BOOK REVIEW

The Ethics of Impossibility


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This essay reviews Mikko Tuhkanen’s *The American Optic: Psychoanalysis, Critical Race Theory and Richard Wright* through the theme of impossibility. The essay investigates Tuhkanen's staging of several seemingly impossible encounters: that between psychoanalysis and critical race theory, that between sexual and racial difference, and that between Lacanian configurations of the Symbolic order and an ethics of transformation and becoming.

In the past decade, several texts have been written that seek to establish a dialogue between psychoanalysis and critical race studies, thereby destabilizing a stubborn assumption that the two discourses have little to say to one another. Of the many important texts in this line of critical work, Mikko Tuhkanen's *The American Optic: Psychoanalysis, Critical Race Theory and Richard Wright* is surely one of the most exceptional, both in terms of the rigor of its analyses and the breadth and scope of its investigations. With the title of the introduction performatively setting the stage ('Richard, Jacques; Jacques, Richard'), Tuhkanen's text unfolds as a dialogue between Lacan and Richard Wright on several of the most important, yet most undertheorized, moments in their respective works. Moreover, while Tuhkanen's psychoanalytic edifice is thoroughly Lacanian, his cultural criticism extends beyond Wright's most famous novels to intertextual readings with Wright's lesser-known works, slave narratives and spirituals, blackface and minstrelsy, and other canonical African-American authors (e.g., Du Bois, Washington, Douglass, Baldwin),...
while his theoretical framework also engages critical race theory, postcolonial theory, queer theory, literary theory and philosophy.

Yet, this inventory of Tuhkanen’s cultural and theoretical sources is already unfair, given that one of *The American Optic*’s major strengths is its extraordinary integration of the texts it examines. Refusing to let the theory be ‘applied’ to the artistic works or to let the literature provide ‘examples’ of the psychoanalytic concepts, *The American Optic* emerges as a remarkable exemplar of a literary-theoretical text. Early on, Tuhkanen acknowledges the tendency on the part of psychoanalytic critics toward what Deleuze and Guattari have called ‘the analytic imperialism of the Oedipus complex’ (xvii), or the often violent practice of forcing any object of analysis to fit psychoanalysis’s pre-given structures. Taking seriously several articulations of the dangers of reading racialized subjects vis-à-vis psychoanalysis (including those by African-American writers such as Eldridge Cleaver, James Baldwin and Hortense Spillers), Tuhkanen argues that psychoanalysis need not be seen as inherently oppressive, but rather, must be opened and exposed to transformation in and through an encounter with black cultural-critical texts.

This recuperation of the generative possibilities of an engagement between race theory and psychoanalysis is one of many of the affirmative readings Tuhkanen offers throughout *The American Optic*, and betrays some of his more Deleuzean commitments. Indeed, Tuhkanen explicitly situates his text in Deleuzean terms as ‘an encounter between bodies (of work),’ and argues that ‘the Deleuzian understanding of bodies’ interimplication, eschewing any notions of harmonious compatibility, characterize[s] the most productive…encounter between psychoanalysis and race’ (xx). Of course, an engagement between Deleuze and Lacan is, like psychoanalysis and race, another impossible one as many critics would have it.

It is this emphasis—*insistence*—on the impossible encounter that ultimately characterizes *The American Optic*. Thus, in this review, I will take a closer look at three of the ‘impossible encounters’ that Tuhkanen stages throughout the work. First, I will examine his practice of reparative or affirmative reading, or the attempt to recuperate texts or practices that are, according to common wisdom, oppressive to the racialized subject, including blackface, symbolic suicide, and psychoanalysis itself. I then want to look at Tuhkanen’s exploration of the processes of racialization and sexuation within the symbolic order. While many Lacanians argue that sexual difference is the only foundational, or Real, difference, while class, race and other social categories are Symbolic, Tuhkanen makes perhaps the most compelling argument for the Reality of racial difference. Finally, I will spend the most time looking at another supposed impossibility: the transformation of the Symbolic order. While many regard the Symbolic order as intractable, Tuhkanen convincingly argues that not only can the Symbolic be reconfigured, but it is precisely this transformation
that the truly ethical subject should attempt to bring about. Ultimately, it is Tuhkanen’s attempt to open psychoanalysis to the unknowability, the \textit{becoming}, of the future, to dislodge its reputation as monolithic and unmoving, and thereby bring out its ethical dimensions, that makes \textit{The American Optic} a crucial text for scholars of both psychoanalysis and critical race theory.

\textbf{Revis(it)ing the Impossible: Reparative and Affirmative Readings}

As a whole, \textit{The American Optic} could be seen as an example of what Eve Sedgwick has called ‘reparative reading’ (Sedgwick, 2003). The project itself—a generative encounter between Lacanian psychoanalysis and race theory—has been seen, until recently, as fraught with danger, if not impossibility. Concerns about the applicability of psychoanalytic theory to the racialized subject’s experience have been rightfully raised, and theorists attempting to do this type of work have had to walk a precarious line between subsuming the specificity of black experience to the primacy of the theoretical apparatus on the one hand, and losing theoretical ‘rigor’ by stretching psychoanalytic concepts too far beyond their textual provenance to address issues such as race on the other. While some might see Tuhkanen’s project, especially given its Lacanian orientation, as doomed from the start, Tuhkanen refuses to relinquish either theoretical sophistication or the particularity of the black cultural texts he analyzes. Thus, the first and largest recuperative project in \textit{The American Optic} is its very attempt to stage a truly multilateral conversation between the discourses of race studies and psychoanalysis, allowing each discourse to transform and complicate the other.

Yet, paranoia, such as that about the contamination of discourses, is itself subject to a theoretical recuperation in Tuhkanen’s text. While paranoia has been seen by some critics, including Deleuze and Sedgwick, as inhibiting, Tuhkanen argues that it is actually a politically useful epistemological orientation for the racialized subject. In a brilliant reading of Lacan’s discussion of anamorphosis and the geometral perspective in \textit{The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis}, Tuhkanen argues that “‘paranoid ambiguities’...enable the mobility of desire, as opposed to the imaginary capture of geometral optics’ (39). Connecting Lacan’s distinction between seeing and looking to the primacy of the visible in racial formation, Tuhkanen argues that it is precisely paranoid looking, or what Slavoj Žižek calls ‘looking awry’ that can enable the racialized subject to resist imaginary capture and negotiate or subvert certain dominant visual regimes.

It is within this defense of paranoid knowledge that Tuhkanen makes his only mention of Sedgwick’s reparative practices—practices that Sedgwick herself distinguishes from those that she calls ‘paranoid.’ Paranoid practices, for Sedgwick, have an inhibiting (‘anticipatory’) relation to futurity, which Tuhkanen counters in his analysis of
paranoia. Yet, it is important to recall that Sedgwick derives her concepts of reparative and paranoid reading practices from a discussion of psychoanalyst Melanie Klein’s distinction between the paranoid and the depressive positions. In Klein, the paranoid position is marked by ‘hatred, envy, and anxiety,’ whereas the depressive position is that ‘from which it is possible … to use one’s own resources to assemble or “repair” the murderous part-objects into something like a whole—though, I would emphasize, not necessarily like any preexisting whole’ (Sedgwick, 2003, p. 128). For Klein, and for Sedgwick, these positions are not mutually exclusive but exist in an oscillating relationship in which one can induce the other. Thus, I would argue, Tuhkanen’s recuperation of Lacanian paranoid knowledge is precisely an example of a reparative reading practice, one that seeks to transform the ‘hatred, envy, and anxiety’ that the racialized subject experiences toward what Tuhkanen calls the ‘white symbolic order,’ into something that can repair or nurture the subject.

Sedgwick’s emphasis on the subject’s self-repair or self-nurturing underscores the therapeutic concerns of her theoretical project. While Tuhkanen rarely mentions the therapeutic or analytic setting, it is important to remember that psychoanalytic theory is primarily a set of tools for the analytic process, not just a body of academic esoterica. Nevertheless, the types of reparative readings that Tuhkanen undertakes in *The American Optic* offer the racialized subject a way of working through the traumatic history of antiblack racism within the white symbolic order. In thoroughly engaging and affirmative re-readings of blackface (Ch 2), *livrée* (Ch 3), symbolic suicide (Ch 4-5), and slave narratives of escape and flying (Ch 5), Tuhkanen demonstrates the extraordinary ways in which racialized subjects have turned pernicious and oppressive experiences into subversive, transformative and emancipatory artistic forms. Such recuperative reading demonstrates that, contrary to Lacanian queer theorist Lee Edelman’s assertion, affirmation’s question is never merely ‘If not this, what?’ (Edelman, 2004, p.4) Edelman here conflates affirmation and adaptation, and as Tuhkanen points out, Lacanian psychoanalysis is never oriented toward adjustment or adaptation to a given symbolic order (100). Instead, Tuhkanen’s reparative reading brings out of Lacan’s work an affirmative ethical practice orientated toward symbolic transformation that restates Edelman’s question as an injunction: ‘Not this! Now what?’

**The Impossible Encounter: Race and Sex**

One of the biggest problems with psychoanalytic theory from a critical race perspective is its supposed positioning of sexual difference as the only foundational or Real difference. While Freud and Lacan most often simply omit substantive discussions of race, many contemporary Lacanians have explicitly argued the primacy of sexual difference. Joan Copjec, perhaps the most well known American Lacanian, writes in *Read My Desire*: ‘sexual difference is unlike racial, class, or ethnic differences. Whereas these differences are inscribed in the symbolic,
In *The American Optic*, Tuhkanen argues that sexual difference can only be situated as primary if one reads the Lacanian formulae of sexuation from *Seminar XX* as distributed only according to the Phallus. Tuhkanen follows queer psychoanalytic theorist Tim Dean’s argument that the phallus in Lacan is “provisional rather than foundational,” and that “the phallus becomes ‘largely obsolete,’” increasingly replaced by the *objet a* in Lacan’s later works’ (97). Thus, Tuhkanen reads the positions outlined in the formulae of sexuation as simply two ways of negotiating the Real in relation to the Symbolic order *in general*, which can involve race as much as sex. As he succinctly puts it, “The real, precipitating the desiring subject’s emergence, is the unnamable ground that is symbolized in the subjective positions that Lacan maps in *Seminar XX*” (98). If the *objet a* is, as Žižek terms it, ‘the traumatic kernel’ around which the Symbolic order coheres, then in a society organized along the color line, that traumatic kernel could certainly be racial difference as easily as sexual difference. The subject positions described by Lacan, then, are symbolic structures that mediate our relation to the real, and are, contrary to popular misconceptions, ‘historically contingent’ (98). Moreover, if these positions produce the desiring subject insofar as the *objet a* is the object-cause of desire, then in a racially organized society, desire can be grounded as much in terms of race as sex.

Thus, in taking another look at the subject positions outlined in the twentieth seminar, we see important implications for racialized subjects. For Lacan, the ‘masculine’ subject is ‘whole,’ a closed set, and relates to jouissance only through a fantasy of woman projected onto the *objet a*. The ‘feminine’ position, on the other hand, is ‘not-whole,’ as signified by the bar through the article ‘la’ in ‘la femme.’ Woman thus exceeds the symbolic function, and as such, cannot be said to exist. Because of this, her jouissance cannot be constrained within the symbolic order and is thus split between symbolic (‘phallic’) jouissance, in which she engages in an Imaginary masquerade, performing the masculine fantasy, and nonsymbolic (‘Other’) jouissance, in which she is able to access a relation to the Real that exceeds symbolic articulation and thus registers as non-sense.

If, as Tuhkanen compellingly argues, we should read these positions merely as two different ways of negotiating jouissance, or our relation to the Real, then we might begin to understand how racialization operates within the white symbolic order from a Lacanian perspective. In a phallocentric symbolic, the masculine position is dominant, and therefore in a white symbolic order, this position is that of the white subject. Such a subject, then, is only able to relate to the Real of racial difference through Imaginary fantasies projected onto the racialized other (the *objet a*), and thus, revising Lacan, we could say, ‘there is no (inter)racial relationship.’ The feminine position within the
phallocentric economy would then belong to the racialized subject within the white symbolic order. Thus, on the one hand, the racialized subject relates to the Real of racial difference both by performing or miming the Imaginary projections and fantasies of white subjects (which is partially how Tuhkanen reads blackface and minstrelsy). Yet, on the other hand, the racialized subject has a relation to the Real that exceeds and evades any Symbolic capture, and thus has access to an experience that is not intelligible in the terms of the white symbolic order. In a play on Luce Irigaray, then, we might say that blackness is the race ‘that is not one,’ insofar as it registers only as an absence within the racist white symbolic, but also that it is ‘not-whole,’ in the sense that woman is ‘not-whole,’ and thus open to a non-totalizable, non-sensical relation to the Real. In setting up such an impossible engagement, Tuhkanen has thus provided us with, to my knowledge, the most sophisticated reading of racial and sexual difference from a Lacanian perspective.

The Ethics of the Impossible: Symbolic Transformation

One of the most prevalent misconceptions of the Lacanian schema is the intractability of the Symbolic order. The Symbolic is often read, in a manner analogous to common misreadings of Foucault’s analysis of power, as ahistorical, monolithic, and resistant to any change. Lacan, like Foucault, is frequently depicted as a thoroughly pessimistic thinker, convicting us to being forever ‘trapped’ within a Symbolic that we can never hope to escape or transform. Unfortunately, even certain Lacanian theorists seem to occasionally buy into the intractability of the Symbolic order, leading to dubious political strategies despite otherwise incisive analyses. In seeking the political options within Lacan’s work, many Lacanians turn, in some capacity, to his discussion of the death drive. Taken to its most problematic extreme, Lee Edelman argues in No Future that queer subjects who have been cathetized as the death drive of the social should embrace such a position and seek to proliferate the dissolution of the Symbolic order, divesting themselves of any symbolic identifications and exploiting the disruptive potential of ‘queer’ jouissance. Arguing that ‘the political’ is always already articulated within the present terms of the Symbolic, any attempt queers might make to challenge the symbolic forms on their own terms only reinscribes such structures. The Symbolic is never going to change, so queers should say: ‘Fuck the whole network of Symbolic relations and the future that serves as its prop’ (29). Thus, despite his compelling Lacanian analysis of the heteronormative logic of the Symbolic order, Edelman only perpetuates the notion that symbolic withdrawal is the only possible political option for minoritarian subjects.

In the graceful yet powerful concluding chapter of The American Optic, however, Tuhkanen revisits notions of symbolic death, both in African American texts and in Lacan’s work, to argue for its more transformative potentiality. In ‘The Subversion of the Subject,’ Lacan reminds us that when we speak of death, ‘we need to know which
death, the one that life brings or the one that brings life’ (Lacan, 2006, p. 686). In his reading of this passage, Tuhkanen argues that it is precisely symbolic death that brings life to the slave, or the racialized subject more generally in that being dead to the Symbolic opens up possibilities of life (161). As Lacan points out in Seminar VII, any ‘will to destruction’ in the death drive coexists with a ‘will to make a fresh start,’ a ‘will for an Other-thing [Autre-chose]’ (Lacan, 1992, p. 212). While Tuhkanen quotes this same passage, and elsewhere refers to Deleuze, he does not here point out that Deleuze makes a virtually identical claim in Difference and Repetition when he argues that ‘Thanatos is completely indistinguishable from the desexualization of Eros’ (Deleuze, 1994, p. 113). In my reading, both Deleuze and Lacan are arguing that despite Freud’s dualistic conception of the drive, when pushed to their limits, a will to destroy and a will to create are not opposites, but both part of a process of becoming: it is only through destruction that creation can occur, or, any creation entails some type of destruction. Likewise, death can only be seen as the ‘opposite’ of life if they are considered discrete states. However, death can also be seen, as Lacan and Deleuze do, as a point in the process of becoming that brings life. Thus, while Tuhkanen does an excellent job at recuperating symbolic death from its more morbid or fatalistic conceptualizations, a stronger connection to Deleuze here would make his argument for the ‘becoming of the death drive’ (164) more complex.

In exploring the vicissitudes of symbolic death for the racialized subject within the white symbolic order, Tuhkanen makes a profound triangulation between slave narratives, Hegel’s master-slave dialectic, and Lacan’s readings of Hegel. While Hegel’s ‘master-slave dialectic’ has long been the paradigmatic philosophical reading of slavery, Tuhkanen argues that it is perhaps no longer the most adequate way to conceptualize racism, or slavery in its most contemporary forms. According to dialectical logic, two beings enter into a struggle to the death in which one ultimately submits to the other, thus becoming the slave. The slave is then alienated from his work, which is handed over to the master for consumption; yet, the slave in learning the transformative power of work, learns authentic freedom, whereas the master remains dependent on the slave for his subsistence. For Lacan, however, the subject is already a slave from the start, insofar as the Other is an opponent against which the subject will lose every time (137). In his discussion of Hegel in Four Fundamental Concepts, Lacan argues that the subject’s alienation occurs in the form of the Other’s impossible demand: ‘Your money or your life!’ In other words, the subject emerges only through the alienation in which it must either cede Being as such in order to take up a place as a signifier in the Symbolic order, or risk having no meaning.

Yet, for Lacan, alienation is always accompanied by the process of separation, in which the subject also recognizes the lack in the Other, or the Symbolic itself. Thus, the subject is alienated from its Being insofar as it becomes an empty spot within the Symbolic to be filled in by the signifier (thus recognizing itself as lack), while also realizing
that the Symbolic is also incomplete. According to Lacan, the ‘one exit’ from this circuit is ‘the way of desire,’ or as Tuhkanen puts it, ‘desire [is] the way out of the immobility of mere alienation’ (138). And it is this incompleteness of the Symbolic, or separation, that is for Tuhkanen, ‘what allows the racialized subject to escape from his or her place within the white symbolic network’ (138). For Lacan, one can always turn back the alienating demand of the Other/Symbolic (‘your money or your life!’), by demanding in response: ‘Freedom or death!’ For Tuhkanen, this ‘impossible, unreasonable demand … introduces what Lacan calls “the lethal factor” into the symbolic pact … [and] possibly derails the symbolic network onto another trajectory’ (153).

Tuhkanen then looks to numerous slave narratives, as well as instances within Richard Wright’s texts, in which the subject demands in response to the alienating process of slavery (both ante- and postbellum), ‘Give me freedom or death!’ So whereas the Hegelian slave submits in order to preserve his life, thus sacrificing his freedom, through Tuhkanen’s reading of Lacan and slave narratives, we get an insightful look at what might happen if the subject refused to submit, refused to value life more than freedom and chose death instead. Arguing that many slave writers saw death as the only possible ‘escape,’ Tuhkanen demonstrates that death, symbolic or otherwise, can only be considered ‘the end’ if we fail to see it as a point in a process of becoming. While this might come dangerously close to suggesting the same kind of ‘political necrophilia’ that we find in someone like Lee Edelman, Tuhkanen urges us to keep in mind the transformative possibilities that might emerge from the ruins of symbolic death.

In closing, I will point out my only two substantive criticisms of The American Optic. First, while the text’s title as well as its first chapter indicate the importance of the ‘visible’ in the operations of racialization, Tuhkanen too infrequently makes reference to the Imaginary in his discussions of the Lacanian system. This is not an accidental oversight, as he argues that the early Lacan, including the concepts of the mirror stage and the Imaginary, has been overtheorized in comparison to the later Lacan, which emphasizes the Real (70). Yet, of course, the three orders are completely interdependent, which is why Lacan graphs them using the Borromean knot in which the removal of any one of the three circles causes the entire system to unravel. Tuhkanen manages to avoid a utopian impulse by pointing out that Symbolic subversion can often ‘slide’ into Imaginary capture or identification; yet, I am left wondering how practices such as ‘symbolic suicide’ can ultimately lead to the actualization of a different symbolic constellation if we do not also consider the reverberations in the Imaginary. Thus, while Tuhkanen’s theorization of both symbolic transformation and of ‘the American optic’ are individually astute, I find that they are less than adequately integrated, considering that the last chapter barely mentions the importance of the field of vision at all.
Related to this, I also wonder if symbolic suicide or, what Tuhkanen calls ‘avian alienation’ (i.e., flight from the Symbolic order) is the only way to transform the Symbolic. Tuhkanen helpfully reconciles Lacanian theory with Judith Butler’s performativity by arguing that Imaginary ‘acting,’ which Butler calls performativity, can lead to more disruptive Symbolic acts. Yet, I wonder what kinds of transformations, if any, take place within the Imaginary itself. If the racialized subject can only hope to transform the Symbolic through risking symbolic death, I am concerned that this places a burden on the minoritarian subject to always resist, to always be transgressive or exceptional. 

Still, despite these concerns, Tuhkanen’s text is without doubt, one of the most important and generative engagements between psychoanalytic and critical race theory to date. It is a text that makes the two discourses seem almost impoverished to the extent that they do not account for one another. Most important, however, is Tuhkanen’s insistence on the ethics of Lacanian theory. According to Tuhkanen, Lacanian ethics is concerned with ‘the becoming of a symbolic order through that which subsists as inassimilable within its framework’ (101). This opening up of the Symbolic to its own becoming provides the hope of Symbolic futures yet to be actualized (which, once again, betrays Tuhkanen’s Deleuzean commitments). Yet, because Symbolic transformation can only take place through what is currently ‘inassimilable’ to its current terms, the ethical act or demand will always appear as impossible, non-sensical, insane. To this, however, I will submit the words of James Baldwin that Tuhkanen uses as an epigraph to his third chapter: ‘in our time, as in every time, the impossible is the least that one can hope for’ (67).

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Notes


2 Indeed, Sedgwick argues, in words that sound strikingly similar to Tuhkanen’s defense of Lacanian paranoia, that the [reparative impulse]’s fear…is that the culture surrounding it is inadequate and inimical to its
nurture; it wants to assemble and confer plenitude on an object that will then have resources to offer to an inchoate self (149). Thus, reparative reading is not without its own ‘paranoia.’

iii It is important to remember that in Lacan, the sexuated subject positions do not correspond to ‘biological’ sexes, but to symbolic positions and thus a ‘biological female’ can take up a ‘masculine’ subject position and vice versa. As Lacan points out in Seminar XX, ‘… when one is male … one can situate oneself on the side of the not-whole. There are men who are just as good as women. It happens’ (1999, 76). Thus, in conceptualizing the racialized symbolic, these subject positions cannot be restricted to phenotypic manifestations, but are rather ways in which subjects relate to the symbolic function in racialized terms.

iv The term is Russ Castronovo’s (2000).

v Jasbir Puar (2007) and Gayatri Spivak (1988) have criticized the figure of the exceptionally resistant or transgressive queer and colonial subject, respectively.

References


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