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Object-Relations and Cultural Narratives in the Analysis of Racism: Theorizing Subjectivity After Klein and Lacan

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Abstract: This article discusses two approaches to racism in the psychoanalytic literature – one based on Kleinian object-relations, and another based on Lacan's theory of language as central to subjectivity. It is argued that the Kleinian method relies on drawing parallels between object-relations at the psychological level and social relations in the external world, and this limits its understanding to a narrow catalogue of psychoanalytic concepts. A Lacanian/post-Lacanian approach begins from the structure of cultural narratives and is more sensitive to social variations. Using examples from anthropology, it is argued that both theories are crucial for a robust analysis of racism.

This article is about the incommensurability of object-relations and cultural narratives in psychoanalytic understandings of race and racism. In using the term object-relations, I refer specifically to the Kleinian sense of the term, in which "the object…[is] suffused with intents and motivations aligned with…[the subject's] own particular libidinal impulses" (Hinshelwood, 1991, p. 372). I am also concerned with the Kleinian modes of object-relating, as elaborated in the theories of the paranoid-schizoid and depressive positions. This differs from the "relational" school of psychoanalysis, which is sometimes associated with the term object-relations, but which focuses on intersubjectivity and recognition between subjects, as opposed to objects or part-objects (e.g. Aron, 1991; Benjamin, 1988). By cultural narratives, I mean the culturally and historically specific stories – especially those about identity and difference – that circulate in a given context and serve as a resource for identification and self-formation. Identity and difference, as a number of psychoanalytic authors argue (e.g. Goldin, 2015; Butler, 2005), are constituted in and through stories about oneself and others. These, in turn, have their own internal structures and meanings that the subject identifies with, rejects, or re-interprets. In this article, I specifically concern myself with the Lacanian/post-Lacanian works of the philosophers Slavoj Žižek and Judith Butler, who have developed a series of elaborate accounts about the relationship between language, narrative and subjectivity, specifically with reference to identity politics (e.g. Žižek, 1989; Butler, 2011, 2005). I argue that a theory of both object-relations and cultural narratives is essential for a psychoanalytic understanding of race and racism, but also that any attempt to link the two faces a tremendous difficulty. This is because the categories of object-relations theory only correspond to a limited range of narratives of self-other relations, making them insensitive to nuances and cultural variations in racial/ethnic taxonomies.

Psychoanalytic theory has made a significant contribution to the way we understand the unconscious processes that underpin social and political forms of racism. Psychodynamic categories such as narcissism, projection, projective identification, splitting and omnipotence have been used by clinicians and psychoanalytic theorists to offer a fresh understanding of the psychological/internal underpinnings of racism as it exists in the social/external world. Contrary to anthropological or sociological accounts that focus on social organization, economic inequality, or circulation of discourses and stereotypes, psychoanalysis has the concepts to help us understand the subjective counterpart of what goes on in the social world (e.g. Butler, 1997; Frosh 1997; Mintchev, forthcoming; Moore, 2007). More specifically, work in the Kleinian object-relations tradition is particularly effective in pinpointing the modes of relating that constitute the self-other boundaries of racist animosity, while works grounded in the Lacanian school have focused on the symbolic order of language and its effects on subjectivity.

As I argue elsewhere (Mintchev, 2015; Mintchev, forthcoming), the Kleinian and Lacanian paradigms, are based on fundamentally different theoretical starting points. The former posits objects and object-relations as the fundamental building blocks of subjectivity and the individual's relationship to the social world. These, according to Kleinians, exist prior to the acquisition of language, and they continue to play a central role in psychic functioning after verbal thought has been acquired (Segal, 1988). The Kleinian subject is composed of different types of objects and object-relations (persecutory, paranoid, depressive, envious, grateful, empathetic…), which take precedence over the narrative dimension of the self.

The Lacanian paradigm, in contrast, posits language as the defining feature of subjectivity. For Lacanians, the subject becomes at once differentiated from, and

linked to, the world of others when language and the symbolic law inscribe themselves onto the subject. Language, thereafter, structures the subject's relationship to itself and others, and also defines and sustains the subject's desire (Lacan, 2006a; Miller, 1991). The distinction between Kleinian and Lacanian theories, as I argue below, translates to fundamentally different approaches to race and racism: in one case racism is theorized as a specific object-relation with associated states of mind; in the other, it is theorized as a fantasy of otherness that is made possible by the structural effects of language and the slippage of meaning that renders racial categories empty.

One of the challenges that both approaches face is that the use of psychoanalytic categories risks a slide into reductionism that ignores the complexities and historical transformations in ethnic/racial forms of exclusion. Scholars building on Lacan's work have managed to address this challenge quite successfully by theorizing the psychoanalytic subject as embedded in a cultural and historical context (e.g. Butler, 2011; Flax, 1990; Laclau, 2005; Moore, 2007). This is because taking language and discourse as a starting point of analysis allows psychoanalytic scholars to pinpoint, compare and contrast the circulations of meaning in different contexts, and link them to specific modes of subjectivity. Kleinians have been much slower in responding to this problem because the categories they work with describe deep unconscious processes that seemingly operate independently of language/culture. This makes it difficult to sensitize the Kleinian notion of the subject to specific cultural narratives. It thus seems that regardless of the wide variety of patterns of racism, the latter are always explained by Kleinian theorists in terms of the same psychoanalytic concepts (splitting, projective identification, narcissism and so forth), with no reference to the variations of racism and/or forms of exclusion. Put bluntly, object-

relations theorizing often repeats the same story at different times, indicating a lack of attentiveness to the structural peculiarities of different social regimes of identity, race and racism.

At the root of this problem is the fact that object-relational accounts must reconcile the concepts used to explain the internal and external worlds – to put analyses of discourses, stereotypes, social organizations, and social inequalities in dialogue with theories about fantasy/phantasy, object-relations and defense mechanisms. Race, as we know, is a social construct (Altman, 2000), and therefore the mind cannot be intrinsically raced; instead, the mind becomes raced, and perhaps racist, once it is integrated into a social order that contains racial stereotypes (Davids, 2011, Ch 3). This calls for an account of how the social links to the psychic, and whether the theoretical categories we use to understand the mind can help us make sense of the complexity of the social world. In what follows, I examine the Kleinian and Lacanian approaches to subjectivity, race and racism, and the respective insights they offer for social analysis. In this sense I see this article as a contribution to the dialogue between Kleinian and Lacanian theory, which has received significant interest in recent years (e.g. Burgoyne and Sullivan, 1997; Borossa et al., 2015; Keylor, 2003; Rosen-Carole, 2011). I then present an anthropological account of different "grammars" of self-other relationships and argue that analyses of object-relations have little analytical purchase unless they are considered in the context of concrete cultural narratives of identity and difference.

Kleinian Theory and Object-Relations.

The Kleinian theoretical framework is built upon the concept of unconscious phantasy, according to which, mental representations from the beginning of life are

experienced as material objects and object-relations within the body: the mental is experienced as corporeal (Klein, 1935, p, 275; Segal, 1988, p. 13; Hinshelwood, 1991, p. 34-35). This, according to Klein, is the most primitive form of experience, which, even in adulthood, persists in the deep layers of the unconscious. In light of this, Klein's theory of development is based on two "positions" of psychic functioning, each characterized by a specific set of object-relations. These are the paranoid-schizoid position pertaining to the first six months of life and the depressive position, which usually ensues from six months onwards.

In paranoid-schizoid functioning, the ego is rudimentary, fragmented, and subject to massive splitting – it is experienced as a multiplicity of independently functioning concrete objects, or rather part-objects, which are either "good" or "bad", depending on whether they are representatives of the life or death instincts. The ego is in a struggle to retain and introject good bits and to expel or annihilate bad ones. From the earliest stages of life then, the infant engages in relations with the external world through the phantasized projection or introjection of good and bad objects, as well as experiences of aggression, persecution, intrusion, envy, and gratitude that the introjections and projections entail.

These phantasized projections or introjections of objects are referred to by Kleinians as projective or introjective identification (Klein, 1946; Hinshelwood, 1991; Brown, 2010). The main difference between projection (Freud) and projective identification (Klein) is that in the former case what is projected is merely an instinct, while in the latter it is both an instinct and an object: a bit of the ego becomes split off and inserted into an external container. In projective identification, "[i]t is not only the drive that is projected and introjected (as love or hatred, desire or destruction), but bits of the baby as well (his organs – the mouth, the anus, and so forth – as well as his

bodily products)" (Kristeva, 2001, p. 63); or yet again, "[i]n projection proper, as Freud had originated and Klein uses the term, *discrete impulses* are attributed to objects; in projective identification the attribution concerns actual *segments of the ego*" (Greenberg and Mitchell, 1983, p. 128).

Since the splitting of the paranoid-schizoid position is so severe, good and bad objects are kept apart without the possibility of conflict and ambivalence. The infant's fantasized attacks on the external object (stereotypically, the mother's breast), as well as fears that the object is retaliating in return, are experienced as violent and bad in their entirety. This relation of aggression and reciprocal retaliation by the object induces paranoid anxiety causing the infant to feel threatened with destruction. As a means of defending against the threat, the ego splits the bad object from the good in an attempt to preserve the latter. A vicious cycle ensues where splitting leads to omnipotence and paranoid anxiety, which in turn is defended against through further splitting (Klein, 1946).

The only way out of this vicious cycle is through what Bion (1959) calls "containment." The caregiver must receive the infant's violently projected bad bits, rework/transform them into good objects, and re-project them back into the infant. In non-technical language the caregiver must respond to the baby's fits of rage and anxiety in a calm, warm and patient manner. If this is not done, and if the caregiver becomes as anxious or aggressive as the infant, then the infant's original bad objects will be re-projected, leading to a vicious cycle of anxiety and further defensive splitting. Under conditions of sufficient nourishment, care and containment, the life and death instincts fuse into each other, the severity of splitting diminishes, and the infant enters the depressive position. The objects comprising the fragmented ego become more integrated. The good breast and the bad breast are no longer

experienced as different and split off; instead there is now perception of a single breast (or object) that has both good and bad qualities. The result is an experience of ambivalence and a new mode of anxiety based on fear that attacking the bad aspects of a breast will also damage the good ones.

Object-Relations and the Racist Relationship

The theoretical framework described above forms the foundation of Kleinian analyses of race and racism. But how are its categories used to theorize race and racism? A good starting point for answering this question is Michael Rustin's argument that "'Race' is both an empty category and one of the most destructive and powerful forms of social categorization" (1991, p. 57). By this, I think, Rustin means that the relationship between racial classification and "objective" biological facts is arbitrary – race is a social/cultural construct that has no stable or fixed referent in material reality, nor can it be ever defined sufficiently as a "real" or "biological" phenomenon.

Anthropologists and sociologists see this as common knowledge (Eriksen, 1993), but they lack the theoretical tools to explain why people cling so passionately to racial and racist ideas that are essentially fictional. Psychoanalysis, on the other hand, is well equipped to address the subjective dimension that binds the internal and external worlds. It argues that there is a suite of psychic mechanisms that sustain racist convictions (Dalal, 2002, ch. 2; Frosh, 1989: ch. 5; Rustin, 1991; Young, 1994). In fact, as Rustin suggests, the emptiness of racial categories is part of the problem, not part of the solution, because it allows the subject to freely use race as "an ideal container" for a number of psychotic mechanisms:

> The psychoanalytic argument is that psychotic attributes of the mind are universal, original and latent components of human mentality…The mechanisms of psychotic thought find in racial categorization an ideal container. These mechanisms include the paranoid splitting of objects into the loved and hated, the suffusion of thinking processes by intense, unrecognized emotion, confusion between self and object due to splitting of the self and massive projective identification, and hatred for reality and truth (1991, p. 62)

Robert Young (1994), in his chapter on racism offers a similar list of mechanisms that are at work in racism: he tells us that "[t]he psychological characteristics of racism are splitting, violent projective identification, stereotyping and scapegoating" (1994, p. 93).

The mechanisms listed in these passages describe a dialectic of identity and difference in which the bad/hated parts of the self are split off from the good/loved parts and projected into the other. This leads to fantasized purification of the self, whereby the self is wholly good, while the other is bad and threatening. A relationship to a racial other thus enables the subject to establish and sustain a fantasy of purity, and a rigid and seemingly impenetrable differentiation between self and other. Karl Figlio makes this point eloquently:

> So the difference with which we are concerned is a constructed difference of an other, a difference that is, on the one hand, needed, in order to secure a sense of (narcissistic) identity of self; and on the other hand, hated for threatening narcissistic purity of self. The latter aims to secure the sense of identity by expelling unwanted parts of the self into

the other and locking it in through hatred (Figlio, 2004, p. 89-90; see also Hook, 2005, p. 732 for a similar argument).

For Bob Hinshelwood (2006, 2007) – an eminent Kleinian analyst – racism is based on a similar rigid boundary which is sustained by splitting. For him, the racist subject experiences an omnipotent narcissism in which the self is idealized while the racial other is violently debased. Hinshelwood claims that racism is a socially and historically specific phenomenon, but in order for it to exist in the first place, it must be able to find a basis in the way in which individual minds work. Hence, he argues that "the organization of the individual mind is the basis on which social categories necessarily depends" (2006, p. 84). Racism, which is one such social category, depends on the mind's capacity for omnipotent and destructive narcissistic thought. So, the internal world's ability to slip into a paranoid-schizoid organization in which paranoia, narcissism and omnipotence prevail, acts as "a hook" onto which narcissistic social stereotypes (such as those of racism) can cling from without (2007, p. 11).

The Kleinain works discussed above, as well as others like them, all follow a similar pattern: they are all based on drawing parallels between the structure of psychic organization as defined by Kleinian object-relations and the structure of racism in the social world. Racial stereotypes in the social world are often violent, narcissistic, and exclusionary, as well as heavily polarized (Altman, 2000). As a result, racial identity and prejudice often tally with the paranoid-schizoid mode of thought described by Klein. This explains why the violent stereotypes of so many forms of racism, that have been theorized by psychoanalysts, including Nazism (Wieland, 2015), American Slavery and Jim Crow (Kovel, 1988), South African Apartheid (Davids, 2011), Islamophobia (Davids, 2009), and Islamic extremism

(Hinshelwood, 2006), can have such a strong psychological appeal. And as Farhad Dalal (2002) argues, Kleinian theory presents a dynamic in which the external and internal are intertwined, so that racism in the social world is a "projection" and "displacement" of the urge to establish internal purity.

> [Kleinian] theory leads one to suppose that the fear of alien Other is really a projected fear that properly belongs in the internal world of the subject…[It] suggests that the wish to purge the external (political) body of alien objects is really a displacement of the wish to purge the internal body of the unassimilated objects that one feels persecuted by (Dalal, 2002, p. 46)

However, there are two significant problems with the Kleinian methodology of identifying parallels between the internal and external and then assuming that they are expressions of one another – that racism in the social world is a projection of psychological processes and vice versa. Firstly, this approach risks conflating ideology and subjectivity. Kleinian analyses of society all too often assume that just because a racist ideology is narcissistic, paranoid and destructive, then so must be the people who live within it. This misses the point – one which Klein herself made – that the subject's relationship to symbols and language is itself an object-relation. People may identify with certain stereotypes, but they may just as well reject or reinterpret them (see Mintchev, forthcoming).

A second problem is that violent and exclusionary modes of racism represent only one form of self-other relations. As I show below, following Gerd Baumann's (2004) work on "grammars of identity," ethnic/racial narratives of self and other can have structures that are more complex and multi-layered than a relationship of narcissistic omnipotence-denigration. This poses a challenge for Kleinian thought

because its catalogue of object-relations does not contain parallels for these social structures, and so it cannot sufficiently explain how the latter relate to the psyche. Consequently, as I argue below, the Kleinian emphasis on early object relations and under-theorization of language and narrative make it difficult (if not impossible) to produce a nuanced account of culturally specific self-other relations.

Lacan and after: Language, Lack, and Essentialization

The Lacanian/post-Lacanian approach differs fundamentally from the object-relations paradigm because it emphasizes language as the main aspect of subjectivity. For Lacan, the subject's entry into the social world occurs through the inscription of the law of the father onto the child, and the latter's subsequent alienation from the mother. However, what matters most in this Oedipal process is not the person of the father who prohibits access to the mother; what is crucial, instead, is the symbolic aspect of the father as a figure of authority, the Name-of-the-Father, as Lacan calls it, as the agency that inaugurates the subject's entry into language, symbolism, identity, and social reality: "It is in the Name-of-the-Father that we must recognize the support of the symbolic function which, from the dawn of history, has identified his person with the figure of the law" (Lacan, 2006b, p. 217). This is in line with Lacan's famous formula that "a signifier is that which represents a subject for another signifier" (2004). In other words, a social relationship is first and foremost a relationship between names, signifiers, and only secondarily a relationship between material human beings. Language is thus the condition for severing the primal bond with the

mother, entering the social world of rules of regulations, and establishing connections to other people.

How then can we make sense of racism using the Lacanian framework? A central argument of the Lacanian school is that love and hate, while originating from the subject itself, are necessarily experienced as grounded in something external that causes these passions (this, as we will see shortly, is linked to language and signification.) A racist subject does not see its hatred for the other as an effect of its own constitution, but rather as the logical response to the other's objective qualities.

> And when we hate someone, we do not want to know about the contingent nature of our encounter. We desperately try to identify some substantive trait we dislike in the others (their culture, their skin colour, the smell of their food, etc.) so that we can take our hatred of them as grounded in an objective necessity (Salecl, 1998, p. 178).

Here, love and hate appear as grounded in "objective necessity" through what Lacanians call *objet petit a*, a fantasy-object covering up the fact that there is nothing in material reality that can fully cause desire. Its function is to make something appear where there is nothing (see Lacan, 2004, ch. 9; Evans, 1996, p. 125).

One of the most elaborate and perhaps most influential account of *objet petit a* and its formation is given to us by the Lacanian philosopher Slavoj Žižek, in his early book *The Sublime Object of Ideology* (1989). There, Žižek uses Saul Kripke's (1980) anti-descriptivist theory of language to explain the relationship between language and identity. According to Žižek's reading, Kripke argues that the word used to designate an object bears no relation to what it designates and plays no role in describing its actual properties. For Kripke/Žižek, an object and its attributes are connected to a

word through a so-called "primal baptism" – the act of giving something (or someone) a name – and this connection is sustained even if the bundle of attributes comprising the object changes completely. Žižek uses the example of gold (also used by Kripke) to illustrate this point:

> let us suppose that today a scientist should discover that all the world was wrong about all properties of the object called 'gold' (the impression that it has a glittering yellow colour was produced by a universal optical illusion, and so on) – in this case, the word 'gold' would continue to refer to the same object as before – i.e. we would say 'gold doesn't possess the properties ascribed to it until now', not 'the object that we have until now taken for gold is not really gold' (Žižek, 1989, p. 99-100).

Žižek Lacanian reading of anti-descriptivism agrees with the theory of primal baptism but it also argues that there is an additional psychological/libidinal dimension at work in the process of naming (Žižek, 1989, p. 100). It argues that the name, the signifier, produces a surplus within the object that stays the same even if all of its material properties change. If gold is still gold in spite of such change, this is because the signifier "gold" produces the illusion of an essential goldness that exists apart from its properties, and sustains the identity of the object. It is this essence that Žižek, following Lacan, calls *objet petit a*, the surplus in gold that is "in it more than itself" (Žižek, 1989, p. 104).

The experience of an unfathomable yet stable essence within the object is thus a necessary effect of language and signification. Its formation, furthermore, takes place through a double movement. On the one hand, the signifier produces a lack or void because its precise meaning can never be positively fixed – there is always a

negativity, something missing in the relation between signifier and signified that thwarts the completion of signification. On the other hand, this negativity is the site of saturation of meaning, so that nothingness becomes imbued with the most meaningful fantasy: "the element which only holds the place of a certain lack, which is in its bodily presence nothing but an embodiment of a certain lack, is perceived as a point of supreme plenitude" (Žižek, 1989, p. 110); or, as Ernesto Laclau puts it in his account of Žižek's theory, "[e]mptiness and fullness are in fact synonymous" (2005, p. 170). The thing's essence is thus the site of greatest saturation of meaning, it is that which makes the object what it is – e.g. the thing within gold that is most gold-like.

In a slightly later work, Žižek (1995, p. 47-50) elaborates this theory by focusing on the relationship between the essence produced by the signifier and the cluster of markers associated with it. This time he draws on the Hegelian philosopher John McCumber (1993) to articulate a three step process through which the *objet a* is constituted. The first step is that of "abbreviation." The logic here is that if something has markers M1, M2...Mj, then it is Mk. The second step is that of "explication": if something is Mk, then it must possess the markers M1, M2...Mj. Step three is the dialectical synthesis of the first two steps where, paradoxically, Mk must be (or at least somehow relate to) M1, M2...Mj simply in virtue of being Mk, even if M1, M2,...Mj are non-existent in Mk. Žižek illustrates this through the example of a Polish anti-socialist joke in which firstly, people say that when there is wealth, books and flats for everyone, then there is socialism. This is followed by the explication that when there is socialism, there is wealth, books, and flats for everyone. The third step is that it does not matter if there is no wealth, books or flats, because at least there is socialism (Žižek, 1995, p. 47-48). Even if socialism is nothing concrete without wealth, books and flats, it is still valued as if it possessed these markers, regardless of

their absence. Therein lies the logic of identity, including racial identity, through which the self and other become reified into essentialized beings. Kwame Anthony Appiah illustrates this dynamic nicely with the example of African Americans. The experience of a fantasized presence in the face of material absence, he argues, is precisely how racial identities operate:

> many people who think of races as groups defined by shared cultures...understand black people as sharing black culture *by definition*: jazz or hip-hop belongs to an African-American, whether she likes it or knows anything about it, because it is culturally marked as black. Jazz belongs to a black person who knows nothing about it more fully or naturally than it does to a white jazzman (1996, p. 90).

According to this logic, the behaviour of the raced subject seems to be irrelevant. Regardless of what he or she does, the addressee of racial discourse is locked into a category and endowed with a series of attributes that may or may not correspond to his or her social being.

Complexity against the essentializing subject: Butler's Critique of Žižek

The Lacanian paradigm of necessary essentialization, at least in the variation elaborated by Žižek, has been criticized for its political implications and its theoretical foundations. As Judith Butler argues, Žižek's notion of the subject is too inflexible, and thereby runs the risk of essentializing historically contingent forms of being into ontological universals (Butler, 2000, 2011: ch. 7). A theory that sees essentialization as inherent to all subjectivity is itself in danger of sliding into essentialism by reifying what could be a culturally contingent phenomenon into an ahistorical law.

In *Bodies that Matter* (2011), Butler interrogates Žižek's reading of Kripke and his insistence on the essentializing function of language. She revisits Kripke's original text, drawing attention to his distinction between non-rigid and rigid designators. As Kripke himself puts it: "Let's call something a *rigid designator* if in every possible world it designates the same object, a *nonrigid* or *accidental designator* if that is not the case" (1980, p. 48). Rigid designators, the label Kripke assigns to the proper names of persons, designate a person unconditionally, even in a world where that person has radically different qualities. If the signifier "Aristotle," to use one of his examples, is attached to the figure of the ancient Greek philosopher, it will necessarily refer to that figure in all possible worlds, even in those worlds in which Aristotle did not become a philosopher, did not live in ancient Greece, etc. The term does not describe a cluster of attributes but a particular individual who holds a monopoly over that term. It is in relation to rigid designators that Kripke introduces the notion of "primal baptism" as the founding moment in which a name is fixed to an object.

For Žižek, all political signifiers are rigid, meaning that any rearticulation of the relationship between the designator and the referent is foreclosed (Butler, 2011, p. 159). Any attempt to loosen the connection between signifier and signified, to open up the signifier to alternative meanings or to undermine its homogeneous and unequivocal nature is rendered unattainable. Butler's argument against Žižek is that rigid designation is not so rigid after all. She points out that the fixity of the signifier to the referent and the constitution of the referent's boundaries, must be constantly reasserted through the performative act of naming. There is no guarantee, however, that the performative reassertion will not go awry, and that the name will not be used in an improper, "catachrestic" way, as the designator of a different referent. Kripke

was fully aware of this, and he even provided an example: “If I hear the name ‘Napoleon’ and decide that it would be a nice name for my pet aardvark, I do not satisfy this condition [of reproducing the fixity of the name]” (Kripke, 1980, p. 96; see also Butler, 2011, p. 161). For Butler, the danger of catachresis is thus inherent in the “reiterability” of the name, in the fact that names have to be repeatedly uttered in order to reproduce their meaning. This danger, she argues, destabilizes the anchorage of word to referent and undermines the rigidity of designation:

> And yet, by virtue of the very reiterability of the name—the necessity that the name be reiterated in order to name, to fix its referent—this risk of catachresis is continually reproduced. Hence the very iterability of the name produces the catachrestic divergence from the chain that the referent is meant to forestall. (Butler, 2011, p. 161).

Once the tight link anchoring the word to the referent is loosened, the boundaries that separate words from other words, and referents form other referents are loosened as well; the less rigidly a designator is fixed to one particular referent, the more open it becomes to designating alternative referents and the more connected (and less exclusionary) the alternatives become in their relations to one another. This opening constitutes a fundamental change in the way identity and signification are theorized: while for Žižek the failure of signification is based on the negativity instituted by the signifier – namely, the fact that the fantasmatic surplus that sustains identity is really a void – for Butler, this same failure is the effect of complexity and the intersection of different identities. She argues this point with reference to gender:

> If ‘women’ within political discourse can never fully describe that which it names, that is neither because the category simply refers

> without describing, not because 'women' are the lost referent, that which 'does not exist', but because the term marks a dense intersection of social relations that cannot be summarized through the terms of identity (Butler, 2011, p. 165).

This theoretical move marks a shift towards a multiply constituted, complex subject comprised of numerous subject positions, but also a historical subject whose link to the signifier is radically unfixed and open to different kinds of imagined relations and forms of identification.

Grammars of Identity: Narratives of Self-Other Relations

We have seen that, according to Butler, the subjective perception of identities as essential and thing-like is by no means unshakable, and neither is the experience of a subject whose raced or gendered subject positions appear to have a guaranteed support in the social and symbolic fabric.

If Butler's argument is correct, then the self-other relationships in regimes of gender, ethnicity and race are not necessarily rigid and essentialized; instead, they are complex and multi-layered, historically contingent, and open to becoming more or less permeable. And while Butler's model of the subject is largely a response to the Lacanian/Žižekian theory of identity, it also challenges the Kleinian object-relations model. This is because it raises the question of whether the fluidity of the subject and the multiple forms self-other boundaries that bind it to others can be sufficiently theorized by Kleinian categories of paranoid-schizoid and depressive object-relations. To answer this question we must consider what exactly these boundaries look like in the real world. What empirical data is there to substantiate Butler's theory? What are

some of the different structural relations that organize narratives of identity and difference, and how do they relate to object-relations?

The work of the social anthropologists Gerd Baumann and Andre Gingrich (2004) addresses this question by pinpointing a series of variations in what they call "grammars of identity/alterity." The anthropological project of identifying such grammars begins from the premise that identity and difference are locked into one another, and any and every sense of self is established relationally, vis-à-vis others (Gingrich 2004, p. 5-6). This, however, is an abstract assertion which is more of a methodological truism than an explanation – it is a point which rightfully guides our analytical attention to relationships as opposed to singular identities, but, which, when taken on its own, tells us very little about the identities of people in concrete cultural and social contexts. Anthropology's commitment to cultural specificity demands a more precise portrayal of how people's taxonomies of identity are organized and structured. Hence, Baumann's aim is "to differentiate between different modalities of self/othering and to put these differentiations to analytical use" (2004, p. 19).

To achieve this aim, Baumann identifies three grammars of identity, which, according to him, do not comprise an exhaustive list – these are (1) Orientalism, (2) segmentation, and (3) encompassment. Orientalism, as we know from the work of Edward Said (1979), is a multi-layered and ambivalent configuration of self-other relations, containing positive and negative representations about both "the East" and "the West," the Orient and the Occident. As Bauman explains, "Orientalism is…not a simple binary opposition of 'us = good' and 'them = bad', but a very shrewd mirrored reversal of: 'what is good in us is bad in them, but what got twisted in us remains straight in them'" (2004, p. 20). A sense of Western superiority and a sense of western alienation and loss coincide here. The Occident is seen as superior in terms of

its rationality, enlightenment and technological advancement (as opposed to the Orient's irrationality, superstitious and backwardness), but it is also seen as regretfully materialist and inauthentic as opposed to idealist and authentic.

The second grammar, that of "segmentation," comes from Evans-Pritchard's (1969) classic anthropological study of The Nuer in the Sudan. The segmentary system is a "pyramid of identifications" (Baumann, 2004, p. 21), in which the lower levels are characterized by rupture and tension between groups, while at the higher levels the ruptures are subordinated to a unified collective identity. The countries within the African Union or European Union offer a good illustration of this logic. For example, the British – especially the more Eurosceptic ones – may feel all kinds of animosity towards the Belgians, the French or the Germans. But this animosity is often subsumed to a collective (West) European identity in opposition to Asian or African, or East European identity. This shift in identification, I would argue, is not something that inevitably takes place whenever there is opposition to a common enemy; on the contrary, it is grounded in an overarching narrative of a common European history, culture, and race, which enable people to imagine themselves as European and identify with this over-arching category (see Anderson, 1983).

Finally, the third grammar is that of "encompassment," whereby the self is posited as universal and the other is subsumed to that universal as a subcategory. This type of relationship is perhaps better illustrated by gender than by ethnicity. The category "Man", as we know from feminist critiques, tends to be posited as a universal representative of "mankind" (i.e. humankind). "Woman" is here encompassed by "mankind", but, within it, she is marked by difference and subordination. In short, woman is perceived as a representative of mankind, but not as much as man is. There are two levels of operation here: at the first level there is

recognition of difference, while at the second level that which is different is subsumed under that which is universal. In the context of race/ethnicity, there are a number of case studies where this grammar is at work: these include the way in which West Germans see East Germans, the way Hindus represent Sikhs, or the way in which Carribbeans in 1990s London saw themselves as the main group at the forefront of anti-racist movements.

These grammars, which by no means provide an exhaustive catalogue of self-other representations, act as an unconscious organizing framework that structures interactions between people in everyday social situations as well as in the clinic. An example from the work of Fakhry Davids (2011: ch. 2) can illustrate this point. Davids – a London-based psychoanalyst of South African descent – presents a case study in which a white British patient launched "a racist attack" against him. What is interesting about this case is that there is very little in the history of the patient that can be explicitly linked to race and racism in any conventional sense of the terms. Davids, however, argues that regardless of the absence of racial discourse, the patient's actions were animated by an internalized narrative about the difficult experiences of immigrants in Britain. This narrative, in turn became particularly relevant for the treatment because of the political events (most notably the first Gulf War) of the early 1990s when the analysis took place, and the fact that the patient mistakenly believed that Davids is of Middle Eastern origin. This last point is of particular significance because, although I believe that Davids is correct to point to the association between his alleged difficulties and his status as an immigrant, I would claim that this link would not have been there (or at least not in the same form) had he been an immigrant from Ireland, Germany, China, or Brazil. In other words, the

patient's transference was defined by an Orientalist fantasy about what it means to be from the Middle East and how British people relate to Middle Eastern immigrants.

The patient, Mr. A, was troubled by conflicted sense of neediness and dependence on others. On the one hand, he believed that cooperating with others would bring him success, but on the other hand, he felt that cooperation constantly slipped into overdependence. In response to this sense of overdependence, Mr A often reproached people for trying to control him, and also reproached himself for his inability to pull himself by his own bootstraps. Consequently, he would break away from his relationships in ways that were detrimental to his wellbeing.

Davids reports that in the third session Mr A. described an incident in which he defied his father. Just before leaving town on a business trip, the father asked Mr. A to renew the insurance of their family car. Mr. A did not comply, and this led to an argument over the phone between him and his mother after she had accidentally scratched the uninsured car. The argument ended when Mr. A's mother told Mr. A that his father had learned about the incident and was furious. In response, Mr. A slammed down the phone. Shortly after this incident, while driving his new car, he heard a strange noise coming from the engine and became worried about an explosion. He then left the car, threw the keys down a drain to prevent himself from turning the engine back on, and called his mother to make sure that she is still alive.

When Davids heard this story, his initial suspicion was that the conflict between Mr. A and his father filled Mr. A with an explosive rage, which was then split off and projected into the car's engine. However, instead of offering this speculative interpretation to the patient, Davids tried to make emotional contact with him as follows: "Since the details of this formulation were at best sketchy, I sought an interpretation that would open things up. I therefore said that I thought *he wanted me*

to know he had enormous rage inside, and he feared that had this not been touched in his therapy I would not be able to cope with it" (2011, p. 22). Upon hearing this interpretation Mr. A lost his composure.

> For some moments he seemed, silently, to be mulling over what I had said. Eventually, through gritted teeth, he muttered that it was always the same: his rage was always *so enormous*. He heard this as a complaint at the extent of rage I saw in him. By characterizing it thus he believed I was simultaneously warning him that I was aware of it and pressurizing him to suppress it – to be the good boy he had been all his life…By now he was yelling uncontrollably at me: everyone is just interested in shutting him up, but no, no longer will he allow it. Never again (Davids 2011, p. 22).

Although this attack was not explicitly racist, Davids argues that it was triggered by a hidden racial organization within the patient's mind. Mr. A did not lose his composure like this with his previous therapists; instead, when he became frustrated, he simply broke off the therapy. This time, however, the analytic situation was different, because unlike Mr A's previous therapists, Davids had brown skin, and so Mr. A assumed that he was an immigrant from the Middle East. He then associated the analyst's brown skin with a liberal narrative about how many problems and prejudices migrants must encounter in Britain. On the basis of this script, Mr A projected his own neediness onto Davids and cast him as a suffering migrant with a need. Now, it was no longer Mr. A who was needy, but the immigrant analyst suffering in a xenophobic country.

So what did this projection have to do with the attack? The interpretation that triggered the attack stated that Mr. A wanted the analyst to know about his rage. Here, it is Mr. A who is cast as needy and not the analyst. By interpreting Mr. A's own need to make his rage known in the therapy, Davids did two things: first, he behaved as a normal analyst, he did what the previous therapists had done, which is to point out Mr. A's need to express his rage; second, he transgressed the image of himself as a

needy immigrant and forced the projection of neediness back into the patient. In other words, by succeeding as a normal analyst, he failed as an immigrant analyst with a need, he departed from the script of the patient's unconscious fantasy of self-other relations.

This failure to be an immigrant 'who knows his place' provoked a paranoid transference. The patient feared that Davids is out of line and would mistreat him, try to control him, and mould his mind into something foreign and unknown. However, as the material that emerged in the analysis revealed, Mr. A strongly believed that the 'real' aim of the Gulf War was to protect the supply of cheap oil to the west, so that western citizens could continue their lavish lifestyle. He feared that Davids may have family and friends in the Middle East, and that he may see Mr A as complicit in this imperial war. This gave rise to fear that the immigrant analyst who ought to be needy and passive had now become vengeful.

As this clinical vignette shows, the patient's subjectivity, the assumptions he made about his relation to the analyst, the projection that he carried out in the transference, and the decision he took to verbally attacks the analyst were all unconsciously animated by his social and cultural experiences. But what is more, I would argue, is that there was an Orientalist grammar at work in which multiple logics of good and bad coincided, and also oscillated as a result of the analyst's interventions. On the one hand, Davids was seen as a good, innocent, immigrant who must be pitied for falling victim to the cold racism of British society, as well as the geopolitical events at the time of the analysis. On the other hand, however, as soon as Davids transgressed the stereotype ascribed to him, he became an irrational and vengeful figure unable to control his anger. He became a foreign figure who would somehow manipulate the patient in a perverse, mystical way. This reversal had a clear

object-relational foundation at the level of interaction between two people. Yet, at the same time, these object-relations were organized by a complex grammar of identity and difference, which is quite different from the sharp antagonism that is often presented in the Kleinian literature racism, and which, arguably, would be fundamentally different if the patient and analyst were of different ethnic backgrounds and in different social and political settings.

Conclusion: Object-Relations in Cultural Context

The variation of grammars or narratives of identity/alterity raises the question of how we can make sense of culture from an object-relational perspective. Where, if anywhere, do the categories of object-relations fit in an analysis of cultural narratives? What is interesting about the grammars of identity outlined above is that they do in fact integrate various forms of object relations. At the same time, however, there is something more to them than object-relations, which requires additional analytical work. On the one hand, the grammars clearly articulate various kinds of object-relations. Orientalism includes projection of good and bad aspects of the self, feelings of envy and admiration, and a sense of self-depletion akin to that of Kleinian projective identification. Segmentation, in turn, is a grammar of identification – it is "a pyramid of identifications," as Baumann puts it, in which identity and difference exist side by side, and one takes precedence over the other depending on the context. Finally, the grammar of Encompassment depicts omnipotent identifications whereby the self and other coincide, as well as relations of exclusion and denigration where the particular is excluded from the universal and seen as a lower form of being.

On the other hand, however, Baumann's grammars are incommensurable with Kleinian object-relations: they embody a set of meanings and rules about what kind,

in what context, and in relation to whom social relationships should be established, and they do so in a way that cannot be captured by the categories of Kleinian psychoanalysis. These meanings and rules, furthermore, are linked to the signifier – the ethnic name or label – and they structure the relationship between people who are attached to different identity labels. What does it mean to be labelled East German in Germany, an Arab in Europe, or a Caribbean in London? Is the relationship between these groups and those in relation to whom they define their identity one of rigid essentialism locked in place by the power of language? Or is it one of more permeable and open boundaries? The answer depends on the network of stereotypes associated with different groups and their relations to one another, as well as the practices in and through which these stereotypes are deployed. Thus, any effort to theorize grammars of identity from an object-relations perspective is confronted with a tension between abstract theoretical categories such as splitting, projection, and identification, and concrete narratives of cultural meaning about the rules and regulations of identity and difference. Concepts such as splitting and projection tell us a lot about the psychic dynamics of racism, but they do not tell us anything about the culturally specific forms which object-relations may assume. Their explanatory potential is therefore limited, unless they are addressed in the symbolic and social context that defines how people relate to themselves and to one another.

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