williams on the red carpet circulated widely among the "Blackosphere." According to Lynette Kvasny, Fay Cobb Payton, and Kayla D. Hales, the "Blackosphere" refers to "an informal group of Black cultural producers ... [that] represents the collective efforts of individual created small public spaces to circulate information, create and rearticulate oppositional frameworks for expressing Black identity without censorship from non-Blacks, and provides opportunities for community interaction that fosters social activism" (19).

As Williams's action was clearly directed at a majority African-American (BET) audience, the "Blackosphere" is an ideal place to search for public reactions to Williams's decision to don the noose. The commentary on Williams ranges from disgust to celebration. The one strain that runs throughout, however, is that the action does not make sense. For example, "rach" comments, "Katt's obviously attempting to make a statement. I'm not entirely sure what this statement is, but there is one to be interpreted [sic] by these images" (quoted in Williams *Stereohyped*). Similarly, "Emmy" writes, "I'm not a fan of lynch ware [sic] but what might Kat [sic] be saying, other than 'I'm a certifiable fool? What do we gain by calling him out (i.e. issuing the negro please award). Do you really think 'he knows not what he's done?'" (quoted in *Jasmyne Cannick.com*). Finally, "QueenWarriorNefertari" adds, "I've had time to think on this, and all I can come up with are questions for this Kat [sic]" (quoted in *Assata Shukur Forums*).

Those who wondered about Williams's intentions received an answer on October 31, 2007 when Williams appeared on Rick Sanchez's *Out in the Open* on CNN. Sanchez introduces Williams by stating "Katt Williams is brave enough to join us now to try and explain why he would do something like this ... You're An African American entertainer, and you wore one [a noose]. How can you possibly explain that, Katt?" Sanchez, thus, begins his interview with the presumption that there cannot be a rational answer to his question. Williams responds simply, "I don't." Later in the interview, Sanchez tries again for an explanation: "Don't you want to educate? Don't you want to help people?" Again, Williams simply replies, "No." In the end of the interview, Sanchez gives Williams the opportunity to make amends. He asks Williams, "Search your soul and tell me if you could do this again, if you could have that day back ... would you show up wearing that noose around your neck that so many people like you find so offensive?" Finally attempting an answer, Williams replies: "If I could do it differently, I would change everything. I wouldn't have wore [sic] that stupid pink suit. I would have done my hair. But the..." Sanchez interrupts, "All right. All right. All right. All right. We got it. We gave you the opportunity."

After the interview on CNN, Williams refused to speak publicly about his decision to wear the noose until he recorded his stand-up comedy film, *It's Pimpin Pimpin*. In the film, Williams says, "Those motherfuckers had me on CNN the next week like I was the racial problem in America, and they were so glad to catch me." In this conclusion, I will agree with Williams that his action did comprise the "racial problem in America." Williams effectively aimed at the structure of race itself, a structure that subjects us all to the unconscious master signifier, "whiteness." Williams's act of donning the noose condenses the three cases analyzed in this dissertation into one image. Through the image of Williams on the red carpet, I will

demonstrate that the three cases are actually three different ways of viewing the same phenomenon. After discussing the interchangeability of the cases, I will turn to the fact that acts, like Williams's act, confront the discipline of rhetoric with its Real limits. The explosion of responses to Williams and his noose attests to the notion that his act was persuasive; however, I will argue that its persuasiveness can best be approached through the framework offered by psychoanalysis.

#### KATT WILLIAMS AND ANTIGONE

In chapter one, I argued that the radical nature of Emma Goldman's acts becomes clear when aligned with Lacan's reading of Sophocles's *Antigone*. An Emma Goldman emerges from my analysis as a bearer of pure desire. Goldman, like Antigone, confronted her audience with the abyss of desire and the lack in the Other. In addition, I argued that all of the various attempts to give meaning to Goldman's acts actually work to cover the representation of lack that her actions radically commissioned. Similarly, the image of Katt Williams confronted his audience with the Real of desire. His action gave body to the void of the Thing.

Desire, for Lacan, is that which mediates between the Real and the Symbolic. In other words, desire is of the Symbolic order (as evidenced by its metonymic unfolding); however, desire aims at the Real of the Thing. The Thing is nothing other than the lack in the Other. In the words of Alenka Zupančič, "In the sliding of the signifiers, in the movement from one signifier to another, something is constantly eluded, or perceived as being eluded, as being under or overshot. There is thus a lack of signifier that is present in every (signifying) representation, inducing its metonymic movement" (185). Desire supports this metonymy. The failure for the signifier to represent the Thing receives its own representation in the ethics of psychoanalysis.

Lacan uses the vase to exemplify an object that gives form to a void. Katt Williams wearing the noose in his pink suit confronted his audience with just such a representation.

Like Antigone, Williams's act places him outside his symbolic community. In his interview on CNN, Sanchez intimates that there can be no rational explanation for Williams's action. Further, Williams refuses to offer any explanation. He knows that rational argument is clearly not on his side. The image of an African-American man proudly wearing a noose, the ultimate symbol of racial hatred and death in America, realizes the possibility of cutting oneself off from the symbolic order within the symbolic order. It is a "representation of the very break with the realm of the representation" (Zupančič 186). Hence, it is no surprise that Williams's act appeared "mad" to his audience.

The noose has a clear symbolic meaning, but Williams's act did more than attempt to resignify the noose as an attractive object of fashion. In Lacan, the law as interdiction gives a signifying form to the impossibility of the satisfaction of desire. This interdiction allows us to deal with the abyss of desire by making the lack into a merely empirical mandate. According to Lacan, "psychoanalysis teaches that in the end it is easier to accept interdiction than to run the risk of castration" (quoted in Zupančič 177). Hence, it is easier to accept the sacrifices mandated by law than to renounce "the service of goods," or accept one's Symbolic castration.

The rally for the Jena Six headed by Jesse Jackson and Al Sharpton aimed at the order of the good and of the law. It misrecognized that the possibility of eliminating interdiction would also eliminate the impossibility in desire. The civil rights leaders in Jena resigned to "keep marching" indefinitely. They remained tied to their "dignity" as threatened by the symbolic meaning of the noose. In contrast, Williams jumped into the negativity of the Thing. His act

accomplished the impossible. He presented the noose in a way that made his audience wonder, “What does it mean?” His act resisted sense, and in his unwavering demand, his “mad” insistence, Williams halted the metonymic sliding of desire. He effectively renounced the “order of the good,” and fully assumed his castration. In response to Williams’s image, “Stacy” even wonders, “So how do I teach my son to be productive when we have fools making us all look bad in the public eye” (quoted in Williams *Stereohyped*). She is correct in perceiving that Williams’s act broke with the order of productivity. Williams deprived his audience of the signifying support for the lack in desire, thus liberating desire from the interdiction in the direction of finding its own law. In other words, Williams’s act emptied the symbolic meaning of the noose and instead insisted that he is not afraid of rope.

#### KATT WILLIAMS AND THE DISCOURSE OF THE ANALYST

In chapter two, I turned to Lacan’s theory of the four discourses to argue that Vernon Johns’s seemingly nonsensical actions placed him in the position of the agent of the discourse of the analyst. Johns embodied the *object a*, or object cause of desire, of his congregation. Similarly, I argue that Katt Williams also embodied the analytic *ethos*. The rally for the Jena Six brought the audience and participants to the hysterical position. Fully recognizing the alienation in the signifier, the participants and audience wondered why racism still exists in the twenty-first century. The speeches in the rally repeatedly posed the question to the big Other, “Why are we still being treated unequally under the law?” The answer was repeated over and over, “We are not who you say we are.”

Williams act aimed at the structure of race itself. As stated in chapter two, Kalpana Seshadri-Crooks argues that the master signifier “whiteness” installs itself in the lack in the big

Other promising wholeness to all who are subjected to its presence. It is the lack of the binary signifier of the feminine in the Symbolic that the unconscious master signifier, “Whiteness,” covers. In Seshadri Crooks’s view, it is ultimately self-defeating to speak of the celebration of race while denouncing racism. Both assertions carry the same kernel of *jouissance*. Seshadri-Crooks equates this misrecognition to the “baby and the bathwater” dilemma “in which the dirty water of racism must be eliminated, to reveal the cleansed and beloved ‘fact’ of racial identity” (9). What is misrecognized is that it is the baby that is making the water dirty in the first place.

Katt Williams’s act served to separate his already alienated audience from the master signifier “whiteness.” The connection to the covering of the lack of a binary signifier for sexuality by the master signifier is harkened by Williams’s image in which it is precisely the noose that covers nothing other than a bright pink suit. The resistance to Williams’s act becomes apparent in the speech of the audience member’s reactions. Jasmyne Cannick writes to Williams, “If you want to make a statement, do it in a way that preserves the dignity of the rest of your brothers and sisters.” Similarly, “Dinero” responds, “This is why our community as a whole is looked at without respect” (quoted in Williams *Stereohyped*). “Gigi Jones” says, “If Katt had any dignity or any sense of history of blacks in America, he could only do something like this in a nightmare!” (quoted in *Jasmynecannick.com*). The repeated use of the words “dignity” and “respect” in these responses shows that Williams provoked shame in his audience members. His image creates a cut between the master signifier and the endless rationalizations that constantly refer to it.

By embodying the *object a*, Williams exposed the contradiction that went without notice at the Jena rally between the actions (celebrating difference) and the belief (equality). By treating an object permeated with *jouissance* and subjective meaning as just another object, a rope,



Williams brought forth the hidden connection between revolutionary subjectivity and authority to which his predecessors in the rally in Jena remained bound. In other words, while the activists in Jena objectivize the lack in the Other onto the symbol of the noose and those who threaten them with it (eliding the abyss of desire), Williams publicizes an image that refuses even the thought that the elimination of the noose (which symbolizes racism) will lead to a full realization of humanity. His image objectively represents the impossibility of any such realization.

Williams, again, shows his audience that they should not be afraid of rope.

#### KATT WILLIAMS AND THE IDENTIFICATION WITH THE *SINTHOME*

In chapter three, I turned to Lacan's notion that the end of the psychoanalytic process is the identification with the *sinthome*. In his later works, Lacan confronted the problem experienced in clinical practice in which the symptom seemed to persist beyond its interpretation. His answer was the creation of the concept of the *sinthome*, defined by Žižek as "a certain signifier which is not enchainned in a network but immediately filled, penetrated with enjoyment, its status is by definition 'psychosomatic,' that of a terrifying bodily mark which is merely a mute attestation bearing witness to a disgusting enjoyment, without representing anything or anyone" (*Sublime* 76). The end of the psychoanalytic treatment became identifying with the *sinthome*, or that which is in the subject more than the subject.

In *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive*, Lee Edelman calls on queers to identify with their *sinthome*, a process he names *sinthomosexuality*. In chapter three, I argued that sadomasochists serve as examples of queers whose identification with the *sinthome* is built into the structure of their very reality. More specifically, I offered sadomasochist performance artist, Ron Athey, as an example of a queer *sinthomosexual* who renounces the fantasy of

reproductive futurism. Edelman's point, which is missed in critiques like that of José Muñoz, is that we are all *sinthomosexuals*. Edelman merely argues that queers are specially positioned by society to recognize their *sinthomosexuality*. To Edelman's argument, I add that viewing the sadomasochist performance artist as *sinthomosexual* highlights the temporality of the psychoanalytic act. The act occurs in the impossible present, and it is only the present that is at stake in the psychoanalytic act.

In the moment of his act, Katt Williams can also be viewed as one who identifies with the *sinthome*. It is no wonder, then, that Williams's audience perceived an implicit *sinthomosexuality* in his act. The title of the "Blackosphere" conversation about Williams that appears on *Stereohyped* is "Katt Williams is Either Into S&M or Lynching." A number of the comments on this site point to the connection with the sexual. "Mo'Ree" writes, "I hope he's in to Lynching because the thought of him involved in any type of sex \*shudders\*." In another comment on *Stereohyped*, "Desmond" says, "This reminded me of some crazy ish [sic] I read on racialicious. A black man who is solely interesting in dating white women was baffled by the fact that a love interest stopped calling after he asked her to whip him and call him Toby." The identification with the *sinthome*, exemplified in chapter three through sadomasochism, is characterized as a fundamentally masochistic act. The connection between the willing donning of the noose and the sexual act of sadomasochism was not lost on Williams's audience.

In *Congingency, Hegemony, Universality*, Žižek defends the psychoanalytic act as one that is characterized by one making the:

... ‘crazy,’ impossible choice of, in a way, *striking at himself*, at what is most precious to himself. This act, far from amounting to a case of impotent aggressivity turned on oneself, rather changes the co-ordinates of the situation in which the subject finds himself: by cutting himself loose from the precious object through whose possession the enemy kept him in check, the subject gains the space of free action. (122)

Williams’s intervention into the Symbolic field disturbs it from the standpoint of its “disavowed structuring principle” (Žižek 125). Through donning the noose, Williams made the “impossible” choice of “striking at himself.” His use of the noose altered the coordinates through which it was viewed as a symbol of racial hatred constitutive of the subjectivity of those fighting against racial injustice.

The majority of the aversive reactions to Williams concerned his seeming insensitivity to the “scar” on African-Americans left by the history of lynching in America. “Lala” says, “This is offensive ... pure and simple ... the fear and trepidation that Blacks and other minorities feel when they come out of their homes and are faced with this badge of terror is REAL!!!” (quoted in Williams *Stereohyped*). Similarly, Jasmyne Cannick argues, “The practice of lynching destroyed many Black families and left a scar that most of [us] will carry for the rest of our lives.” These references to a “REAL” “scar” gestures toward an historical trauma that cannot be mitigated through symbolic intervention. It marks the impossible, which is the site of the *sinthome*.

According to the ethics of psychoanalysis, the identification with the *sinthome* involves the realization that the “scar” is “destroying him, but at the same time it is the only thing which gives him consistency” (Žižek *Sublime* 78). Žižek adds that this “is the paradox of the

psychoanalytic concept of the symptom [*sinthome*]: symptom is an element clinging on like a kind of parasite and ‘spoiling the game,’ but if we annihilate it things get even worse: we lose all we had – even the rest which was threatened but not yet destroyed by the symptom” (*Sublime* 78). Through donning the noose, Williams identifies with the *sinthome*, not to empty it of its Real trauma, but instead to face that Real trauma covered by the signifying form of the symptom. In the end of his film *It’s Pimpin Pimpin*, Williams finally offers the sought-after answer to the meaning of his act. He proclaims, “[We] ain’t afraid of rope.”

I hope it becomes clear through the act of Williams that the cases of Emma Goldman, Vernon Johns, and Ron Athey discussed in this dissertation are really three different ways of viewing the same phenomenon. Confronting their audiences with the Real lack in the Other has clear political implications. In *Seminar VII: The Ethics of Psychoanalysis*, Lacan states, “There is absolutely no reason why we should make ourselves the guarantors of the bourgeois dream” (quoted in Zupančič 175). According to Zupančič, the “bourgeois dream” consists of “the attempt to link individual comfort with the service of goods (private goods, family goods, domestic goods, the goods of our trade or our profession, the goods of the community, etc.)” (175).

It is to the “bourgeois dream” that the protest in Jena, Louisiana is bound. I will now conclude that the discipline of rhetoric is bound to the same “bourgeois dream” and that confrontation with psychoanalysis represents the Real limits to that dream. Much like Katt Williams confronted Jesse Jackson and Al Sharpton with the Real limits of their actions, Katt Williams, as well as the other cases analyzed in this dissertation, confront rhetoric with the limits of its ability to interpret Real acts. Through enabling this confrontation between rhetoric and

psychoanalysis, rhetoric's ability to explain the persuasion at the heart of social change can only be enhanced.

#### PSYCHORHETORIC OF SOCIAL CHANGE

There are several aspects of the acts described in this dissertation that place them in an antagonistic relationship to the discipline of rhetorical studies. First, each of the cases described in this dissertation gestures toward the embodiment of an abject object. In order to truly be acts in the psychoanalytic sense, the acts cannot be subjectivized. In other words, there is no rhetorical agent in the moment of the act. The "agent," then, can only be referred to as a "vanishing mediator." Second, each act stages a resistance of sense. In other words, the thing to do is not to cover the act with signifiers or search for its inherent "meaning." This second aspect highlights the diametrically opposed aims of rhetoric and psychoanalysis. While rhetoric remains bound to the path of the "good," psychoanalysis treats this "good" as a price to be paid for access to the Real of desire. Next, all of the cases discussed in this dissertation confront their audiences primarily with an image. This is not an image, however, to be read as argument. Instead, the image testifies to the inability for rhetoric to explain everything.

All of the acting individuals described in this dissertation were abjected in different ways after their acts. Emma Goldman was exiled from the United States. Vernon Johns was ejected from all of his pulpits and spent the remainder of his life as a travelling vagabond. Similar to Goldman, Athey was banned from performing at any venue in the United States funded by the National Endowment for the Arts. He moved to Europe where he continues to reside. Less than a year after his act, Katt Williams was committed to a mental hospital. This abjection shared by all in different ways speaks to the authenticity of their acts according to psychoanalysis. As Žižek

defines this abjection, "... the act in its traumatic *tuche* [the Aristotelean term for 'event'] is that which divides the subject who can never subjectivize it, assume it as 'his own,' posit himself as its author-agent" (*Ticklish Subject* 374). In other words, the subject of an act is nothing but the absence of the subject. Again according to Žižek:

A revolution is achieved ... when it 'eats its own children,' the excess that was necessary to set it in motion. In other words, the ultimate revolutionary ethical stance is not that of a simple devotion and fidelity to the Revolution but, rather, that of willingly accepting the role of 'vanishing mediator,' of the excessive executioner to be executed ('as the traitor') so that the Revolution can achieve its ultimate goal. (*Ticklish Subject* 379).

Hence, evidenced by subsequent abjection, all of the acts described in this dissertation ate their own children.

There is a reluctance in the discipline of rhetoric to refuse to subjectivize the agent of an act. In "Ouija Board, Are There Any Communications?" Agency, Ontotheology, and the Death of the Humanist Subject, or Continuing the ARS Conversation," Christian Lundberg and Joshua Gunn confront head-on this reluctance. They argue that "the undeniable existence of agency ... does not prove that the autonomous subject is therefore its source" (92). Lundberg and Gunn gesture to the use of psychoanalysis as instructive if one is to reverse the agent's relation to agency. They write, "... to the extent that we rhetoricians ought to worry about such things, the reversal of 'possessing' to 'possessed' is obviously more hospitable to the concerns of posthumanist thinking, and none more so than Lacan's" (97). In the end, however, the article betrays the antagonistic relation between the ultimate aims of rhetoric and psychoanalysis. Lundberg and Gunn concede, "We do not necessarily disagree with an understanding of

rhetorical studies as having an ethical mission (defined by the imperative to generate normatively good civic action) ...” (95). Lundberg and Gunn proceed, however, to valorize the rhetorical to the psychoanalytic when they conclude that “... Lacanian psychoanalytic theory can help rhetoricians navigate the posthumanist theoretical landscape in a characteristically rhetorical way” (97).

This concession by Lundberg et al. leads me to my second point concerning the antagonistic relationship between psychoanalytic exploration and rhetoric. As I have already noted, the ethical mission of psychoanalysis is precisely to liberate the subject from the pursuit of his desire through the “service of goods.” Lundberg et al. admit that the ethical mission of rhetoric is “defined by the imperative to generate normatively good civic action” (95). Thus, the rhetorical engine is moved by the necessity of the subject to renounce his desire, not to act in accordance with it. Given the differing aims of rhetoric and psychoanalysis, as well as the disappearance of the subject in the negativity of the psychoanalytic act, it becomes clear that the acts described in this dissertation *should* be dismissed by rhetoricians as rhetorical failures. In fact, the acts, in effect, only exist as failures of the “rhetorical machine.”

The third antagonistic aspect of the psychoanalytic act to the discipline of rhetoric is found in the fact that the act ultimately confronts its audience with a traumatic image that refuses meaning. In “Unruly Arguments: The Body Rhetoric of Earth First!, ACT UP, and Queer Nation,” Kevin Michael DeLuca analyzes the actions of several “new social movements” that are characterized by practicing “an alternative image politics, performing image events designed for mass media dissemination” (10). Speaking of the valorization of the body in these images, DeLuca continues:

Often, image events revolve around images of bodies – vulnerable bodies, dangerous bodies, taboo bodies, ludicrous bodies, transfigured bodies. These political bodies constitute a nascent body rhetoric that deploys bodies as a pivotal resource for the crucial practice of public argumentation. (10)

These images, then, are not bodies bearing the mark of an extradiscursive force, but instead, they are bodies that are publicized in order to be read as argument.

While DeLuca looks at “image events,” such as ACT UP’s die-in and the ecological protestor buried up to her neck in the ground, one could add the image of Emma Goldman chained to the speech podium to avert arrest, the image of Vernon Johns dressed as a sharecropper selling watermelons out of a pickup truck, the disfigured and bleeding Ron Athey, and the image of Katt Williams modeling a noose on the red carpet. Although DeLuca prompts rhetoricians to “read” these images and endow them with meaning, I have argued that these images confront us with what cannot be read. Like the terrifying images of the sunken Titanic that have seized our desires since its disastrous sinking, the traumatic impact of these images has nothing to do with meaning. The images function as a “sublime object,” defined by Žižek as a “positive material object elevated to the status of the impossible Thing” (*Sublime* 71).

Readings of images, like DeLuca’s reading, are correlative to “an attempt to escape this terrifying impact of the Thing, an attempt to domesticate the Thing by reducing it to its symbolic status, by providing it with a meaning” (Žižek *Sublime* 71). While this attempt to “domesticate the Thing” is wholly rhetorical in its aim, it denies the possibility that “the meaning obscures the terrifying impact of its presence” (71). From a rhetorical perspective, Emma Goldman was an ineffective rhetor; Vernon John’s would have been legendary if not for his non-sensical farming;



Ron Athey is altogether (a)social; and Katt Williams is insensitive and offensive. All of these cases are rhetorical failures in every sense of that word, but they are also psychoanalytic heroes. When viewed as the “sublime object” of rhetoric, psychoanalysis becomes not something to assimilate into rhetorical theory (as Gunn and Lundberg would have us do), but instead something with which to identify. In strictly paying attention only to those acts that rush to cover the traumatic impact of the Real with meaning, rhetoric misses those “rhetorical failures” that are also immensely persuasive. A psychorhetoric, then, fully endorses the antagonistic relationship between psychoanalytic and rhetorical theories, but it attempts to take seriously the Real antagonism by the revelation of rhetorical failures through rhetorical theory and their subsequent analysis with the theories of Lacanian psychoanalysis.

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