# A Liberation Psychoanalytic Account of Racism

## Robert K. Beshara[1]

[1]Department of Arts & Human Sciences, Northern New Mexico College, Española, USA

**Correspondence**
Email: robert.beshara@nnmc.edu

Lacanian psychoanalysis has been a theoretical resource for critical psychology since its formal inception in the 1970s. In this essay, I critically review some of the major Lacanian psychoanalytic accounts of racism, particularly over the last 30 years, in an attempt to expand these accounts through a liberatory framework. My two-fold aim with the theoretico-methodological praxis that I am calling liberation psychoanalysis is: (1) to decolonize Freudo-Lacanian psychoanalysis and (2) to historicize racism within a psychoanalytic reading that is dialectically materialist. Decolonizing psychoanalysis does not entail canceling it; on the contrary, metonymic decolonization is the name for critical yet sympathetic readings of modern fields of knowledge (e.g., psychoanalysis) from a Global Southern perspective, the ultimate goal of which is worlding.

**KEYWORDS**
liberation, psychoanalysis, decolonization, dialectical materialism, racism

## 1 | LACANIAN PSYCHOANALYSIS AS A THEORETICAL RESOURCE FOR CRITICAL PSYCHOLOGY

Lacanian psychoanalysis has been a theoretical resource for critical psychology at least since the 1970s in the English-speaking academic world. Lacanian psychoanalysis particularly found a place for itself in the journal *Ideology & Consciousness*, which years later metamorphosed into a very important edited book titled *Changing the Subject: Psychol-*

*ogy, Social Regulation and Subjectivity* (Henriques, Hollway, Urwin, Venn, & Walkerdine, 1984/1998). Ian Parker (1999) writes that *Changing the Subject* "was a powerful inspiration for those who wanted to rebuild something of the 1970s radical psychology movement in the 1980s" (p. 5). In a sense, Parker was largely referring to himself when he wrote "those", but his reference was more generally representative of the Discourse Unit, which he co-founded with Erica Burman in 1990. I say this because his record (Parker, 2001, 2003b, 2005, 2010a, 2010c, 2010b, 2014a, 2014b) dwarfs similar contributions from his colleagues. Parker has indisputably been the most productive critical psychologist writing on Lacanian psychoanalysis, which will be my main focus in this section as a way of introducing this essay.

        In addition to *Ideology & Consciousness*, it is also worth mentioning another journal of import, namely *PsychCritique: The International Journal of Critical Psychology*. Parker (1999) writes that this journal "started from the premise that psychoanalysis was the basis for an adequate critique of psychology" (p. 4). The reasoning for this is clear in Henriques et al.'s (1984/1998) section on theorizing subjectivity, wherein they argue that Lacanian psychoanalysis essentially provides us with a psychosocial account of subjectivity beyond the "individual-society dualism" (p. 203) because of its emphasis on language since "the workings of language provide a key to unconscious mental processes" (p. 213). Nevertheless, the authors are quick to list "some problems with Lacan's account" (pp. 216-218). Similarly, Parker, who is a practicing Lacanian psychoanalyst, does not use Lacanian theory as a critical psychological panacea, which is why the Discourse Unit relies on four theoretical resources, wherein each one keeps the other three in check:

> *Marxism attempts to place feminism only within a socialist feminist framework, finds in Foucault much abstract talk about power which ignores class privilege in capitalist society, and sees psychoanalysis as the reflection of and prison of individualised misery. Feminism in turn is concerned at the way Marxism conceals the oppression of women in its narrative of the history of classes, the way Foucauldians sabotage the idea of gender solidarity and consciousness, and the way psychoanalysis keeps smuggling in normative accounts of sexual desire. Foucauldians meanwhile are indignant at Marxism's continued adherence to totalising grand theory, at feminism's identification of power only with male designs, and at the psychoanalytic spiral of oppressive and self-blaming confession. Psychoanalysis then responds by characterising Marxism as the infantile search for ideal conflict-free worlds, feminism as pathological denial of sexual difference, and foucauldian work as a warrant for perversity. (Parker, 2003a, p. 9)*

        I want to end this section with a significant innovation from Parker, which sits at the intersection between critical psychology and Lacanian psychoanalysis, namely: Lacanian Discourse Analysis (LDA). LDA is a radical qualitative research method in critical psychology, which applies Lacanian theory as a discursive analytic tool to any and all textual material. LDA owes a great deal of debt to Jacques Lacan's (1991/2007) Seminar XVII, *The Other Side of Psychoanalysis*, which primarily deals with his theory of four discourses (i.e., Master, University, Hysteric, and Analyst). There are undoubtedly important contributions—for an overview see Beshara (2019, pp. 1-31)—between the publication of that Seminar (Lacan, 1991/2007) and Parker's writings on LDA, such as Mark Bracher's (1993) *Lacan, Discourse, and Social Change: A Psychoanalytic Cultural Criticism*. In addition to the articles dealing with the method, which are about a dozen or so, there are only three books that fully explore LDA: *From the Conscious Interior to an Exterior Unconscious: Lacan, Discourse Analysis and Social Psychology* (Pavón-Cuéllar, 2010); *Lacan, Discourse, Event: New Psychoanalytic Approaches to Textual Indeterminacy* (Parker & Pavón-Cuéllar, 2013); and *Decolonial Psychoanalysis: Towards Critical Islamophobia Studies* (Beshara, 2019).

        In this section, I have established Lacanian psychoanalysis as a major theoretical resource for critical psychology, particularly as represented by the writings of Parker and his colleagues. In the next section, I will evaluate

some of the key Lacanian psychoanalytic accounts of racism (i.e., Lacan, Miller, Žižek, Seshadri-Crooks, and George) while bracketing some important interventions in the process (e.g., Khan, 2018; Lane, 2020; Mitchell, 2012) due to the limitations of space. Unquestionably, racism is not only a research topic that is poorly studied in mainstream (Euro-American) psychology, which Wetherell (2012) qualifies as "the prejudice problematic"; it is also, and more significantly, a psychosocial problem that necessitates an antiracist praxis from critical psychologists. In other words, we, as scholar-activists, must act upon our reflections if we are to eliminate racism from our societies.

## 2 | LACANIAN PSYCHOANALYTIC ACCOUNTS OF RACISM

In this section, I will be reviewing some of the major Lacanian psychoanalytic accounts of racism beginning with Lacan's brief remark on the topic. However, it is important to bear in mind the contentious place of 'race' and racism in psychoanalysis, so that the reader does not get the wrong idea that Freudo-Lacanian psychoanalysis is somehow inherently progressive as a critical psychological tool: "anthropological theories are to be found throughout Freud's work, giving rise to a covert racist subtext within the discourse of psychoanalysis" (Brickman, 2017, p. 3). The clearest example of this covert racist subtext is Freud's use of the psycho-anthropological concept of *primitivity*, which Brickman (2017) argues "is not simply a disinterested term signifying the earliest and often repressed stage of individual psychic development" but also a signifier that "functioned for Freud both as a psychological category and an anthropological one" (p. 4). Brickman (2017) adds:

> For the nineteenth-century anthropology from which Freud borrowed, the **primitive** referred to the earliest and most rudimentary stages of a universally conceived human evolution. In this anthropological sense, it referred to "savages" who were considered, by virtue of their differences from European cultural norms and their darker skins, to be less evolutionarily advanced than their European cousins. But for Freud **primitivity** also referred to the earliest psychosexual stages of development of the white, European child. The overlap of these two meanings meant that the concept of **primitivity** would move throughout Freud's work with metonymic force, allowing for the possibility of a continuous slippage between psychological and anthropological registers. **Primitivity** is thus the key to the racial economy of psychoanalysis, the watchword of a psychologizing discourse behind which is concealed an ideology of race. (p. 4, emphasis in original)

To be clear, I follow Alana Lentin (2020) in her formulation of "race as a technology for the management of human difference, the main goal of which is the production, reproduction, and maintenance of white supremacy on both a local and a planetary scale" (p. 31). Consequently, I understand racism as "a global hierarchy of human superiority and inferiority, politically, culturally and economically produced and reproduced for centuries by the institutions of the 'capitalist/patriarchal western-centric/Christian-centric modern/colonial world-system'" (Grosfoguel, Oso, & Christou, 2015, p. 636).

### 2.1 | Television

The following excerpt is from a text titled *Television*, which was published in English for the first time in 1987 based on a 1973 program for French TV featuring Lacan lecturing and being interviewed:

> **Interviewer**: *From another direction, what gives you the confidence to prophesy the rise of racism? And*

*why the devil do you have to speak of it?*

**Lacan**: *Because it doesn't strike me as funny and yet, it's true. Without our **jouissance** going off the track, only the Other is able to mark its position, but only insofar as we are separated from this Other. Whence certain fantasies—unheard of before the melting pot. Leaving this Other to his own mode of **jouissance**, that would only be possible by not imposing our own on him, by not thinking of him as underdeveloped. Given, too, the precariousness of our own mode, which from now on takes its bearings from the ideal of an overcoming [**plus-de-jouir**], which is, in fact, no longer expressed in any other way, how can one hope that the empty forms of humanhysterianism [**humanitairerie**] disguising our extortions can continue to last? Even if God, thus newly strengthened, should end up existing, this bodes nothing better than a return of his baneful past. (Lacan, 1987, pp. 36-37, emphasis in original)*

Even though Lacan never fully addressed the topic of racism beyond this brief exchange in *Television* and another passing reference in one of his most obscure texts known as *L'étourdit* (1973/2009), there are a number of theoretical insights that are worth unpacking from the above-quoted statement. First, Lacan links racism with *jouissance*—that is, enjoyment beyond the pleasure principle, which is sometimes rendered paradoxically as painful-pleasure. This linkage is foundational for later theoretical elaborations from Jacques Alain Miller to Sheldon George.

For Lacan, racial difference (and consequently, racism) is premised on a difference in modes of *jouissance*, which is a non-essentialist account that goes even further than social constructionist theorizations of 'race'. In other words, the European racist subject looks down on the racialized non-European Other because of how they enjoy differently. However, the racist fantasy is inherently ambiguous, for it typically consists of two contradictory but superimposed fantasies: phobic and philic ones. For example, the racist dual-fantasy can manifest as overzealous admiration (e.g., "I love your hair, can I touch it?") mixed with subtle disgust (e.g., "how do you wash it?"). For this reason, in my research on Islamophobia, I radically ground antiracism in a third position beyond liberal-conservative modes of racist *jouissance*: learned ignorance (Beshara, 2019). In this sense, learned ignorance provides antiracists with a way of traversing racist fantasies. When it came to the three passions of love, hatred, and ignorance, Lacan revered ignorance because of its link with knowledge (Soler, 2015, p.86), but he was also careful to distinguish between crass ignorance and learned ignorance (p. 87). The latter being, according to Colette Soler (2015), "the ignorance of he [or she] who knows a great deal and who on the basis of his [or her] knowledge isolate what cannot be known (that is, isolate the hole in knowledge)" (p. 87). The most famous practitioner of learned ignorance was, of course, Socrates with his saying: "I know that I know nothing." In other words, the Socratic paradox is a proto-psychoanalytic epistemological position vis-à-vis the unconscious.

Second, Lacan frames racism not in terms of a civilizational clash, but in terms of a clash of fantasies. In fact, the most antiracist aspect here is Lacan's rejection of developmental logic—"not thinking of him as underdeveloped"—both as an economic discourse (i.e., the developed v. developing world) and a psychological discourse (e.g., Freud's stages of psycho-sexual development). Ultimately, as illustrated above, the rhetoric of psycho-economic development is rooted in a racist anthropo-logic regarding non-European *primitivity*.

Third, when Lacan is talking about "the ideal of an overcoming" which drives "the empty forms of human-hysterianism", he is specifically diagnosing liberal racism—that is, the conceited position of most neoliberal subjects in the Global North today: "I am not racist, but…"—vis-à-vis humanitarianism-as-false-generosity (Freire, 1970, p. 54), or what has been aptly characterized as "humanitarian imperialism" (Bricmont, 2005) in the context of the endless war on terror. The overcoming, or more specifically *plus-de-jouir*, which Lacan refers to is an ambiguous neologism that signifies both a lack and an excess of enjoyment. The ideal of overcoming at the heart of liberal racism, or even

antiracism, explains why these strategies will always fail, for they are premised solely on conscious (mis)recognition, or a politics of *méconnaissance*, when they should be engaged in a radical effort of delinking from the racist unconscious, that is, the racist discourses of the Euro-modern Other. While not writing from a psychoanalytic angle, Kwame Ture and Charles Hamilton (1967) were aware of these two dimensions of racism (i.e., conscious-unconscious racism) when they distinguished between overt-covert and individual-institutional racism.

Finally, Lacan's prophecy about the rise of racism as a function of "the melting pot" ideology is salient because while one might imagine, for instance, one of the effects of globalization and mass immigration since the end of World War II being a reduction in the subject's fantasies about others; the lack of separation (i.e., the so-called melting pot, which is a monocultural metaphor) has the exact opposite effect: a clash of fantasies, which manifests in terms of nationalism, racism, fundamentalism, etc. The melting pot metaphor is an ideological source of anxiety especially because of this lack of separation, which is a lack of lack. The object-cause of anxiety, in this case, is the racist's fantasmatic *objet* a (e.g., the racialized Other's uncanny facial hair, clothes, language, etc.). For this reason, alternative metaphors have been proposed to capture cultural pluralism, such as kaleidoscope; nevertheless, it is helpful to remember the paternal function of all metaphors: condensation, which involves substituting the desire of the mother with the Name-of-the-Father. In other words, the singular question of the subject's unconscious desire remains pertinent despite the phallic significations of any culture. That is to say, the Real impossibility of cultural difference should not be ideologically sutured through recourse to Imaginary fantasy, but rather dealt with Symbolically as lack (i.e., the hole in knowledge).

Lacan argues against subjects from a hegemonic culture imposing their own *jouissance* (e.g., freedom and democracy as empty signifiers) onto subaltern others. To reiterate, the key is separation, for without it there is no difference. Here Lacan is clearly arguing for cultural pluralism, or a pluralism of modes of *jouissance*, which can neither be fantasmatically nor discursively sutured. Subsequently, cultural pluralism is another name for the traumatic Real beyond the ideological reality of the Symbolic-Imaginary order. The only way we can live with this traumatic Real is, I argue, through the strategy of learned ignorance. The *learned* aspect speaks to our conscious but radical antiracist effort of delinking from the racist unconscious. And the ignorance aspect points to our unconscious acceptance of Real (racial-cultural-colonial) difference, that is, the incomprehensible modes of *jouissance* of others.

## 2.2 | Extimité

Miller, Lacan's son-in-law and the editor of his Seminars among other things, developed Lacan's earlier account by emphasizing his psychosocial concept of extimacy (*extimité*), which signifies that the exterior (unconscious) is present in the (conscious) interior:

> In racism, for example, it is precisely a question of the relation to an Other as such, conceived in its difference. And it does not seem to me that any of the generous and universal discourses on the theme of "we are all fellow-beings" have had any effectiveness concerning this question. Why? Because racism calls into play a hatred which goes precisely toward what grounds the Other's alterity, in other words its jouissance. If no decision, no will, no amount of reasoning is sufficient to wipe out racism, it is indeed because it is founded on the point of extimacy of the Other. It is not simply a matter of an imaginary aggressivity which, itself, is directed at fellow-beings. Racism is founded on what one imagines about the Other's jouissance; it is hatred of the particular way, of the Other's own way of experiencing jouissance. We may well think that racism exists because our Islamic [sic] neighbour is too noisy when he has parties; nevertheless, it is a fact that what is really at stake is that he takes his jouissance in a way different from ours. Thus, the Other's

*proximity exacerbates racism: as soon as there is closeness, there is a confrontation of incompatible modes of jouissance. For it is simple to love one's neighbour when he is distant, but it is a different matter in proximity. Racist stories are always about the way in which the Other obtains a "plus-de-jouir": either he does not work or he does not work enough, or he is useless or a little too useful, but whatever the case may be, he is always endowed with a part of jouissance that he does not deserve. Thus, true intolerance is the intolerance of the Other's jouissance. Of course, we canot [sic] deny that races do exist, but they exist in so far as they are, in Lacan's words, races of discourse, i.e., traditions of subjective positions. (Miller, 1988, pp. 125-26, emphasis in original)*

It is not a coincidence that Miller, a French citizen, cites "our Islamic neighbour" in the context of his discussion of racism—it is also worth noting his error in using the adjective 'Islamic' to refer to Muslims. France happens to be one of the most Islamophobic countries in the Global North (Wolfreys, 2017), which attempts to impose its specific (read: ideological) mode of *jouissance* (i.e., secularism or *laïcité*) onto its Muslim subjects in particular, many of whom are the descendants of colonized subjects of French imperialism due to France's occupation of Algeria from 1820 to 1962. Decolonization was successful due in large part to the sustained anti-colonial efforts between 1954 and 1962 of the *Front de Libération Nationale* (FLN), which included revolutionary psychiatrist Frantz Fanon among its ranks.

Wolfreys (2017) characterizes French Islamophobia as "respectable racism", which is another way of describing new or cultural racism as opposed to the old religious and scientific racisms. Wolfreys (2017) writes with a psychoanalytic sensibility:

*The new racism is genteel and respectable, providing users with a sophisticated upgrade on the old while operating in a similar way. Metonymy, for example, the use of objects [e.g., the ḥijāb] to symbolise or embody race without having to spell out their meaning, is simply applied to a different set of things. (p. 41)*

States legitimize Islamophobia, or render this form of racism respectable, particularly through the war on terror discourse, which is sustained ideologically by fantasies about Islam being a primitive religion or culture that is incompatible with, and therefore will endlessly clash with, Euro-modern civilization and its values. One does not need to deny the present reality of Islamic terrorism in order to clearly see the historical effects of the *longue durée* of Euro-colonial violence, or State terrorism, from the colonization of the Americas beginning in 1492 to the scramble for Africa in the 19th century—not mentioning the rise of fascism in the 20th century, two world wars, and the so-called Cold War. While the 1.8 billion diverse groups of Muslims in the world are not a 'race', they are certainly racialized metonymically (or with metonymic force), particularly in the Global North, in the context of the war on terror discourse, which dates back to Ronald Reagan's first presidential term in the early 1980s. So the (counter)terrorism discourse is fairly recent, but Islamophobia/Islamophilia as a fantasy predates the discourse by close to five centuries (Beshara, 2019).

In sum, the extimacy of the Islamic, or non-European, Other—its own way of experiencing *jouissance*—is that which the European racist subject hates. Miller (1988) writes, "the Other's proximity exacerbates racism" (p. 125), which we can read historically in terms of the Judeo-Islamic Other's proximity in Al-Andalus for close to 800 years—a fact that is repressed in the European unconscious. 1492 indexes both the collapse of Al-Andalus—as a polycultural Caliphate—and the beginning of the colonization of the Americas. Anti-Semitic and Islamophobic fantasies are old, for they date back to the 11th century or since the Crusades, and they are foundational for later racist fantasies because they were projected onto, for example, the Indigenous peoples of the Americas (Beshara, 2019, pp. 32-64).

Islamophobia is a reaction formation to the presence of Muslims in the Global North who are positioned

as outsiders (or immigrants) when they really signify the return of the repressed. For example, in the case of the United States, Muslims have been present on Turtle Island since at least the 16th century, with a case in point being the presence of Mustafa Azemmouri (1500 – 1539)—an enslaved Moroccan explorer—in what is now known as the state of New Mexico. But, more significantly, the transatlantic slave trade (16th – 19th c.) brought to the Americas a large number of enslaved African Muslims: "between 2.25 and 3 million Muslims" according to Diouf's (1998, p. 48) estimate.

The Judeo-Islamic Other has been the exterior unconscious of the European subject (i.e., present in its conscious interior) since at least the 8th century. This extimacy, this proximity, is what makes Judeo-Islam and Jews/Muslims—as representatives for non-Europeans in general in the European unconscious—so disturbing to Euro-Christian racist subjects. At the heart of this violent dualism (i.e., us v. them) and oppressive hierarchy (i.e., civilized v. primitive) is an attachment to a discourse or tradition of subjective positions—that is, an essentialist myth about racial origin (e.g., Europe is Christian, Greece is the cradle of Western civilization, etc.), hence, the ongoing clash of fantasies. A cosmopolitan sensibility towards world history, and particularly one grounded in learned ignorance, provides us with the possibility of traversing racist fantasies. This example demonstrates the logic of learned ignorance vis-à-vis Real Others: "Because I do not (and may never) understand the Other's mode of enjoyment, I accept that my specific mode of enjoyment is neither better nor worse." However, the real challenge is undoing racism at the cultural (or ideological) level, that is, exploding racist discourses and fantasies embedded deeply within the Symbolic-Imaginary order. Furthermore, one of the consequences of traversing racist fantasies may be moral relativism because learned ignorance is an epistemological position and not an ethical stance. Suffice to say that this essay is driven by an ecocentric ethic that I will say more about later.

## 2.3 | The Sublime Object of Ideology

Slavoj Žižek's (1989) first book in English, *The Sublime Object of Ideology*, was a very influential intervention in contemporary continental philosophy, which introduced the English-speaking world to the Ljubljana school of psychoanalysis known for its unique synthesis of the ideas of Hegel, Marx, and Lacan. Žižek (1989) analyzes anti-Semitism, which for him is "the purest…form of racism" (p. 128), through the Lacanian concept of '*Che vuoi?*' (What do you want?). Žižek (1989) writes:

> in the anti-Semitic perspective, the Jew is precisely a person about whom it is never clear 'what he really wants' – that is, his actions are always suspected of being guided by some hidden motives…The case of anti-Semitism also illustrates perfectly why Lacan put, at the end of the curve designating the question 'Che vuoi?' the formula of fantasy ($ a): fantasy is an answer to this 'Che vuoi?'; it is an attempt to fill out the gap of the question with an answer…The crucial point that must be made here on a theoretical level is that fantasy functions as a construction, as an imaginary scenario filling out the void, the opening of the desire of the Other: by giving us a definite answer to the question 'What does the Other want?', it enables us to evade the unbearable deadlock in which the Other wants something from us, but we are at the same time incapable of translating this desire of the Other into a positive interpellation, into a mandate with which to identify. (p. 128, emphasis in original)

In other words, for Žižek, racism is a function of the European racist subject not knowing what the non-European Other wants, whose obscure desire, and therefore enjoyment, is a cause of anxiety. Once more, the radical antiracist lesson here is that one must be able to sit with this anxiety: "the unbearable deadlock" of not knowing

the Other's desire. Racist fantasies are comforting to the anxious racist subject, for they suture the void of desire with "an imaginary scenario…a definite answer". Learned ignorance, on the other hand, is uncomfortable and even "unbearable" since it entails living with open questions. Learned ignorance is how we can translate the desire of the Other "into a positive interpellation, into a mandate with which to identify".

Žižek's analysis of anti-Semitism in this book and in other works, such as *The Plague of Fantasies* (Žižek, 1997), represents the first sophisticated Lacanian psychoanalytic account of racism. Elsewhere in *The Sublime Object of Ideology*, Žižek (1989) formalizes Lacan's and Miller's crude theorizations of racism through his conception of "the *subject presumed to enjoy*" (p. 212, emphasis in original). The racist subject, for Žižek (1989), is an obsessional neurotic who fantasizes about saving "the Other from his [sic] *jouissance*, even at the price of destroying him or her" (p. 212, emphasis in original), which again explains the humanitarian imperialist impulse. The non-European Other, for the racist subject, "is always presumed to have access to some specific enjoyment, and that is what really bothers us" (p. 212). In *Decolonial Psychoanalysis* (Beshara, 2019), I draw a clear link between anti-Semitism and Islamophobia, particularly through the ideological figure of the *Muselmann*, which is the signifier that Nazis used for Jews in concentration camps who would collapse on their knees from starvation and exhaustion. The Nazis used this signifier because they fantasmatically associated Jews in those horrific conditions with *sujūd* (prostration) in Muslim prayer (salah). While I draw on Žižek's excellent analysis in my work, I also lament him for his under-theorization of Islamophobia given its affiliation with anti-Semitism since the Reconquista.

## 2.4 | Desiring Whiteness

Kalpana Seshadri-Crooks's (2002) *Desiring Whiteness: A Lacanian Analysis of Race* is the first book-length treatment of race and racism from a Lacanian perspective, and it is an erudite study that builds upon the previous works I reviewed thus far through an engagement with what she calls "the system of 'desiring Whiteness'" (p. 9). For Seshadri-Crooks (2002), the foundational problem is race itself rather than racism per se, particularly because of how the discourses of race along with fantasmatic racializations sustain the ideology of whiteness, which informs how we desire and enjoy. She writes, "racial anxiety, the unconscious anxiety that is entailed by the sight of racial difference, has its cause not in ideology, but in the structure of race itself, and in the functioning of its master signifier, 'Whiteness'" (Seshadri-Crooks, 2002, p. 32). Whiteness, for Seshadri-Crooks (2002), is "the inaugural signifier of race" that "implicates us all equally in a logic of difference" (p. 3). She adds:

> *By Whiteness, I refer to a master signifier (without a signified) that establishes a structure of relations, a signifying chain that through a process of inclusions and exclusions constitutes a pattern for organizing human difference. This chain provides subjects with certain symbolic positions such as "black," "white," "Asian," etc., in relation to the master signifier. "Race," in other words, is a system of categorization that once it has been organized shapes human difference in certain seemingly predetermined ways. We will therefore have to see how this symbolic structuration is related to visibility. (Seshadri-Crooks, 2002, pp. 3-4)*

In the hollow structure of race (even as a social constructionist discourse), racializations—or perceiving others through the lens of race—function as the fantasmatic quilting points (*points de capiton*), which suture the ideology of whiteness and, hence, give it its Symbolic-Imaginary coherence. In other words, racialization (and racial visibility) is always from the perspective of ideological invisibility (or whiteness), which leads Seshadri-Crooks (2002) to distinguish between the invisible white subject of the Imaginary and the hypervisible racialized subject of the Gaze:

*The difference between the visible body as an ego function, and the visible body as a function of Whiteness or racialization, can be understood as the difference between seeing and being seen. The subject of the imaginary is constituted as seeing by the signifier, whereas the subject of race is constituted as seen, the subject of the gaze, through a certain logic of the signifier. (p. 38, emphasis in original)*

Seshadri-Crooks (2002) concludes her analysis with a radical antiracist thesis that traversing the fantasy of ideological whiteness can be accomplished through "symbolic passing", which she defines as:

*one's relation to the signifier that is redefined. One neither submits nor resists its marking; rather, one assumes it and thereby makes it one's own. The (anxious) object of racial visibility has been traversed. It is "subjectified" to the point that it can no longer sustain the subject in the circuit of desiring Whiteness. One passes for what one is—a being in the world. The Other is simply snowed. (p. 131, emphasis in original)*

Seshadri-Crooks's (2002) strategy of Symbolic passing aligns with Lacan's (1973/2009) argument in *L'étourdit* that race "is constituted according to the mode in which symbolic places are transmitted by the order of a discourse" (p. 15). In order words, the strategy of Symbolic passing problematizes and disturbs Imaginary, or anthropological, accounts of race, which were/are central to scientific racism.

## 2.5   |   Trauma and Race

Sheldon George's (2016) *Trauma and Race: A Lacanian Study of African American Racial Identity* explains race and racism, particularly vis-à-vis the African American experience, as iterations of "a transhistorical *jouissance*" knotted around the "traumatic past of slavery" (p. 13). George (2016) writes:

*This past of slavery has produced both race and racism as modes of jouissance, as methods of accessing being.* **Jouissance***, I would suggest, is embedded in the very signifiers of race themselves, which enable remanifestation of structures of enjoyment that bind subjects equally to concepts of race and to practices of racism. (p. 13, emphasis in original)*

Like Seshadri-Crooks before him, George is problematizing the notion of race itself, particularly because of how it has historically been cathected with a traumatic charge, since its *jouissance* can be traced back to the period of slavery. In other words, the signifiers of race are haunted or cursed to the extent that there is no way of undoing racism without simultaneously undoing race, for it is "a Symbolic remnant…a link…to the traumatic Real of slavery's *jouissance*" (George, 2016, p. 36, emphasis in original). The problem precisely is how to undo race without falling back into facile post-racial discursive fantasies of colorblindness. George (2016) continues:

*slavery and racism seek to bring about precisely a traumatic confrontation with lack and an unveiling of the subject's status as signifier. I call this confrontation the trauma of slavery, an assault directed not sim-ply at the slave him- or herself but, more critically, at the very fantasies that sustain subjectivity…I suggest that because the slave and his African American descendants continually confront obstacles in their ef-forts to manipulate the discourses that define them, these racialized subjects often struggle more than is usual to maintain their safe distance from the traumatic* **jouissance** *of lack. My argument is that slavery and racism become traumatic because they seek to inhibit the subjectifying function of fantasy, aiming to*

*confront African Americans with the very lack that is necessarily masked in the Lacanian subject. (p. 21,*
*emphasis in original)*

In other words, the lack that racialized subjects, especially African Americans, experience is much more unbearable—than the lack experienced by the Lacanian (read: European) subject—because of the trauma of slavery. This logic can be extended to Indigenous subjects, too, through a conception of the trauma of genocide. In sum, while all racialized subjects experience lack in a significantly more traumatic way, our analyses must be nuanced to reflect historical differences vis-à-vis modernity/coloniality, that is, our varied experiences of intergenerational trauma (e.g., genocide, slavery, forced displacement, etc.).

## 3 | A LIBERATION PSYCHOANALYTIC ACCOUNT OF RACISM

In the previous section, I have reviewed some of the major Lacanian conceptualizations of racism. In this final section, I will propose a liberation psychoanalytic account of racism as a dialectical materialist praxis (cf. Pavón-Cuéllar, 2017; Reich, 1934/2013; Tomšič, 2015). I have written about decolonial psychoanalysis (Beshara, 2019) as a way of decolonizing psychoanalysis from the perspective of the damned, and I have also theorized contrapuntal psychoanalysis (Beshara, 2021) as a liberation praxis, which takes into consideration both (post)colonial and decolonial psychoanalyses.

### 3.1 | Liberation Psychoanalysis as a Dialectical Materialist Praxis

Liberation psychoanalysis as a dialectical materialist praxis names a positive process, which goes beyond ideology critique and, therefore, attempts to delink itself from modernity/coloniality. It is clearly inspired by Paulo Freire's (1970) *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* and Ignacio Martín-Baró's (1994) *Writings for a Liberation Psychology*. Daniel José Gaztambide's (2019) *A People's History of Psychoanalysis: From Freud to Liberation Psychology* is a one-of-a-kind study, which traces the theoretical and practical linkages between psychoanalysis and liberation psychology. Gaztambide (2019) shows that the seeds for social justice are there in the early history of psychoanalysis, particularly in the works of Freud, Ferenczi, Fenichel, Reich, and Fromm.

However, with the institutionalization and globalization of psychoanalysis (i.e, the International Psychoanalytic Association) in tandem with a later neoliberal tendency to psychologize, or reduce psychosocial distress to the level of the psyche, psychoanalysis—ego psychology, in particular—today is at best a liberal project (if not a conservative one) that has adapted to its ordinary unhappiness within the global capitalist system. Liberation psychoanalysis, on the other hand, reactivates the radical potential of psychoanalysis as a social justice-oriented praxis of not only changing the subject, but also, and more importantly, changing the Other—that obscure representative of the Symbolic order—because racism comes from the Other. For instance, free association is not only a technique in psychoanalysis, but also an anarcho-Marxist praxis—that is, the collective ownership of the means of production. The signifier 'psychosocial' names a dialectical reality, that is, the antagonistic relationship between the subject and the Other. This relationship is ideological in at least two ways: discursively and fantasmatically. Lacan (1966/2006) famously wrote, "*the unconscious is the Other's discourse*" (p. 10, emphasis in original), which means that unconscious racism is a function of the racist Other, hence, why radical antiracism must be dialectical (i.e., not only an individual effort). Elsewhere, Lacan (1966/2006) writes, "unconscious desire is the Other's desire" (p. 528), hence, his formula for fantasy ($\$ \diamond a$)—the key link between the subject and the Other. Fantasy is ambiguous because desire is polysemous:

the subject desires the Other, through the Other, and/or what the Other desires. Lacan's formula reads: the barred subject's unconscious desire for the *objet* a (or the object-cause of desire). How then do we traverse racist ideologies, or discursive fantasies?

Liberation psychoanalysis reactivates the *radical* potential of psychoanalysis, especially from the perspective of the *damned* (i.e., the poor, the racialized, the oppressed, etc.), who are transmodern/decolonial subjects-leaders. Liberation psychoanalysis links the subject's repression with the Other's oppression and, as such, articulates the political role of psychoanalysis beyond the clinic. My point is not to repeat Gaztambide's (2019) excellent historicization here, but to theorize racism (and oppression more generally) through the lens of what I am calling liberation psychoanalysis, which builds upon the findings reviewed in the second section of this essay, but grounds them dialectically in both materiality and history.

The racialized (or oppressed) subject is doubly barred because of the traumatic legacies discussed above (i.e., genocide, slavery, forced displacement, etc.). Furthermore, they are also the *objets a* of racism, that is, they take the form of phobogenic/philogenic object-causes of anxious desire in racist fantasies. In writing about dialectical materialism, Leon Trotsky (1929) made a very relevant point, "Consciousness grew out of the unconscious", which is premised on Karl Marx's (1859/1978) argument, "It is not the consciousness of men [and women] that determines their being, but, on the contrary, their social being that determines their consciousness" (p. 4). In other words, from a dialectical materialist perspective: social being → the unconscious → consciousness.

The primacy of our social being—qua speaking being (*parlêtre*)—emphasizes the material (or socio-economic) conditions that give rise to both the unconscious and consciousness. Therefore, our ideology critique of racist discursive-fantasies must be grounded in a material analysis of the means and relations of production that position us as a certain social being within a racial capitalist structure: an alienated, over-exploited, and racialized lumpenproletariat. This form of material alienation, from our own labor and from our comrades or co-workers, precedes the ideological alienation, which is of great interest to psychoanalysts. Racial capitalism, which is what liberation psychoanalysis as a dialectical materialist praxis aims to dismantle, refers to "a racially hierarchical political economy constituting war and militarism, imperialist accumulation, expropriation by domination, and labor superexploitation" (Burden-Stelly, 2020). Its dialectical opposite is "antiracist socialism" (Burden-Stelly, 2020).

Furthermore, we can speak of not only the juridico-linguistic bar dividing the subject of the Law/signifier, but also the socio-economic bar dividing the subject of racial capitalism. The subject, according to liberation psychoanalysis, is split between a bourgeois ego and a proletarian unconscious. In other words, we must pay attention to both juridico-linguistic (or ideological) oppression and socio-economic (or material) violence, that is, the extraction of surplus-knowledge/*jouissance* and the extraction of surplus-value. Racist *jouissance* then is only possible because of the existence of a racial capitalist structure of oppression and violence.

Additionally, it is worth noting Lacan's (1966/2006) discussion of "the materiality of the signifier" (p. 16) or how a given $S_1$ (master-signifier) subjugates us under it as an alienated subject ($). A clear example is how the rhetoric of modernity is founded upon a colonial logic. In other words, the discourse of modernity necessitates not only colonial fantasies—i.e., the desires of colonizers for everything—but also the Real of coloniality as a material structure premised on the over-exploitation of colonized objects (nonbeings/things). We can formally locate the Real of coloniality (i.e., its materiality) in both the bar splitting the modern/colonial subject ($) and dividing the world into zones of being and nonbeing, as well as the phobogenic/philogenic *objets* a of racism—that is, the racialized lumpenproletariat.

## 4 | DECOLONIZING DIALECTICS | METONYMIC DECOLONIZATION | GROUND-ING PSYCHOANALYSIS

Before ending this section with a historical materialist timeline of racism, I would like to state a few caveats regarding decolonizing dialectics, metonymic decolonization, and grounding psychoanalysis. In a recent essay for Aeon, Avram Alpert (2020) provocatively exposes "the racist history of the dialectic going back to Rousseau". Alpert's point, however, is not for us to cancel dialectics, but for those who have historically been the objects of dialectics (i.e., the colonized) to decolonize these modern notions and methods the way Césaire, Fanon, and other transmodern/decolonial subjects did. George Ciccariello-Maher (2017) makes a similar argument when he writes, "I approach the task of decolonizing dialectics by excavating a largely subterranean current of thought, what I call a *counterdiscourse*, that I argue constitutes a radicalization of the dialectical tradition while also opening outward toward its decolonization" (p. 6, emphasis in original). Ciccariello-Maher (2017) decolonizes dialectics chiefly through the works of Fanon and Dussel, the latter being "sharply critical of dialectics" embracing instead "what he calls an *analectics* rooted in the embrace of the Other as exteriority" (p. 8, emphasis in original).

My use of the term 'decolonization' recalls Tuck and Yang's (2012) critical essay, *Decolonization is not a metaphor*[1], wherein they argue against the metaphorization of decolonizing discourse (e.g., decolonizing your diet) in an effort to remind readers of the literal meaning of decolonization as a praxis of unsettling: "decolonization specifically requires the repatriation of Indigenous land and life" (p. 21). An example of decolonization as a praxis of unsettling is the decolonization of Asia and Africa between 1945 and 1960. While I certainly agree with Tuck and Yang's (2012) call for "the demetaphorization of decolonization" (p. 10), I want to make an argument for *metonymic decolonization.*

Whereas metaphoric decolonization is based on an Imaginary fantasy of oneness (e.g., the masses identifying with a charismatic politician), metonymic decolonization is based on a Symbolic alignment of desire (e.g., we want land back, reparations for slavery, prison and police abolition, etc.), which is dialectical, for it is premised on difference (i.e., the 'we' is made up of Indigenous, Black, and Global Southern subjects along with our Euromodern comrades). Metonymic decolonization, as a metonymy of desire, can be a source of collective jouissance (or comradeship). Metonymic decolonization is founded upon "true solidarity with the oppressed", which "means fighting at their side to transform the objective reality which has made them these 'beings for another'" (Freire, 1970, p. 49)—that is, phobogenic/philogenic *objets a.* Freire (1970) emphasized that the oppressed must occupy the subject-position of revolutionaries leading the way toward a humanizing liberation for all. How else can we (the oppressed) subjectify our metonymic desire for decolonization?

In *Dark Continents: Psychoanalysis and Colonialism*, Ranjana Khanna (2003) writes about "worlding psychoanalysis" or "the process of understanding the violence of the production of psychoanalysis in the world" (p. 5). Khanna's (2003) project has two aims: "It documents the world events through which psychoanalysis was produced, and it also offers a critical reading practice which itself is a product of that initial violent projective saying" (p. 5). Whereas Khanna borrows from the thinking of Martin Heidegger to write about worlding, I want to invoke Edward Said's (1983) notion of "worldliness" instead.

To say that psychoanalysis is worldly is to ground it materially, which means that it is an "event" that is "part of the social world, human life, and of course the historical moments in which [it is] located and interpreted" (Said, 1983, p. 4). Furthermore, psychoanalysis is "materially bound to [its] time" (Said, 1983, p. 25), for it is neither ahistorical nor

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[1] For a recent critique of Tuck and Yang's (2012) influential essay from the perspective of Black studies, the reader is encouraged to survey Garba and Sorentino's (2020) case for "the slave metaphor" being "central to the logics of slavery, not an after-effect" (p. 11). Their rebuttal rests on the seemingly counterintuitive thesis that "*slavery is (nothing but) metaphor*" (p. 3, emphasis in original), which for them is premised on the argument that "anti-Blackness is animated by the gratuitous substitution that marks metaphoricity" (p. 3). In other words, slavery as metaphoric condensation is symptomatic of the traumatic Real of coloniality.

immaterial. For example, psychoanalysis, as a modern science of the unconscious, began in late 19th century Vienna with its founder (Sigmund Freud) being an atheist Jew working in an anti-Semitic Christian milieu, which literally became colonized by Nazis in 1938. The radical worldliness of psychoanalysis, which has been deemphasized over more than a century through institutionalization and psychologization, contains within itself the seeds for its (and our) decolonial liberation (e.g., free association). Further, I encourage grounding psychoanalysis in radical Indigenous, Black, and Global Southern theories and practices.

## 4.1 | A Historical Materialist Reading of Racism

### 4.1.1 | Civilization

I will end the essay with a swift historical materialist reading of racism as a "social relation of oppression" (Camfield, 2016) as opposed to "racism-as-ideology" (p. 40). Paradoxically, slavery was a product of civilization as a function of social stratification during the first agricultural revolution (c. 10,000 BCE). As Derrick Jensen (2004) shows, "Slaves built the levees, canals, and granaries vital to the agricultural revolution. They built the pyramids of Egypt and the great hydraulic systems of China…Indeed, without slave labor there would have been neither Bronze nor Iron Ages" (pp. 141-42). He adds, "until modern times, no sane person ever uncoerced became a mine worker…Only prisoners, captives, and slaves—three branches from the same tree—ever entered the underworld, and even then did so only under the lash, or at the point of a sword" (p. 142). "Slavery's use", Jensen (2004) continues, "was so central to the foundation of civilization that it dictated the design of early cities" (p. 143). He then concludes, "To undo slavery—if this argument holds—would be to undo the civilization we—at least those of us who might be considered slaveholders—all enjoy" (p. 145).

One hundred and twenty-five years earlier, Friedrich Engels (1877/1939) made a similar argument in *Anti-Dühring*: "It was slavery that first made possible the division of labour between agriculture and industry on a considerable scale, and along with this, the flower of the ancient world, Hellenism. Without slavery, no Greek state, no Greek art and science; without slavery, no Roman Empire...no modern Europe" (p. 206). From the perspective of 'civilization', we can then understand who are the ones framed as 'barbarians' or 'primitives' and why (Mignolo, 2007). 'Barbarians' were/are those racialized beings living in the periphery, that is, exterior to the core of Euromodernity; in other words, non-Europeans or Orientals (Said, 1978), particularly Muslims and Arabs. 'Primitives' were/are those racialized beings lagging behind the scientific advances of Euromodernity; in other words, Amerindian, African, and Asian tribes. The first term designates spatial colonial difference; the second one signifies temporal colonial difference.

## 4.2 | Slavery

According to Niall McKeown (2011), a "third of the population of classical Athens [were] slaves" (p. 20). Three preconditions gave rise to chattel slavery in ancient Greece and Rome: "(1) Large, privately controlled farms… (2) The development of market exchange… (3) Crucially, a lack of internal source of labour" (p. 21). Further, McKeown (2011) argues, that "rather than democracy helping to create slavery, slavery helped the development of democracy by allowing farmers time to engage in politics" (p. 21). Slavery certainly existed in the pre-modern world, particularly in Greece, Rome, and Africa. However, the Atlantic slave trade (15th - 19th c.)—the largest forced migration in modern history with over 9.5 million Africans enslaved and worked-to-death on plantations in the Americas (Rawley & Behrendt, 1981/2005, p. 4)—represents a massive acceleration of the institution of chattel slavery, which was instrumental for establishing the hegemony of the European modern world-system. Rawley and Behrendt (1981/2005)

note, "It is not a paradox that the start of the Atlantic slave trade coincides with the dawn of modern Europe. The trade was closely interwoven with the major changes that are associated with the making of the modern era" (p. 8). Modernity/coloniality signifies that modernity was/is founded upon coloniality. Rawley and Behrendt (1981/2005) add, "The [Atlantic slave] trade formed a part of Europe's transition to capitalism, the nation-state, and imperialism" (p. 360). They conclude, "The [Atlantic slave] trade illustrates various stages in the history of capitalism, moving from mercantilism and state-conferred monopoly to free trade and individual enterprise to concentration, and from royal to bourgeois direction" (p. 364). Racial capitalism, as a concept, seeks to capture all these different historical iterations of capitalism given their material basis in slavery.

Given the traumatic legacy of slavery, it makes sense from a historical materialist perspective to read racism today through the lens of Marx's (1867/1978) theory of commodity-fetishism from *Capital, Volume One*. While the racialized subject is no longer a commodity in a literal sense, for he or she is not a chattel slave, they still retain the "mystical character of commodities" (p. 320). Racialized subjects exhibit an "enigmatical character" and appear as "a mysterious thing" in the eyes of the racist commodity-fetishist. Racialized subjects are thingified, or positioned as fantasmatic phobogenic/philogenic *objets a*, as a function of how they are anxiously fetishized both ideologically and materially within the oppressive and violent structure of racial capitalism.

## 4.2.1 | Racism

**Religious Racism**. Historically, there have been three main types of racism, which often overlap. Presented chronologically, these three types are: religious racism, scientific racism, and cultural racism. Fredrickson (2002/2015) writes, "In the twelfth and thirteenth centuries the attitudes of European Christians toward Jews became more hostile in ways that laid a foundation for the racism that later developed" (p. 19). Fredrickson (2002/2015) adds:

> the racism or protoracism of the late Middle Ages extended well beyond the Jews. As the core of Catholic Europe expanded, conquering and colonizing the periphery of the continent, attitudes of superiority to indigenous populations anticipated the feelings of dominance and entitlement that would characterize the later expansion of Europeans into Asia, Africa, and the Americas. If the demonization of the Jews established some basis for the racial antisemitism of the modern era, the prejudice and discrimination directed at the Irish on one side of Europe and certain Slavic peoples on the other foreshadowed the dichotomy between civilization and savagery that would characterize imperial expansion beyond the European continent. (p. 23)

**Scientific Racism**. To recap the historical materialist argument thus far: civilization → slavery → religious racism (see Figure 1). This means that slavery existed before racism, and racism existed before the modern concept of 'race'—whose etymology is the Spanish word *raza*, which is based on the Arabic term رأس or ra's (literally, headland as in place of origin). As Fredrickson (2002/2015) shows, "The modern concept of races as basic human types classified by physical characteristics (primarily skin color) was not invented until the eighteenth century" (pp. 52-53). Further, "The notion that there was a single pan-European or 'white' race was slow to develop and did not crystallize until the eighteenth century" (p. 53). Therefore, the invention of scientific racism and whiteness coincided with the modern conception of 'race': "The scientific thought of the Enlightenment was a precondition for the growth of a modern racism based on physical typology" (p. 56).

As I mentioned before, these types of racism are not mutually exclusive; in fact, they often overlap. For example, some may think that today we live in a post-racial society or that one can be colorblind because slavery and
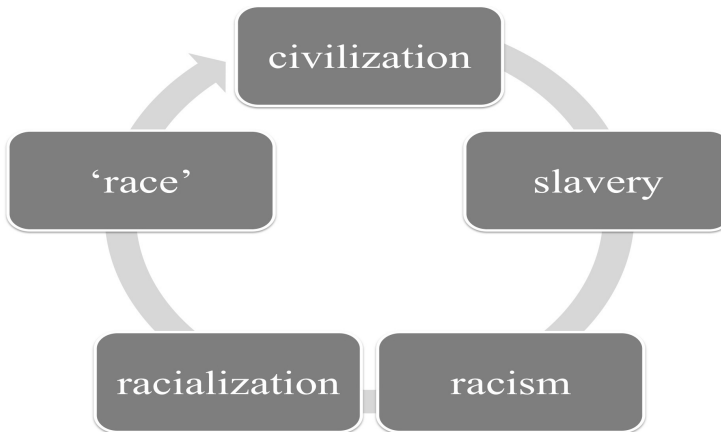
**FIGURE 1** The 'race'-racism paradox

segregation are no longer legal. While it is true that we see more racialized folks represented in politics and culture, we continue to use the modern concept of 'race', most obviously in the US Census, which includes five racial categories (i.e., white, Black, American Indian, Asian, and Native Hawaiian) even though race is a social construction that has no material basis. So why does race continue to be ideologically salient? The next type of racism may provide us with the answer.

**Cultural Racism**. Cultural racism, the most popular type of racism today, is not premised on skin color alone, but employs stereotyping, prejudice, and/or discrimination on the basis of any cultural marker of difference (e.g., clothing, language, religion, accent, food, facial hair, etc.) that signifies Otherness from the perspective of hegemonic subjects, who are often (but not necessarily) of European descent. In many ways, cultural racism is quite insidious because while it may appear benign, it is the culmination of the two types of racism that preceded it. For instance, racists today, typically from a Euromodern nationalist perspective, will argue that some cultures (or religions) are inferior to others. This covert practice of cultural racism—or "racism without races" (Balibar & Wallerstein, 1988/1991)—indexes the signifiers 'savage', 'barbarian', and 'primitive' vis-à-vis subaltern cultures without mentioning any races and so reverts to a civilizational discourse, which is the beginning of the problem anyway.

## 4.2.2 | Racialization

Racializing—or (mis)perceiving others through the lens of 'race'—is inherently problematic because of how racism historically preceded the concept of 'race'. In other words, the concept of 'race' is tainted and may never be salvageable. However, colorblindness—or pretending not to racialize—is equally (if not more) problematic. This is the paradox facing radical antiracists. We know from mainstream psychological studies of perception that misperception is built into the process of perceiving itself as is clear from how the brain automatically changes what we see, particularly in the face of optical illusions (e.g., the Moon illusion). In other words, it is impossible to override misperception even if we consciously understand the logic of why we are misperceiving. Similarly, Lacan (1966/2006) addressed Imaginary misrecognition (*méconnaissance*), which is something that the ego cannot avoid, and which typically leads to narcissism and aggressivity vis-à-vis Imaginary others (or other egos); therefore, the point of learned ignorance is knowing that we will always perceive difference when faced with others without reverting to categorizing this difference in a hierarchical way. This anti-hierarchical stance is simultaneously an anti-civilizational stance.

## 5 | ANTIRACIST ECOSOCIALISM

In sum, liberation psychoanalysis as a dialectical materialist praxis is a contribution to the destruction of racial capitalism and the construction of antiracist ecosocialism. Whereas whiteness is a racialist ideology, Indigeneity, Blackness, and other transmodern/decolonial ways of being are an antiracist materiality—in other words, in alignment with social ecology. Therefore, radical non-European ways of being and knowing are driven by an *ecocentric (i.e., unconscious) ethic of liberation*. Unlike whiteness, which is a fantasy that sutures class struggle among those of European descent in settler-colonial societies; terms associated with the racialized lumpenproletariat signify human difference along a horizontal axis of power (i.e., non-hierarchically) without occluding class struggle—since whitening is a bourgeois aspiration. As Cedric Robinson (1984) puts it succinctly: "We will be Black [or Indigenous or Global Southern] not because we are not white, but *because of our history and the achievements of our struggle*" (p. 27, emphasis added).

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